Principal Perceptions of District Supported Job-Embedded Professional Development

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Principal Perceptions of District Supported Job-Embedded Professional Development

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Leadership

by

Kelly Ledet Burlette

B.A. Louisiana State University, 1997
M.Ed. University of New Orleans, 2005

May, 2024
Dedication

To my family and friends who supported me for the last six years…
yes… I think I am finished with school now.

To my professors at the university, thank you for sharing your knowledge with me.
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Abstract

In a 2021 Wallace Foundation study, researchers concluded that effective school leaders may have a greater impact on student achievement than any single classroom teacher, primarily because of the principal’s scope of influence. District leaders may consider how to support principals and build their capacity to effectively lead school improvement initiatives. Job-embedded professional development has demonstrated promise in providing principals with opportunities to deepen their instructional leadership practice within an authentic school setting. Even though current research on job-embedded support for school leaders is limited, this study builds on existing research to focus on the types of professional development and district support offered to principals and their perceptions of district-led efforts to build their instructional leadership capacity. In this qualitative, explanatory embedded single case study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews of both school and district leaders in a traditional public school district and observations of principal professional development opportunities. Using New Institutionalism, specifically focusing on isomorphism and threat rigidity effect, as the theoretical framework for the study allowed the context in which principals work to also be considered as it affected perceptions of the professional development and support received. Findings suggest that, although principals believe they serve as instructional leaders, district leaders control much of the day-to-day school operations and serve as the instructional leaders. Principals receiving job-embedded support were identified as in need of additional support in spite of its reported benefits. Because of the organizational structure, the type of support and professional development principals received varied.

Keywords: job-embedded leader professional development, district support, isomorphism, threat rigidity
Chapter One: Introduction and Research Question

With the implementation and expansion of federal and state accountability mandates, principals are faced with mounting pressure to increase test scores and positively impact student achievement (Hefferman, 2018; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; West et al., 2014). In fact, principal evaluation policies place significant emphasis not only on their overall leadership but the impact of their decisions on student performance (Nielsen & Lavigne, 2020). As test scores are often viewed as a reflection of administrative capabilities, school leaders must artfully balance instructional leadership with daily management tasks (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Neumerski, 2012; West et al., 2014; Zepeda et al., 2014). Day-to-day school operational tasks, such as ordering materials, communicating with parents, and completing district-mandated paperwork, can consume much of the principals’ time, leaving only a portion of the school day to conduct classroom visits or facilitate professional learning or collaboration (Augustine et al., 2009; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Litchfield, 1985; West et al., 2014). Even though they are held directly responsible for student achievement, principals often lack control over a multitude of factors that affect their job performance, like choice of curricula and staffing practices (DeJong et al., 2017; Hefferman, 2018). Nevertheless, although the role of a school leader is complex, the primary focus of modern school leaders has become that of an instructional leader.

Instructional Leadership

Research studies suggest that school administrators can significantly impact school improvement efforts and student achievement through targeted leadership practices, such as improving teachers’ instructional efficacy and actively participating in staff professional development (Bauer & Silver, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005). According to Leithwood et al. (2008), school administrators are second only to teachers in their positive impact on student achievement, primarily through their influence on faculty motivation, working conditions within the school, and educators’ commitment to the school community. Unfortunately, much of the research centers on principals’ leadership characteristics and behaviors, rather than on how leaders can improve teachers’ instructional practices (Neumerski,
There are notable exceptions. For example, Elmore and Burney’s (1997) study of Anthony Alvarado’s work in New York City Public School District 2 highlights the connection between focused professional development and school improvement. However, more research focusing on leader actions to improve instructional efficacy may be needed as educational reform efforts rely on the capacity of teachers and school administrators to serve as instructional leaders to achieve success (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012).

Instructional leadership, or a leader’s influence over school-wide teaching and learning initiatives, staffing, and curriculum implementation, cannot be accomplished alone (Neumerski, 2012). Although many school leaders are confident in leading curricular initiatives within their schools, even skillful instructional leaders cannot be experts in all disciplines (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Leaders may consider assigning formal or informal leadership roles to multiple individuals within the school community to provide necessary instructional support to classroom teachers (Leithwood et al., 2008). However, the lack of capacity among staff, the lack of time, and the often-isolating school environment can create barriers to effective shared instructional leadership and can derail school improvement efforts (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Impediments to the school leader’s ability to implement initiatives aimed at increasing student achievement can lead to principal stress, role overload, and decreased job satisfaction (DeJong et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018).

**Principal Autonomy**

School principals have a pivotal role in leading educational reform; in fact, schools in which principals actively led school reform initiatives outperformed other schools with similar student populations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). The demand for improvements in student achievement has compelled public school administrators to consider how to successfully lead school programs that meet the needs of students within the school community (Hefferman, 2018; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; West et al., 2014). Recent educational reform initiatives, such as Together Initiative, small autonomous schools, and empowered schools, advocate for greater principal autonomy, which can create conditions for school improvement (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Steinberg, 2014;
Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). With increased autonomy, principals can promote teaching and learning strategies that build on the strengths of building-level personnel, address the needs of their unique student populations, effectively utilize school resources, and enable teachers to choose research-based curricular materials (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Steinberg, 2014). Historically, however, school improvement initiatives that focused on the decentralization of school-based management by giving principals increased autonomy have demonstrated little impact on student performance; these initiatives were not well defined, often lacking clear goals and accountability measures (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Payne, 2017; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Thus, a seemingly contradictory scenario is created, one in which decentralized school reform initiatives may potentially be the most successful in theory but also the most likely to fall short in meeting established objectives. The key may be ensuring principals have both the autonomy to build customized reforms, but also the supports to ensure that autonomy doesn’t result in isolation (Fullan, 2000).

New autonomy initiatives in cities such as Boston, New York City, and Los Angeles differ from past reform movements because of the focus on teaching and learning with the principal spearheading school improvement efforts (Hefferman, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Enabling school leaders to make decisions that benefit students without intensive district oversight became prominent within charter schools (Adamowski et al., 2007; Foreman & Maranto, 2018). Driven by a belief in choice and competition, charter schools promoted the creation of innovative, autonomous environments that engaged all stakeholders in influencing the organizational vision, goals, and structure of the school (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski, 2003; Mayer & LeChausseur, 2013). Adopting a range of administrative practices and organizational behaviors enabled charter schools to provide administrators with a level of autonomy that allowed them to be more innovative and to devote more time to curriculum, instruction, and mentorship (Foreman & Maranto, 2018; Lubienski, 2003). These innovative approaches to programming and organizational structure offered parents educational options that may not have been available in traditional public schools (Lubienski, 2003). For leadership scholars, charter schools offer
multiple examples of how leadership differs in the absence of district mandates.

Trying to mirror the levels of principal autonomy commonly adopted in charter schools, traditional public schools have, at times, attempted to expand principal autonomy. Principals with full autonomy have increased control over curriculum and instruction, teacher professional development, school climate and safety, budgeting, staffing, school calendar and schedule, and facilities (Hefferman, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Principals in such districts maintain the freedom to choose to follow district mandates or to develop and implement new approaches to teaching and learning (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Honig & Rainey, 2012). In exchange for their increased autonomy, principals also maintain greater individual responsibility over school progress (West et al., 2014). In many cases, however, traditional public school districts define principal autonomy differently (Hashim et al., 2019; Hefferman, 2018; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013). District leaders can choose to maintain control over specific aspects of school leadership in which efficiency and support are needed, giving principals controlled, or limited, autonomy (Hefferman, 2018; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

Regardless of the conditions, a multitude of barriers can prevent plans to increase principal autonomy from being successfully granted. Strict structures of traditional public school systems can hinder efforts to grant autonomy, particularly when the institution is resistant to change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975). In order for principals to assume control over school decision-making, district leaders abandon a top-down management approach and redefine the roles of district leadership from evaluators to providers of guidance and support (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Institutional settings and culture are critically important to effective implementation, and success is more likely if both building-level and district administrators support the new initiatives. System structures, organizational culture, and district leaders’ beliefs about who should maintain control of school operations can either help or hinder decentralization efforts (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). When proposed changes to the organizational structure are profoundly different from current district practices, leaders’ support and commitment to the initiatives will only occur if these practices align with their beliefs and values (Berman
& McLaughlin, 1975). External barriers, such as accountability mandates, can also limit principal autonomy as leaders struggle to reconcile the needs of stakeholders with federal, state, and district policies (Chang et al., 2015; Jessen & DiMartino, 2019).

Since the additional responsibilities may compound work demands, principals must also be willing to assume the responsibility of increased control (Hefferman, 2018; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; West et al., 2014). However, if given a choice, principals may choose increased control even with the increase in responsibilities. Decreases in a principal’s ability to make school-based decisions can lead to a reduction in job satisfaction and may negatively affect his or her confidence in leading school improvement efforts (Beausaert et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Yan, 2020). Reductions in principals’ feelings of self-efficacy can lead to increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, burnout, and motivation to quit (Federici, 2013; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; West et al., 2014; Yan, 2020). High levels of stress and burnout among principals contribute to a growing principal attrition rate, which is increasing across the United States (DeJong et al., 2017; Mitani, 2018; West et al., 2014; Yan, 2020). Research conducted by Levin and Bradley (2019) found that, nationally, the average tenure for a public school principal was four years. Novice principals with less than two years of experience accounted for 35% of all principals, and veteran principals with ten years or more represented 11%. Although the turnover rate for principals averaged 18%, schools with higher rates of poverty, higher percentages of students of color, urban schools, and struggling schools reported a six percent higher rate of principal attrition. As the number of qualified principal candidates decreases and principal turnover increases, school systems will be faced with negative effects on the system, on the school, and ultimately, on student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; DeJong et al., 2017; Yan, 2020).

Current educational reform initiatives rely heavily on skillful, effective instructional leadership for successful implementation (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Steinberg, 2014). This type of instructional leadership requires administrators to adequately assess a school’s strengths, identify areas for improvement, and recognize and support effective teaching practices (Steinberg, 2014; Weisberg et al., 2009). Principals may perceive they have instructional leadership expertise and have confidence in their
own abilities to successfully support teaching and learning at their school site (Acton, 2021; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). However, although principals self-identify as proficient instructional leaders, many lack the capacity to use their autonomy to determine the curricular needs of their schools or to evaluate the level of teachers’ instructional proficiency (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Neumerski, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016; Weisberg et al., 2009). School leaders are unprepared to address curricular and instructional deficiencies, motivate staff, and coordinate strategies aimed at improving teaching and learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Neumerski, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). They are unable to evaluate teachers accurately, ignore teacher development and support, and treat teachers as “interchangeable,” which is known as the Widget Effect (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2009, p. 9). Principals need practice and district support to improve instructional leadership skills (Honig, 2009). Nevertheless, districts seldom offer extensive, quality instructional leadership training to building-level leaders, and many principals only request district support when necessary (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). The absence of principal support is problematic considering the importance of effective instructional leadership in the success of school improvement efforts (Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

**District-led Support for Principals with Increased Autonomy**

Current efforts to increase leader autonomy advocate for the involvement of a principal supervisor or coach to ensure principals have the knowledge and skill to effectively utilize their expanded autonomy (Beausaert et al., 2016; Honig & Rainey, 2012). Although districts may consider outside organizations or resources to provide such support, an overreliance on outside experts may not address the needs of the district to facilitate changes in practice (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Honig et al., 2017). The willingness of district leaders to support principals in their expanded autonomy, however, may demonstrate improvements in instructional leadership practices (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Chang et al., 2015; Mitani, 2018; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). As the needs of administrators evolve, the scope, nature, and purpose of support also evolve. Historically, school leader professional development focused on administrative tasks in monthly principal meetings or encouraged principals to
attend curriculum or content training alongside teachers (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Rowland, 2017). Any professional development specifically for principals was based on a deficit model, or as a way to compensate for a lack of knowledge and skill (Zepeda et al., 2014). School administrators were not often the focus of district-level training or professional development designed to assist them in improving their leadership skills (Acton, 2021). On the other hand, school leader preparation programs may not be sufficient for the current work demands of most school leaders who need continuous access to individualized programs that strengthen their knowledge and skill. Professional development for principals can be difficult to implement, requiring data-informed, strategic planning to successfully offer sustained learning opportunities that are relevant to principals’ experiences, career stages, and needs (Augustine et al., 2009; Honig et al., 2017). District leaders may only have a superficial understanding of high-quality teaching and may not know how to develop leaders in ways that support growth in student learning. Therefore, district leaders may begin to consider how to build support structures that create conditions in which district leaders and school administrators grow in their ability to lead school improvement efforts together (Augustine et al., 2009).

**Job-Embedded Principal Support**

One of the more impactful forms of support includes ongoing, data-informed, strategic, job-embedded professional development (Zepeda et al., 2014). Job-embedded supports allow for a deepening of a principal’s professional practice within the context of an authentic school setting, making the learning relevant, problem-centered, action-based, and goal-oriented (Honig, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014). An example of such job-embedded support may involve a principal meeting with a coach or mentor to better facilitate teacher collaboration efforts at the school level or can involve supporting the implementation of a school-wide literacy initiative.

By utilizing differentiated, job-embedded professional development, district leaders can potentially support principal autonomy within the context of their school environment and at the same time ensure their instructional leadership capacity is being developed (Chang et al., 2015). Needed differentiated supports are identified by district leaders through their work with principals and are based
on their current instructional leadership capacity (Honig, 2012). District leaders communicate with principals to provide a clear explanation of expectations and to deliver concise actionable feedback (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; DeJong et al., 2017; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Successful principal support can produce long-term improvements in instructional leadership, strengthen teaching and learning, as well as improve the school’s organization and student performance (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). In addition, principals are likely to be more motivated to further develop their leadership skills and spend increasingly more time on challenging instructional leadership tasks (Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Mitani, 2018). If local school districts can provide job-embedded professional development, combined with differentiated support focused on developing instructional leadership capacity, principals can build confidence and feelings of self-efficacy, which can reduce principal attrition rates and increase the success of school reform efforts (Acton, 2020; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Yan, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2014).

**Problem Statement (or Research Problem)**

Research studies indicate that school principals can have a considerable impact on student achievement and school performance by demonstrating effective instructional leadership (Bauer & Silver, 2017; Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al, 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Steinberg, 2014). However, principals may lack the knowledge and skill to effectively lead school improvement efforts or address the school’s instructional needs (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Neumerski, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). District leaders who provide principals with the support needed to improve teaching and learning may generate long-term advancements in instructional leadership and increase student performance (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Unfortunately, districts may not offer extended, high-quality professional development to school leaders, and principals may request district support only when needed (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). School systems may consider providing job-embedded professional development, which offers differentiated support focused on building principals’ instructional leadership capacity within an authentic setting. Because it is based on the principals’ current practices, this type of district support can
build leader confidence and feelings of self-efficacy and may increase the likelihood that school reform efforts are successful (Acton, 2020; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Yan, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2014).

Although current research on school leadership is varied in scope, many studies concentrate on understanding the role of a principal, focusing on specific leadership styles, behaviors, and characteristics. Among the studies that address school leader development, few examine the impact of utilizing differentiated, job-embedded professional development or of principals’ perceptions of the support they do receive, if any. As current research on job-embedded professional development primarily focuses on teacher learning and instructional support, more research is needed to discover how these supports can assist principals in refining their leadership practices. Current research on principal professional development focuses on the characteristics of specific programs, the success of implementation efforts, or the success of district-provided support (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Acton, 2021; Augustine et al., 2009; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Honig et al., 2017; Houle, 2006; Huggins et al., 2021; Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda et al., 2014).

**Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

Building on the existing research on how districts build a principal’s instructional leadership capacity, this study focused on the effect, or perceptions, of professional development supports within a traditional public school setting and the perceptions of principals as they work with district personnel to improve their instructional leadership skills. Guided by New Institutionalism as its theoretical framework, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to examine not only how principal supervisors support principals in their instructional leadership and what organizational structures, if any, enabled successful implementation but how principals perceived these supports (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Through a combination of observation and interviews with principals and principal supervisors, the study also considered how the organization defined principal autonomy, how principals balanced their need to maintain autonomous decision-making with the district’s guidance and feedback, what types of job-embedded professional development was offered to school leaders, and how principal supervisors planned
for principal professional development. Therefore, this study was guided by the following research question:

How do principals perceive job-embedded professional development and instructional leadership support provided by district office staff?

**Implications**

The complexities of managing school operations and instructional leadership tasks have placed increased work demands on today’s educational leaders (DeJong et al., 2017; West et al., 2014). Although more studies are needed to examine the benefits of providing principals with increased district support, district leaders can gain some insight into how to help principals in building more effective leadership strategies (Honig, 2009, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014). Principals’ perceptions of how district leaders provide support can affect their acceptance and subsequent implementation if any occurs. District leaders may also consider how the organizational culture can hinder principal development. School reform initiatives providing autonomy to school leaders require systems to communicate clear expectations, to redefine traditional roles of central office staff, and to support principals in their decision-making within the context of their school communities (Honig & Rainey, 2012). This study may provide district leaders with information that can guide their current and future practices in building instructional leadership capacity among school leaders.

**Definition of Terms**

**action research** – a process through which educators identify problems of practice and attempt to solve the issue by experimentation and investigation. The process requires practitioners to collect, analyze, and reflect on data and its meaning using a structured process: to identify a problem, review established research, develop a research plan, implement the plan, evaluate its success, and revise the original plan for further investigation (Bleicher, 2013; Batagiannis, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Huggins et al., 2021; Lewin, 1946; Stevens 1986; Williamson & Taylor, 1983; Zepeda, 2015, 2019).

**agency** – empowering individuals to develop intentionality in leading their own learning (Honig & Rainey, 2020)
**autonomy** – granting principals the ability to have authority over school-based decisions and share leadership roles with stakeholders through a bottom-up decision-making structure with increased administrative accountability for student performance. Key decisions concerning school improvement efforts specifically target teaching and learning, curriculum choices, discipline and safety issues, teacher professional development, budgeting, and organization of the school calendar and schedule (Adamowski et al., 2007; Chang et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Jessen & DiMartino, 2019; Mayer et al., 2013; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; West et al., 2014).

**autonomy gap** – the distance between principal authority and needed authority to effectively lead school improvement initiatives (Adamowski et al., 2007).

**coaching** – a form of mentoring that can develop specific skills within a reduced time frame. The work, which is differentiated based on the leaders’ instructional leadership capacity, is applied within the context of the school setting, provides opportunities for reflection, and utilizes leader strengths as the basis for growth (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2005; Honig & Rainey, 2020; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2019).

**collaboration** – an opportunity for educators to work together and learn from one another. Educator collaboration is most typically limited to planning or working on structured tasks and projects and seldom includes critical feedback and reflective practices (Hargreaves, 1994; Honig & Rainey, 2020).

**collaborative culture** – a culture of a school or organization that promotes voluntary, spontaneous open communication, encourages joint work and consensus building, and embraces distributed instructional leadership. In collaborative cultures, work becomes a shared responsibility in which educators are able to challenge each other’s thinking and assumptions and reflect on individual beliefs and practices. Collaborative cultures are established within organizations in which trusting relationships are developed (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Hargreaves, 1994; Marks & Printy, 2003).

**collegiality** – or a more in-depth form of collaboration, requiring educators to engage in joint work to achieve a common purpose. Collegiality requires trust, mutual respect, interdependence, and positive
relationships. Colleagues value one another’s beliefs, experiences, and work, resulting in members accepting equitable responsibilities for joint work (Hargreaves, 1994).

**community of practice** – a close-knit group of learners working together to implement successful school improvement initiatives determined by a clear, precise learning target. Learners share common practices and information and use open communication (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

**comprehensive intervention required** – a state department of education label for schools consistently underperforming for three or more consecutive years, earning a D or F school performance rating.

**controlled autonomy** – districts afford principals the ability to make school-based decisions that impact their campuses while maintaining control over most school operations to ensure efficient practices (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davie, 2010; Ford et al., 2020; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

**coupled** – or the level of connectedness of the organization’s departments or units. If organizations, like schools, create a distance between formal and informal behaviors within the organization, they are described as being more loosely coupled. This means that the formal structures are prioritized over the real work being done within the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Weick, 1976).

**differentiated support** – designing opportunities for learners to grow based on their individual needs.

**distributed leadership** – a collective effort of multiple individuals who assume leadership roles related to teaching and learning; the individuals may or may not have formal or informal titles (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Houle, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2012; Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

**district-led support** – or district leaders who provide opportunities for school leaders to grow in their instructional leadership practices.

**educational reform** – deliberate actions to change current traditional public school systems in teaching or administrative practices.

**instructional leadership** – or a leader’s influence over school-wide teaching and learning initiatives, staffing, and curriculum implementation to increase student achievement. Effective instructional leaders not only focus on the technical aspects of teaching and learning but also motivate staff to become active
participants in school improvement efforts and coordinate school-wide classroom strategies (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014).

**Instructional proficiency** – or advancing the skills and expertise of classroom teachers to meet the needs of all students, providing them with equitable access to high-quality teaching and the means to reach higher levels of achievement.

**Isomorphism** – the practice of using other similar, more successful organizations as a model in which to align organizational actions, policies, and practices; these organizations are used as a model because of their similarity to the environment or goals (Burch, 2007).

**Job-embedded professional development** – a form of professional development that allows for a deepening of an educator’s professional practice within an authentic school setting, making the learning problem-centered, action-based, practical, and goal-oriented (Honig, 2012; Zepeda, et. al., 2014).

**Joint work** – is a form of collaboration that results in a product that is reflective of collective group abilities and values. For joint work to be possible, it requires interdependence, mutual trust, respect, and adjustments of practice (Hargreaves, 1994; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020).

**Mentoring** – a process through which experienced educators share their collective knowledge and expertise with others. Mentors can support the learning process by challenging the learner’s understanding of the new knowledge, asking critical questions, offering different ideas and solutions, and constructing mental models (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Johnson et al., 2016).

**NIET** - National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, a professional teaching organization that offers instructional leadership, teacher collaboration, and teacher evaluation systems.

**Organizational culture** – or the collective values, norms, expectations, practices, and understandings that inform individual behaviors within the organization (Hallett, 2003; Payne, 2017).

**Peer coaching** – is a collaborative structure that allows educators to participate in joint learning activities, to network with others, to give and receive quality feedback, and to join in professional dialogue. Peer
coaching can assist transference of new learning from a conceptual idea into real-world practices (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hargreaves, 1994; Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, 2019).

**power** – or the ability to create an effect using whatever means needed, which can be related to a role or an individual (Lawrence, 2008; Morris, 2002).

**professional development** – opportunities for educators to acquire new learning to expand their knowledge, resources, and experience to improve instructional efficacy. Professional development can be in various forms – such as training, collaborative learning communities, mentorship, coaching, and hands-on experiences. The goal of professional development is school improvement.

**professional learning community** – a group of educators who collaborate regularly to share resources, information, and experience with the explicit goal of increasing student achievement. Professional learning communities (PLC) can also be a vehicle for professional development. Professional Learning communities are also referred to as learning communities and communities of practice.

**school climate** – the character of a school based on the patterns of student, parent, and staff experiences while on the school campus, which is reflective of the values, norms, relationships, goals, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structure.

**school improvement** – is the continuous process by which schools provide all students with access to high-quality education and support with the sole purpose of reaching higher levels of achievement. This process may require educational changes in organizational structure, curricula, and instructional practice.

**talk moves** – or discussion strategies and questioning techniques that promote critical thinking and reflection in coaching and mentoring sessions (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

**technologies** – or economic exchange; refers to institutions with no established means of production.

**threat rigidity** – a maladaptive response to continuous, coercive threats and adverse circumstances to an organization which results in limitations to organizational behaviors. When organizations become more rigid and fixed, they may deliberately restrict information and relegate control to hierarchical positions (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981).
urgent intervention required – a state department of education label for schools consistently underperforming for two years, earning a D or F school performance rating or subgroup performance.
Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

School districts, or more specifically leaders within the “central office,” play a significant role in establishing the context of the daily work of a school principal (Ford et al., 2020, p. 266). Districts whose leaders effectively manage the organization’s operations while providing school-level curricular and instructional support are able to create optimal learning conditions for both students and faculty. Recent studies that attempt to define district effectiveness often focus more on the actual success than on the organization’s behaviors and culture that led to improvements in student achievement. Nevertheless, district leaders may consider what behaviors, structures, and strategies can generate positive results at the school level. The characteristics of effective school districts include how district leaders build principal capacity as instructional leaders and remove the barriers to effective instructional leadership. Literature on effective district leadership also investigates how central office staff can develop principals as autonomous leaders, determining the level of controlled autonomy to afford principals and removing any barriers to implementation (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Ford et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Finally, districts may consider the availability and quality of district support for school administrators, barriers to implementing district support initiatives, and the capacity of central office staff in effectively implementing job-embedded professional development.

Before district leaders consider adopting new structures and behaviors, they may consider the organization’s culture, leadership practices, and organizational structures in which these supports are offered to understand how principals may perceive such supports, and ultimately if they will be effective (Heck, 2004). If any changes are needed within the district’s organizational structure that deviates from traditionally accepted leadership behaviors, conflicts may result, and efforts to improve school performance may be futile (Burch, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Weick, 1976). By using New Institutionalism as the theoretical framework of the study, an examination of the organization’s behaviors and structures, which are influenced by societal expectations, cultural norms, and perceptions, can be brought into focus (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Organizational behaviors may also explain how contextual factors, external and internal conditions, and pressures on the organization shape leaders’
decision-making and behavior (Heck, 2004; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Considering why district leaders choose to offer increased support to building-level administrators or what types of supports are offered are important considerations. New initiatives may be in response to increasing pressure to improve school performance and student achievement, resulting in isomorphic behaviors or even maladaptive responses, known as threat rigidity effect (Daly et al., 2011). It is through the theoretical framework of New Institutionalism with a concentration on isomorphism and threat rigidity effects that the study will examine the efforts of two districts to adopt more effective leadership practices and build capacity among school-building leaders.

**Literature Review**

Leadership practices of both school administrators and teachers have remained the focus of federal and state educational reform efforts for over three decades (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). School improvement initiatives require principals to be effective instructional leaders with the ability to not only identify areas in need of improvement but to make changes in school structures that positively impact instruction and student achievement (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Steinberg, 2014). School leaders, who once were tasked with keeping order and handling parent complaints, have now become important levers in raising academic achievement for all students. Because the nature of school leadership has changed, school leaders may need more direction and support to navigate the challenges of accountability. District leadership matters because of the proximity to and supervisory authority over principals, which may create conditions that influence decision-making (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Ford et al., 2020; West et al., 2014).

**Role of District Leadership**

Considering the complex, loosely coupled components of the U.S. public school system, traditional school districts and the role of “central office” staff are not often at the center of research (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) contend that traditional roles of district staff serve as middle management, passing along information and funding to schools while ensuring compliance with federal and state mandates, laws, and regulations. Ford et al. (2020) define the
role of ‘central office’ as an organization with structures and policies to meet the needs of all stakeholders and whose responsibility it is to aid and influence the work of principals as they function as school building leaders (p. 265). However, if districts fail to adopt cultures that support key leadership characteristics leading to improvements in student achievement, they are not developing the conditions needed for principals to effectively lead school improvement initiatives (Augustine et al., 2009; Bryk et al., 1999; Ford et al., 2020; Honig et al., 2017; West et al., 2014).

Efforts by central office supervisors to standardize school operations in all schools are unlikely to have the desired effect in improving instruction and raising student achievement (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). In fact, most district leaders may need to actively seek to improve their knowledge and skill to better aid principals in their work (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Honig et al., 2017). Traditionally central office staff were more focused on managing finances, raising local funds, and policymaking rather than instructional improvements or building instructional leadership capacity (Honig & Rainey, 2020). District leadership has now evolved to support a system that prioritizes teaching and learning, and what defines an effective district has as well. Establishing a vision, developing a plan to empower principals and teachers to accept ownership of their schools, and building trust by supporting and collaborating with school leaders can be a determining factor in how successful principals are in leading school improvement (Chang et al., 2013; Ford et al., 2020; Mitani, 2018). District staff can develop structures that allow them to work with school leaders through various means to build instructional leadership capacity rather than resorting to simply micromanaging principals. At the same time, they can provide principals with the tools they need to be more effective leaders while continuing to engage in learning to improve schools (Augustine et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2013; Honig & Rainey, 2012, 2014, 2019; Honig et al., 2017; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). The key leadership characteristics – instructional leadership, autonomy, support structures, and continuous learning – can lead to differences in school performance and can have a profound impact on the level of “district effectiveness” (Ford et al., 2020, p. 265).
Principals as Instructional Leaders

While district leaders have an under-examined role in supporting school improvement, the research is clear that school principals have significant influence over a school’s success (Marzano et al., 2005). Although there is no one definition that captures the qualities of an effective principal, a research study by Parylo and Zepeda (2014) suggests that effective principals demonstrate specific characteristics, abilities, and skills. Researchers interviewed district staff to determine their perceptions of an effective principal and found that principals are considered to be effective if they are passionate, community-oriented, data-informed, collaborative, and have a tangible impact on student performance. The responsibilities of a school leader are becoming more complex, requiring principals to have varied skills and abilities to be considered effective. Principals are also faced with increased role ambiguity, specifically how to balance the responsibilities of school management within the larger context of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2012; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Zepeda et al., 2014). Aside from their role in managing school operations, successful principals strategically lead instructional practices, build relationships with stakeholders, develop staff capabilities, examine how organizational structures support programs, and promote the use of technology and innovation (Leithwood et al., 2019; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). Capable leaders maintain high expectations for all students and regularly monitor and analyze student data (Augustine et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2012; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). These multiple challenging roles are unlikely to be easy for a single leader, thus highlighting the need for targeted supports. Leaders with a strong track record of success create school cultures that are conducive to learning in practice and in policy (Blase & Blase, 1999; Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2019; Stein et al., 2004). However, the specific details of leader actions that impact school success and indirectly improve student achievement are not readily available (Neumerski, 2012). In fact, only a small number of research studies attempt to connect student performance with instructional leadership, including two studies by the Wallace Foundation (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004) and a study by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005).
Effective Instructional Leadership and Student Achievement

In a five-year study by the Wallace Foundation, Leithwood and colleagues (2004) conducted a research review to outline deliberate actions successful school leaders take to significantly impact student learning. Actions, such as adopting a distributed approach to leadership, building individual and collective efficacy among faculty, and having a focused approach to instruction, accounted for a quarter of the total effect on student learning. The effect was found to be more pronounced in schools with the most difficult circumstances and the highest need. The study’s findings have since been expanded to include thousands of survey responses from teachers and administrators, classroom observations, and interviews with stakeholders (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Since 2004, the Wallace Foundation has continued to support research to determine the impact of effective school leadership on student achievement. Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) conducted a longitudinal synthesis study, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, to measure the impact of an effective school leader on student achievement. Through identifying key principal skills and practices, researchers concluded that the benefit of effective leadership has been “understated” with a “greater and broader” impact than previously identified in the Leithwood et al. (2004) study (p. ix). Principals who were able to identify and implement high-leverage instructional strategies, establish collaborative learning environments, build a productive climate and culture, and manage resources and personnel effectively yielded increases in student performance. Effective leadership practices, researchers concluded, are more impactful than any single teacher because of the scope of their influence and can increase student learning by almost three months in math and two and a half months in reading (Grissom et al., 2021).

In a separate study, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified specific leadership behaviors through a meta-analysis of 69 research studies taking place over 23 years. Many of the studies included in the meta-analysis utilized a survey to determine teachers’ perceptions of their principals’ leadership, and these survey results were correlated with the average student achievement in the school. Researchers concluded that principal leadership profoundly impacted student performance as a result of 21 specific leadership actions, including effectively communicating, developing a culture of community
and collaboration, demonstrating flexibility, having situational awareness, and maintaining visibility around the campus (Marzano et al., 2005). Discrepancies in the meta-analysis effect size were noted, however, with some studies yielding larger more positive correlations than others.

**Instructional Leadership Practices**

To fulfill the redefined role of a school leader, principals have made concerted efforts to focus their attention and resources on improving instruction (Augustine et al., 2009; Payne, 2017). However, the idea that a school principal functions as the primary educational expert is not new. In the 1980s, through the effective school’s movement, the role of a principal was reconceptualized to include instructional leadership, which involved supervising classroom practices and monitoring student progress (Marks & Printy, 2003). However, the role of today’s instructional leader has advanced. Instructional leadership involves the process by which principals influence the instructional direction and efforts to improve teaching and learning at their school site, motivate staff to become active participants in school improvement efforts, and coordinate school-wide classroom strategies to increase student achievement (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008; Neumerski, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014). Without these skills, principals may be unprepared to meet the demands of modern principalship and may require district leaders' support.

Not only do they focus on the technical aspects of teaching and learning, but effective instructional leaders also guide the day-to-day classroom practices of teachers and students through specific actions (Marks & Printy, 2003). First, principals establish a shared vision, mission, and set of goals centered on student achievement; these shared values and goals determine the direction of the school and serve as the guide to reaching school goals (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008). Clearly defined academic goals are communicated to all staff and become ingrained into daily practice (Hallinger, 2005, 2010). Instructional leaders manage, monitor, and evaluate curriculum implementation, instructional efficacy, and assessment practices (Marks & Printy, 2003). To meet their current academic goals, leaders identify potential improvements, develop a plan, and monitor student performance (Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2012). Principals who effectively engage in
instructional leadership are cognizant of their school goals, instructional practices and systems of evaluation, plans for teacher professional development, and structures to improve teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2019). Utilizing data regularly to inform planning, implementation, and evaluation of instructional outcomes, effective instructional leaders maintain a sole focus on improving instructional efficacy to increase student achievement (Augustine et al., 2009).

Contextual factors. Accountability mandates and school improvement initiatives have created an explicit expectation that principals fulfill the role of an instructional leader to be effective (Hallinger, 2005). As a result, principals feel pressured to implement effective school reform initiatives that increase student achievement (Marks & Printy, 2003). To support reform, organizational, political, and cultural conditions must be favorable, and all teachers, students, and administrators are active participants (Stein et al., 2004). Therefore, principals understand the kind of leadership necessary to improve student performance and respond to the contexts in which they work (Hallinger, 2005; Houle, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2019). Examining contextual factors within the school can guide school leaders in what types of instructional leadership activities are needed (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2010; Neumerski, 2012; Stein et al., 2004). Principals can also consider how to maximize employee performance, which is a function of what the employee believes and their values, skills, knowledge, and motivation (Leithwood et al., 2008). Because of the impact that contextual factors may have on their decision-making, school leaders may need specific guidance from supervisors and central office personnel in how to determine which instructional leadership practices are most effective in addressing the specific needs of the school community (Grissom et al., 2013; Houle, 2006).

School climate and culture. The research on instructional leadership indicates that a school's adult climate is also an important consideration for instituting teacher-level instructional changes (Marks & Printy, 2003). Principals can cultivate this climate by setting high expectations for students and staff, building a community of learners, and finding ways to overcome barriers that impede success (Adamowski et al., 2007; Blase & Blase, 1999). Of equal importance is the principal's ability to create a
supportive, productive work environment for teachers and staff (Marks & Printy, 2003). Because they are actively involved in curricular and instructional matters on the school campus, school principals create productive environments by improving working conditions, maintaining organizational stability, hiring highly effective staff, and providing teachers with needed support (Leithwood et al., 2008). Even though the process by which instructional leaders work with teachers may vary and is dependent upon the school’s instructional goals, interactions between teachers and school leaders center on the coordination of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2012). Through a variety of professional development models, such as peer coaching, networking, and staff development, principals build teacher capacity (Acton, 2021). Although principals may have some curricular content knowledge to successfully lead, school leaders may choose to not address specific content areas when working with teachers to build their capacity (Leithwood et al., 2008).

**Instructional leadership in the classroom.** Because instructional leaders support classroom teachers in their instructional practices, they become an essential, active participant in stimulating, monitoring, and supervising teaching and learning on the school campus (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2010). To be an effective leader, principals spend time with teachers and students, observing classroom behaviors and gathering reliable information about what occurs in the classroom routinely (Litchfield, 1985). As principals spend more time implementing effective instructional leadership practices, Grissom and other researchers (2013) found increases in student achievement resulted over time. The effectiveness of the school leader’s actions was contingent upon their quality and specificity but also dependent on how the leader used information to lead school improvement initiatives. Yet not all leaders possess the level of knowledge and skill needed to implement change, and the support of principal supervisors may be needed to build leader capacity to respond to the needs of the school community.

Proficiency in the use of various forms of school data - both qualitative and quantitative - is also a key component of instructional leadership. To be an effective instructional leader, principals identify the knowledge and abilities of faculty and staff related to curriculum, instruction, and school culture (Leithwood et al., 2019). Through a variety of activities, such as teacher coaching, classroom
walkthroughs, and academic feedback, principals gather data to advance teaching and learning (Grissom et al., 2013; Neumerski, 2013). For example, classroom observations provide principals with the opportunity to monitor teaching practices, to evaluate the need for or the effectiveness of professional development, to determine the instructional needs of faculty and students, and to increase visibility across the school’s campus (Grissom et al., 2013). Leaders often combine informal classroom walkthrough observations with various coaching techniques, both of which are positively associated with gains in school performance. Teachers benefit from coaching, which assists them in improving instructional practices, student academic performance, curriculum implementation, and classroom management (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2005). Knowledgeable and experienced principals are confident in their abilities and skills to develop teachers. However, principals cannot be knowledgeable in all domains, particularly at the high school level, and can utilize distributed leadership to ensure all teachers receive instructional support (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012).

**Distributed leadership.** Instructional leadership cannot be effectively implemented by the principal in isolation (Neumerski, 2012). Even the most capable principal is not knowledgeable of all disciplines and content areas (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Therefore, effective instructional leadership requires a collective effort of multiple individuals, with or without titles, to assume leadership roles related to teaching and learning; the practice is known as distributed leadership (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Houle, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2012; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Distributed leadership allows the principal to build capacity among school staff, transfer relevant knowledge associated with effective teaching, and motivate teachers to grow in their own instructional practices, which supports the heart of the organization’s work - teaching and learning (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). In collaboration with teachers and other leaders, the team can develop a school improvement plan to address curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as plan for teacher professional development opportunities that support school goals (Marks & Printy, 2003). In delegating tasks associated with instructional leadership, the principal creates a collaborative culture, one in which instructional leadership is viewed as a shared responsibility (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Marks & Printy,
2003). The principal shares knowledge and exchanges ideas with followers within a culture of professionalism (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Neumerski, 2012; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). The context of the work is essential, and the leader only delegates leadership responsibilities if the situation warrants such action (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Followers who have the capacity to assume the responsibility of these roles can add depth to and exceed the knowledge of a single principal.

**Barriers to Successful Instructional Leadership**

Time and contextual factors can both play a major role in a principal’s ability to become an effective instructional leader. For most principals, a gap exists between their intent to lead teachers in effective practices and the daily challenges of managing school operations (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Litchfield, 1985). The gap widens in schools with more challenging environments, urgent or recurring problems, required meetings, and mandated paperwork, often preventing leaders from engaging in instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; West et al., 2014). In fact, while higher achieving schools allow principals the time to work with teachers in improving their instructional practices, principals who lead lower achieving, less effective schools have additional time constraints that do not allow them the freedom to spend equal amounts of time supporting teachers (Grissom et al., 2013). In some schools, conflicts can also be associated with financial difficulties, administrative pressures, and district interference, and the negative perceptions of these constraints can affect a principal’s ability to overcome the challenges (Federici, 2013). This sets up a calamitous reality in which schools most in need of effective instructional leadership may be the least likely to receive it.

A leader’s level of expertise and skill in supporting teachers in improving their instructional efficacy can also serve as a barrier to effective instructional leadership (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Payne, 2017). Research suggests that some building-level leaders are unprepared to support teachers and lack the knowledge and skill in identifying effective instructional practices (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Neumerski, 2013; Payne, 2017). Even if leaders are experienced and knowledgeable, more challenges may exist.
The organizational culture can create difficulties for principals who attempt to institute improvements in instruction at the school level (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Even at the school level, teachers’ reluctance to implement new learning can deter them from fully engaging in opportunities to improve their instructional practices, and as a result, new learning will not be transferred into the classroom, which is a necessary step for positive gains in student performance (Neumerski, 2012).

The interference of district leaders or lack of district support can undermine principals’ instructional leadership efforts; for example, district leaders may institute mandates that overshadow principals’ leadership, discrediting their abilities as school leaders (Neumerski, 2012). District leaders disconnected from the day-to-day operations of a school may view instructional leadership as easy and evaluating successful implementation as straightforward as counting the number of classroom observations and teacher conferences (Litchfield, 1985). In some cases, district leaders, themselves, lack the ability to lead instructional initiatives, possessing limited knowledge of instruction and school improvement (Burch, 2007). The lack of district support or the lack of recognition of principals’ instructional leadership efforts led to decreases in job satisfaction, motivation, and morale, which can have a profound effect on the principal’s continued ability to perform leadership duties (Wang et al., 2018). In extreme cases, this may lead to principal attrition, which can have a devastating effect on student achievement, especially in struggling schools, particularly when it is unplanned (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008).

Principals as Autonomous Leaders

Significant changes in school accountability policies have impacted not only the work of school and district administrators but also school governance, organization, and structures (West et al., 2014). Historically the role of central office staff remained concentrated on school operations and policy compliance; however, within the past 20 years, responsibilities of district leaders have evolved to focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Although this shift in the work of district leadership has created opportunities for change, principals can face significant barriers to implementing lasting changes at the school level because of conflicting ideas over the role of central
office in schools (Mayer et al., 2013). Even though initiatives to grant principals increased school-level autonomy hold promise in positively affecting school performance and student achievement, especially in low socio-economic areas (Honig, 2009), impediments within the organization may hinder any real change.

Autonomy grants principals the ability to share leadership roles with stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community members, through a bottom-up decision-making structure with increased administrative accountability for student performance (Chang et al., 2015; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; West et al., 2014). Under such a model, principals maintain authority over key decisions concerning school improvement efforts that specifically target teaching and learning but also focus on choices in curriculum, discipline and safety, teacher professional development, budgeting, and organization of the school calendar and schedule (Adamowski et al., 2007; Ford et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Jessen & DiMartino, 2019; Mayer et al., 2013; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). With more autonomy, principals can ostensibly focus school programs on the needs of students and on the strengths of the faculty and staff rather than simply comply with external mandates (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig, 2009). By working with their school community to establish meaningful school improvement goals, autonomous principals can strengthen the rigor and relevance of school programs (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Honig, 2009).

In the 1980s, initiatives to increase school-based autonomy in cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles gave principals more authority to make decisions regarding school operations and management (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Ogawa, 1994; Payne, 2017; Steinberg, 2014). In Chicago, initiatives to reform schools were the result of pressures from various sources, including the business community, community organizations, educational journals, and the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Payne, 2017). Consortium researchers, who utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to study the impact of decentralization on educational systems in Chicago, regularly conversed with powerful educators on potential issues, challenges, and successes (Bryk & Seibring, 1991; Bryk et al., 1999; Payne, 2017). To support the reform initiatives that emerged from disappointment over
the state of public schools in the city, the consortium launched a five-year research agenda based on four areas of concentration - decentralization, increased accountability, increased teacher capacity to support improvements in teaching and learning, and innovation (Bryk & Seibring, 1991; Bryk et al., 1999). In one such study, Bryk and colleagues (1999) studied the success of six Chicago elementary schools in leveraging new reform opportunities to enact change. Findings of the study indicated that commonalities existed among all six schools, such as the support of local school councils, a stable professional community, a plan to support instructional improvements and staff development, and strong parent involvement (Bryk et al., 1999). The goal of research conducted by consortium members during this time was to increase broad community involvement, respond to immediate needs, focus on student outcomes, understand issues, and stimulate innovation (Bryk & Seibring, 1991). As a result of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, Chicago public schools launched two major reform initiatives that became the center of school improvement efforts - autonomy and accountability (Payne, 2017).

Efforts to reform schools in Chicago utilized a corporate model to decentralize decision-making, placing more authority in the hands of school leaders or school-based management councils (Ogawa, 1994; Payne, 2017; Steinberg, 2014). School site-based management initiatives allowed school council members and school leaders to have increased control over the school’s budget, curriculum, and personnel (Payne, 2017; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Decentralization of schools was in response to a multitude of factors, including failing Chicago schools, a teacher strike, an overinflated bureaucracy, and outraged community members (Payne, 2017). Leaders, like Paul Vallas and Arne Duncan, led reform within the district by increasing accountability, developing human capital, and improving instruction while maintaining much of the principal’s autonomy over school management (Payne, 2017). However, in other cities across the U. S., efforts to increase principal autonomy yielded limited positive results and virtually no impact on student achievement for multiple reasons, including lack of central office support and inattention to building the principal’s capacity to utilize autonomy effectively (Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Initiatives were not well-defined, devoid of clear goals, and lacked methods of accountability; the primary goal of decentralization was to redistribute authority from
district leaders to the greater school community - including principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders - in order to increase control over school management rather than academic goals (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013).

New initiatives to increase principal autonomy deviate from past decentralization efforts by focusing on improving academic outcomes and instructional improvements for every student (Honig & Rainey, 2012; West et al., 2014). Current efforts to grant principals increased autonomy include a key role for district leaders who support principals by improving their instructional leadership capacity, which the lack of can be a potential impediment to successful school improvement (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Honig & Rainey, 2012). As a result of the reduction in district oversight and micromanagement, school leaders have, in places, established professional networks, increased collegial trust, and reported improved job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2018). For example, according to West and colleagues (2014), district initiatives to increase autonomy led to improved working conditions for school leaders in a large urban school district in the southeastern United States. In fact, autonomy is generally conceived of as one of the most critical conditions to aid in school leader success because of its importance in the development and sustainability of leaders’ motivation. Leaders may need to experience decision-making based on the value of their own beliefs, thoughts, and actions to achieve a goal or outcome and to enhance their intrinsic motivation and feelings of competence (Federici, 2013; Ford et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In spite of the benefits, districts vary in how they determine the level of autonomy for principals (Hashim et al., 2019; Hefferman, 2018; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013). For instance, some studies have found higher-achieving schools were afforded more autonomy over underprivileged schools that were promised more district support (Hefferman, 2018; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Schools not meeting satisfactory external accountability measures were susceptible to scrutiny or “surveillance” instead of autonomy (Hefferman, 2018, p. 7). Urban school principals reported decreased levels of autonomy despite research suggesting that autonomy can be a factor in school success (Wang et al., 2018). In schools with greater autonomy, the principal reported spending more time focusing on instructional leadership and curriculum and was more likely to adjust instructional practices and teacher
professional development to meet the needs of faculty and students (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Conversely, principals receiving lower levels of autonomy, such as in the case of urban principals, reported less commitment to their jobs and recorded higher attrition rates (Chang et al., 2015). Even in cases where autonomy is limited, principals can experience some autonomy, usually regarding how district policies are implemented (Hashim et al., 2019).

Adamowski et al. (2007) argue that accountability policies can compound the challenges districts must overcome to transition from a top-down command and control bureaucratic structure of management to a bottom-up leadership model that supports school leader autonomy. In cases where principals claimed to have increased autonomy, the power to make real decisions was limited (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hefferman, 2018). Principals’ authority over school management and instructional leadership they regard as essential to their success is often withheld, relegating the power to make decisions to district personnel (Adamowski et al., 2007). This distance between the authority that principals have and what they need to effectively lead school improvement initiatives is called the “autonomy gap” (Adamowski et al., 2007, p. 5). Adamowski and colleagues (2007) interviewed and surveyed principals in three states about their experience in working in district-controlled schools. Many principals who were interviewed reported feeling unable to raise student achievement because of district constraints, most notably in the areas of staffing, budgeting, and instructional leadership. Findings indicate that leaders in district-led schools are presented with a specific curriculum, materials to supplement the curriculum, a pacing guide, and curriculum sequencing instructions. District policies removed instructional decisions from participants’ control, and instructional leadership was reduced to ensuring that teachers were implementing the district-adopted curriculum with fidelity (Adamowski et al., 2007).

**Controlled Autonomy**

Cultural, social, and political contexts within the constraints of the district system also influence the boundaries of autonomy for principals (Hefferman, 2018; Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). System leaders may choose to establish a district-wide vision in which to guide principal decision-making while, at the same time, increasing leader accountability or choose to define the boundaries of
principal autonomy, selectively choosing specific areas in which principals have decision-making ability. Districts that maintain control over most school operations in the name of efficiency and in providing support, while at the same time, affording principals the ability to make site-based decisions that may impact the school campus is known as “controlled autonomy” (Ford et al., 2020; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016, p. 335). Instead of freedom from district oversight and interference, controlled autonomy can be effective because it may be combined with district support (Chang et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2020). However, if a system of controlled autonomy is adopted, district leaders may consider clearly articulating what constitutes principal autonomy, both in nature and in scope, for new and veteran leaders in order for positive changes in school leadership to occur (Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Other models by researchers such as Waters and Marzano (2006) and Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) suggest systems maintain a balance between district oversight and principal decision-making known as defined autonomy. Waters and Marzano (2006) describe “defined” autonomy as the Superintendent setting well-defined non-negotiable goals for teaching and learning with assurances that schools will align resources and professional development to the district’s vision. To evaluate progress towards this goal, district staff monitor implementation efforts. In both the controlled and defined autonomy models, district leaders hold principals accountable for their school performance.

Conversely, school leaders believe that efficiency, power, and values are important factors in determining the balance between principal autonomy and district control (Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). In a qualitative study by Weiner and Woulfin (2016), novice principals were interviewed concerning their perception of controlled autonomy and their thoughts concerning district controls limiting their current level of autonomy. Findings of the study indicate that principals believe that district leaders should manage school operations, such as transportation and supplies, serve as advocates for building leaders and teachers, and establish a clear, coherent district-wide vision. They also contend that principal supervisors should provide principals with external validation and acknowledgment for work and accomplishments. Principals in the study also expressed frustration over bureaucratic structures described as “inefficient” or “counterproductive” (Weiner & Woulfin, 2016, p. 341). In terms
of instructional leadership capacity, principals within this study believed that they had more knowledge and skill in managing curriculum and instruction and that the district should relinquish control over teaching and learning. Findings suggest that district support would only be required if the instructional challenges were beyond the scope of the principal or if the leader’s instructional leadership capacity was considered diminished (Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

**Barriers to Principal Autonomy**

Although many principals are afforded some level of autonomy, school leaders who attempt to fully realize their decision-making capabilities may face resistance from a bureaucratically inclined central office staff. For example, district offices may lack the organizational capacity to monitor school leader decision-making, which can present ongoing challenges to decentralization (Hashim et al., 2019). Autonomy rhetoric may conflict with the reality of the school leaders’ ability to make decisions that yield improvements in school performance (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hefferman, 2018). Discrepancies may arise between the leader’s existing autonomy and the perception of support for autonomy (Ford et al., 2020). Therefore, principals may, in fact, have a high degree of autonomy but, because of district policies and opinions, may not feel as though they do. With increased autonomy, leaders may experience conflict between the need for autonomy and meeting students’ academic needs (Chang et al., 2015). Nevertheless, a district’s failure to service schools and provide them with resources and support may indicate a need to negotiate for controlled principal autonomy (Weiner & Woulfin, 2016), whatever the difficulty in negotiating such autonomy may be.

To effectively implement initiatives to increase principal autonomy, deep organizational changes are often required (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013). New bureaucratic processes at the district level – ones that enable school and district leaders to build more trusting relationships and expand the boundaries of shared leadership responsibilities - may be needed (Mayer et al., 2013; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013). District leaders can also reframe the scope of their work, changing their mindset and job description to focus on curriculum, instruction, school support, and school improvement (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Daly & Finnigan, 2011). Because of these
changes in the traditional roles of district staff, training may be required throughout the implementation process to engage district leaders in the new practices (Honig, 2009). Without district support and principal commitment to decentralizing decision-making, negative consequences can result (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Chang et al., 2015; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013). For example, surface-level decentralization resulted in cases where the organizational culture and structure did not support role revisions or the relinquishment of power to increase principal autonomy (Mayer et al., 2013; Honig, 2009; West et al., 2014). If decentralization efforts are to be successful, principals may require the support, confidence, and understanding of all central office staff to encourage strong leadership and responsibility among building-level leaders (Chang et al., 2015; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

**District Support for School Administrators**

Traditionally, central office leaders served in a strictly supervisory capacity and monitored principal work without developing a system of effective communication or providing targeted support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Honig, 2012). Principals’ perceptions of district leadership were often relegated to providing test preparatory materials and information about state-level mandates, rather than assisting them with developing high-performance learning environments to ensure student success (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Information on the current types of on-the-job support available to principals is sparse, and experts question the quality of support that is available to principals across the U.S. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2016; Rowland, 2017). Research on principal professional development indicates that districts vary in the type of supports offered to building-level leaders and the effect can either expand or have a negative impact on a principal’s ability to lead (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). With districts dedicating more time and resources to leadership development, district leaders may be required to take on different roles, which focus on supporting, retaining, and mentoring principals as they assist them in navigating the complexities of educational environments (Ford et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019).
The idea that district leaders can have a positive effect on the success of school reform initiatives is not a new one. Elmore & Burney (1997) investigated the connection between professional development and successful school improvement in their study of Anthony Alvarado’s work in New York City’s Public School District 2. Researchers concluded that successful school reform requires a balance between district leadership guidance and decentralization. Alvarado was able to integrate school management with professional development by conducting school site observations, providing principals with actionable feedback, developing a structure to support principal coaching, and establishing strong relationships between central office staff and school leaders (Elmore & Burney, 1997). Opportunities for school leaders to participate in some type of professional development have increased. For example, in a report for the National Center for Educational Statistics, researchers noted that many principals said they had access to some type of professional development with the most common types being conferences or workshop attendance, enrollment in university coursework, or district-led professional development (Levin et al., 2020; Lewis & Scott, 2020). Lewis and Scott (2020) also found that over 80% of the professional development focused on safety, school management, educational policy changes, technology, student engagement, school improvement planning, analyzing student achievement data, and effective instruction. In exemplary professional development models, principals were also afforded opportunities to learn about managing change, leading instruction, developing a positive and collaborative school culture, building staff capacity through instructional leadership, and meeting the needs of diverse learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). However, the majority of school systems do not offer principals access to authentic, job-embedded learning opportunities, despite beneficial reports from principals who received individualized support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2020).

The need for professional development is not limited to only experienced principals. New principals can be unprepared to assume the role of an instructional leader because of topical gaps in preparation programs - these programs may focus on licensure and competencies rather than job-related knowledge and skill (Acton, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Villani, 2006). To provide new
principals with additional leadership training opportunities, 20 states, like Arkansas, Maryland, and Texas, recommend new leaders attend a leader induction program (Levin et al., 2020). Induction programs, like Pennsylvania’s Inspired Leadership induction program, provide new principals within their first five years of service with targeted training on strategic planning and data analysis to improve teaching and learning (Levin et al., 2020; Steinberg & Yang, 2020). A portion of the states offering new principals a formal induction includes mentoring as a key component (Steinberg & Yang, 2020; Villani, 2006). Induction programs can be important in new leader development, providing multiple years of support designed to enhance leadership skills and encourage growth (Villani, 2006). Effective induction programs, which may include a variety of techniques such as networking, peer observations, leader shadowing, internships, and guidance provided by district staff, have produced improvements in student math achievement and decreases in teacher attrition, particularly in economically disadvantaged schools (Steinberg & Yang, 2020). With the increased pressures on principals to improve student achievement, school systems may consider adopting exemplary support structures, like Pennsylvania’s Inspired Leader induction program, to build the capacity of current and future school leaders.

Highly Supportive School Systems and Organizational Structures

Central office leaders can have a substantial role in facilitating leader development initiatives and can serve as agents of principal learning (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Honig et al., 2017). Highly supportive school districts create structures and policies to direct and facilitate leader development, and they do this by utilizing differing methods, such as professional development sessions, principal meetings, learning communities, or one-on-one mentoring or coaching sessions. By creating a culture of learning and embracing a collaborative teaching and learning approach, central office staff develop principal instructional leadership rather than micromanaging or solely serving in a supervisory capacity (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017). The teaching and learning approach utilizes strategies, such as differentiation and modeling, to allow district leaders the opportunity to learn and work side by side with school administrators, and growth becomes a shared responsibility (Augustine et al., 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012, 2019, 2020; Mayer et al., 2013). District leaders can
successfully implement new systems of professional development aimed at supporting principals if they establish strong relationships with building-level leaders (Honig & Rainey, 2020). This type of professional development is contrary to previously held beliefs that central office is the only source of knowledge (Daly & Finnigan, 2011). Therefore, traditional principal meetings are transformed into a means to emphasize to principals the importance of the school leader’s role as an instructional leader and to reinforce collaborative work as educators (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2017). Principal supervisors reframe the definition of professional success to include growth in building instructional leadership capacity (Honig & Rainey, 2020). In using a teaching and learning approach, district leaders can successfully build leadership capacity, boost individual and collective leader performance, develop relationships between colleagues, and focus on how improving practices can positively impact student achievement (Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020; Zepeda, 2015).

Central office staff in districts that provide high levels of support to school leaders spend most of their time in schools, assisting principals in developing a school culture that promotes success (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). The individualized meetings allow central office staff to differentiate their work with principals in contextual settings with a focus on teaching and learning, allowing the principal to put challenging ideas into practice (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). In addition, principals receive encouragement and feedback to further guide their instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Through continued joint work, principals and district leaders engage in more reflective practices and contemplate solutions and actions (Honig et al., 2017). Communication between principals and supervisors is increased, generating an open and regular dialogue about principals’ needs and the ability of district staff to meet those needs (Bauer & Brazier, 2013; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Using these methods, school leaders gain agency over their own learning, establish a motivation to continue learning, and develop a growth mindset (Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020). Without ownership, principals may only engage in practices when mandated or observed, and practices are no longer learning opportunities but compliance exercises (Honig & Rainey, 2019).
Focus on a Teaching and Learning Approach. Within highly supportive school districts, central office leaders not only take an active role in supporting the work of principals by elevating the importance of achievement, instruction, and reform efforts, they develop organizational structures that facilitate collaboration and leadership growth within the context of the work (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Houle, 2006; Neumerski, 2012). Based on the tenets of Socio-Cultural Learning Theory, a teaching and learning approach to leader professional development requires principals to associate learning with doing (Honig & Rainey, 2020). More specifically, educational leaders engage in collaborative performance-based instructional leadership tasks, apply the new knowledge within the context of a real-world situation, and receive support and feedback from a peer, mentor, or coach; this type of approach has shown to generate encouraging results in improving instructional leadership capacity (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Honig et al., 2017). Because effective principal professional development may require a mix of methods and a variety of strategies, teaching and learning structures can be used alongside individual principal coaching and/or mentor sessions (Liljenberg, 2020). Collaborative performance-based instructional tasks are presented to principals as opportunities to explore and find solutions to issues within their own schools while collaborating with peers and learning from experiences (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Collaborative problem-solving tasks, known as joint work, are not only important in the context of their own practice but to their colleagues and their organization as well and become the focus of learning. Through joint work, contextual factors, leader experiences, and administrator knowledge guide principal learning both in content and in method of delivery (Huggins et al., 2021; Rowland, 2017). These collaborative efforts reduce principal isolation, provide principals with observation opportunities and better feedback, and may enable principals to transfer new learning to a real-world setting (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Sparks & Bruder, 1987).

Focus on Collaboration. Regardless of whether district supervisors work with principals individually or in small groups to support them in their growth as instructional leaders, collaboration is an essential component, providing leaders with an opportunity to work together and learn from one another (Hargreaves, 1994; Honig & Rainey, 2020). In collaborative meetings, educators discuss educational
practices, enabling each member of the group to share his or her knowledge, experience, and professional judgment (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Collaboration becomes a method to acquaint leaders with common elements of professional practice as well as strategies and techniques used within the organization. In many instances, collaborative meetings become informal induction programs with more skilled practitioners sharing knowledge and experience with more novice leaders (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Schon, 2016). Additionally, collaboration allows educational professionals to share resources, reduces isolation, encourages mentorship between members, and provides a bridge between theory and practice, leading to the goal of building a supportive environment and a collaborative culture (Aas & Paulson, 2019; Hargreaves, 1994; Sparks & Bruder, 1987).

According to researchers, system leaders may have an important role in developing a culture of collaboration and a sense of community among building leaders and district staff (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019). However, Hargreaves (1994) contends that, with administrative interference, “true” collaboration cannot exist (p. 189). In Hargreaves's (1994) model, a collaborative organizational culture is only achieved through voluntary, spontaneous efforts of educators with the established purpose of initiating and sustaining school improvement. The results of these collaborative efforts may be unpredictable, and educators may not work together within structured environments but in brief, frequent, informal meetings without regulations. Hargreaves (1994) also suggests that collaborative cultures can be incompatible with district directives, which rely on structured, “highly centralized” processes (p. 193). If an authentic collaborative culture can be achieved, however, participants can focus on joint work, participate in peer observations and feedback, and engage in reflective inquiry with the sole purpose of improving practices and school performance. Through a process of collaboration and consensus building, organizations can embrace a culture of collaboration, particularly if it is facilitated by skilled leaders (Hargreaves, 1994).

Professional Learning Communities and Communities of Practice. In an effort to support principals in their growth as instructional leaders, district staff may encourage them to collaborate through collegial networks in order to share ideas and support one another (Blase & Blase, 1999; West et al.,
Through networking, sometimes called *principal professional learning communities* or *communities of practice*, small groups of principals grow as instructional leaders by examining theoretical concepts in combination with the practical skills and experience of the group (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Through these various networks and learning environments, principals are provided with support, knowledge, and professional-level interaction (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Ford et al., 2020; Rowland, 2017; West et al., 2014). They are able to collaborate with other leaders who share similar goals, values, and ideas and, through continued social interaction, are able to work together to generate solutions to problems of practice selected by the group and found within the organizational structure, culture, and context of the work (Stein et al., 2004). Because principals from similar schools are grouped, they can share experiences and collaborate within a safe, inclusive environment that is conducive to learning (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Leithwood, et al., 2008; Stein, et al., 2004). The safe environment allows participants to have meaningful professional conversations with colleagues who may have different perspectives and experiences; within these conversations, colleagues can ask critical questions, engage in reflection, and gain differing perspectives on their own beliefs and practices (Zepeda, 2015, 2019). Principals exchange ideas about how new practices, learning, and information can be integrated into the school environment and how it impacts thinking and action (Honig & Rainey, 2014). If metacognitive strategies are utilized to discuss not only the reasoning and rationale to support practice but that challenge the validity of the claims as well, leaders have opportunities to think about leadership and how it matters to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Learning and reflection become a natural byproduct of the collaborative effort (Zepeda, 2019).

District leaders may aid in establishing connections among like-minded colleagues and facilitate collaboration among leaders with similar school configurations or student populations through the creation of small networking groups (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Stein, et al., 2004). In fact, if the network evolves into a small tightly knit group of learners who share common practices and information, communicate openly, and negotiate improvements determined by a clear, precise learning goal, they become a community of practice (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). In communities of practice, which is...
based on Socio-Cultural Learning Theory, participants are engaged in a practical application of new learning rather than simply gaining more knowledge (Honig & Rainey, 2014). By focusing on the joint work of the community of practice, participants view the work as a collaborative endeavor, and as a result, a collaborative culture emerges within the group. With the building of trust, interdependence, and a positive relationship, these learning group practices evolve from collaborative groups into collegial groups, one in which joint work becomes the focus (Hargreaves, 1994).

In learning communities, limited time spent on discussing issues not related to instructional practices maximized the time spent on issues related to student achievement (Honig & Rainey, 2014). To ensure principals are actively engaging in the communities of practice, all principals are asked to serve in some capacity as a resource for learning (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Stein et al., 2004). Central office staff who may serve as facilitators to assist participants in helping and learning from one another validate their efforts, in theory, creating conditions conducive to principal growth and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2014). However, the value of principal professional learning communities is dependent upon specific central office staff practices as they facilitate the meetings, and these processes do not happen immediately. Building a culture of learning and collaboration at a leadership level takes time (Zepeda, 2019). Nevertheless, the creation of collaborative structures may benefit principals by reducing isolation, connecting them with coaches, mentors, and other instructional leaders, and allowing them to gain agency over their own learning (Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda, 2019).

**District Leadership Capacity and Role of District Leaders**

Unfortunately, many district leaders have not been trained to lead collaboratively or to provide professional development, coaching, mentoring, or support to school leaders. The limited capacity of both district and school leaders can hinder the successful implementation of school improvement initiatives, and too often district personnel do not have an expansive knowledge of leadership strategies and techniques (Stein et al., 2004). Therefore, most school leaders have inadequate access to exemplary models of leadership, and gaps in knowledge can contribute to unsuccessful school reform efforts (Acton, 2021). Successful school change requires principals with enough knowledge and expertise to evaluate
classroom teaching and provide feedback to teachers (Stein et al., 2004). Yet most principals still participate in professional development designed for classroom teachers or in leader training that only focuses on the “what” of school reform rather than the “how” (Rowland, 2017). This may help them understand what teachers should be doing but may not necessarily prepare them to support staff navigating the process of change.

Successful district leadership generates lasting positive impacts on principals’ instructional leadership and student achievement (Boston et al., 2017; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Honig et al., 2017). To accomplish this in a way that supports principal autonomy, district leaders invest in building the instructional leadership capacity of all principals and seek opportunities to build their own capacity, if needed (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). In districts in which schools continually struggle to improve student achievement, Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) argue that the leadership capacity of both school and district leaders needs improvement. For districts to be effective, both school and district leaders are capable of monitoring instructional practices and creating cultures that support instructional efficacy (Augustine et al., 2009). The key to building successful school cultures lies in leadership behaviors that develop cohesive, sustainable organizational systems that foster trust among school leaders, develop structures for formal and informal networks, maintain open communication, adopt policies and initiatives that support quality instructional leadership, and build the capacity of administrators and teachers (Augustine et al., 2009; Bauer & Brazer, 2013). These systems sustain supportive networks and revise strict organizational behaviors and hierarchical power structures that may deter successful implementation and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016). Without organizational changes that support school reform, however, efforts to improve school performance may not be permanent (Acton, 2021; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010).

Role of District Leaders. Because a variety of leadership behaviors may be needed to support the growth of building-level leaders, district staff may need to discard their traditional roles in supporting school management and operations, along with other responsibilities, to focus on teaching and learning alongside building-level leaders (Honig et al., 2017). This may require a transformation of what is
traditionally considered the role of the central office. A district-wide vision refocused on teaching and learning can guide building-level leaders in aligning curriculum choices with instruction and assessment practices (Ford et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2020; Honig et al., 2017). District leadership may also invest in a strategic plan that includes goals, supportive policies, best practices framework, and alignment of resources, which can assist principals in building school cultures that reinforce school reform efforts (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). Effective, supportive district leadership leads initiatives to embrace principal autonomy and looks for opportunities for school leaders to exercise autonomy within a district-monitored structure (Ford et al., 2020). Researchers contend that district leaders who have the skills and knowledge to build leader capacity model exemplary instructional leadership, such as actively motivating, monitoring, and encouraging practices that improve instructional efficacy for all faculty members (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2010). To build principal knowledge, central office supervisors may provide instructionally focused professional development on leading instruction, building staff capacity through instructional leadership, and managing sustainable school reform initiatives (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Efforts to increase collaboration may involve creating opportunities for networking, facilitating professional learning communities or communities of practice, or establishing a coaching initiative (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, 2022; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Honig et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2004). Leader induction programs that utilize mentoring, peer observation, and continuous district-led support may also be considered (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, 2022). In fact, any effort to incorporate high-quality teaching and learning activities that are embedded into leader professional development can improve administrative practices (Boston et al., 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019).

**Job-Embedded Professional Development**

To build leadership capacity, principals may require a variety of learning opportunities, both individually and collaboratively, within a supportive environment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Zepeda, 2015). However, not all methods of principal professional development are effective in building leader capacity (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). For example, Grissom and Harrington (2010) studied
connections between leader performance and professional development. Findings of the study indicate that, while university coursework and formal leader networks were correlated to lower performance ratings, principals who engaged in formal mentoring programs received higher performance ratings. Yet no matter the content or focus of new learning, leaders can benefit from ongoing professional development that reinforces instructional cohesion and establishes a common lexicon (Ford et al., 2020; Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, 2019). To be relevant and useful, professional learning is differentiated and based on the leader’s current needs, is continuous and extended over time, and is grounded in practice within the context of the leaders’ work (Acton, 2021; Boston et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Rowland, 2017; Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda et al., 2014). Professional development and district support that focus on an administrator’s day-to-day practices are essential, as they are significant in supporting improvements in instruction and student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Honig, 2009; Honig et al., 2017). Because this type of professional development is problem-centered, reflective, motivational, practical, and goal-oriented, learning can consider principals’ capacity for instructional leadership and target valued behaviors and skills that can lead to greater instructional leadership efficacy (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Zepeda, 2015, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2014). Additionally, if new learning is connected to principals’ work and prior experiences, they can engage in reflective practices, which can solidify understanding or become the catalyst for changes in practices and beliefs (Zepeda, 2015).

To offer principals high-quality professional learning and individualized support, districts may develop policies, secure funding, and establish organizational structures to facilitate the implementation of these types of change initiatives (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Rowland, 2017; Zepeda et al., 2014; Zepeda, 2019). With the limited time available to provide such supports, district leaders can ensure that the assistance provided meets the needs of all building leaders. Research studies suggest that intensive, job-embedded professional development for educational leaders is valuable in building instructional leadership capacity and improving classroom instruction (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Honig, 2012;
Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2014). In fact, job-embedded learning, through its various methods and types, provides the variety of learning principals may need to build leadership capacity. For job-embedded professional development to be effective, the opportunities must be relevant to the adult learner, support inquiry and reflection, require feedback as a part of the support structure, and facilitate transference from learning into practice (Rowland, 2017; Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda, 2015, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2014). Job-embedded professional learning actively engages principals in thinking about academic standards-based learning, student achievement, and school improvement goals (Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda, 2019). For the opportunities to be valuable, principals trust in the process, in colleagues and supervisors, and in themselves as learners (Zepeda, 2019).

**Characteristics of Effective Adult Learning.** Adults learn differently than children as they are self-directed and often seek learning that relates to their interests and their sense of self (Knowles et al., 2005). When creating opportunities for job-embedded professional development, district leaders may consider developing new learning experiences with adults in mind. To be successful, district leaders incorporate prior experiences, explore the “why” or rationale for learning, appeal to the learner’s motivation and readiness level, and be readily applicable (Forgarty & Pete, 2004; Knowles, et al., 2005). If adults have a choice in what is learned, central office staff can provide principals with professional learning that meets their individual needs and support ownership over their learning goals (Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2014). For instance, by establishing the rationale for instructional leadership practices, building-level leaders are challenged to critically think about their actions and how to integrate new learning into current practices (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Stein et al., 2004). In this way, district leaders can build on the leaders’ prior knowledge and experiences, reinforce new practices with the support of a mentor, model best practices, engage in constructive dialogue, and strengthen leaders’ agency over their own learning (Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019). Principals have an equal voice in their learning, and as a result, trust is gradually established between the principal and district leader (Stein et al., 2004). Comprehensive learning allows principals to connect new learning to practice, and instead of a traditional type of staff development “sit and get” method, learning is action-based (Zepeda et al., 2014; Zepeda,
Adult learning can be impactful when leaders consider how to coordinate the learners’ individual learning goals and needs with the capacity of the organization to facilitate differentiated learning within an environment conducive to learning (Stein et al., 2004).

**Characteristics of Job-Embedded Professional Development.** In building principal capacity through job-embedded professional development, school administrators are able to reflect and collaborate through interaction with peers or a principal supervisor as a part of their everyday work (Zepeda, 2015). One method is through the development of a “learning infrastructure” in which principals participate in observation-based projects and group learning structures (Aas & Paulsen, 2019, p. 1). Within these learning structures, principals, working with supervisors, peers, mentors, or coaches, utilize new learning to critically think about and solve problems of practice (Acton, 2021; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019). District leaders encourage principals, either individually or collaboratively, to adopt research-based solutions by incorporating theory into the learning through readings and discussions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Rowland, 2017; Stein et al., 2004). Collaborative activities, such as projects, action research, mentoring, and coaching, can facilitate successful transfer of activities from the learning context into a real-world context (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Zepeda, et al., 2014). As a result, learning structures emphasize increasing the knowledge and skill of participants over time and engage participants in authentic tasks in collaboration with other experienced professionals, which has shown promise in strengthening principals’ instructional leadership capacity (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Stein, et al., 2004). This type of professional development promotes collaboration and collegial learning among principals across a district’s network (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Payne, 2017; Stein et al., 2004). When district leaders establish organizational structures for principal support, this can result in stronger relationships and trust among principals, mentors, colleagues, and district leaders (Augustine et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Ford et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Payne, 2017).

A variety of job-embedded professional development strategies can be utilized individually or in coordination with other strategies and can be accomplished in small groups or in a one-on-one setting to
assist principals in developing their leadership skills; these strategies can include mentoring and coaching, learning communities and collaborative groups, peer observations and peer coaching, and action research (Ford et al., 2020; Honig et al., 2017; Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, 2015, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2014). Whether it is formal or informal job-embedded learning, leaders can grow in their instructional practices by conversing with colleagues, studying student work, analyzing data, and reflecting upon their decision-making (Zepeda, 2015).

**Mentoring and Coaching.** In 2016, only 20 states in the U.S. mandated structured mentoring programs for new principals to aid them in navigating the complexities of their new role, to assist them in prioritizing their day-to-day work, and to develop needed skills to successfully manage the school and lead teaching and learning initiatives (Goldrick, 2016). Even though mentoring and coaching can be beneficial for leaders in various stages of their careers, Darling-Hammond and colleagues’ (2022) study on leadership preparation programs and in-service support for educational leaders found that only 23% of principals in the study reported working with a coach or mentor in the past three years. All leaders can learn through continued interaction over time with more experienced leaders as they collaboratively work within authentic work settings (Stein et al., 2004). In fact, principal participation in mentoring and coaching provided them with needed support to improve their effectiveness as a school leader (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Mentoring and coaching initiatives can be used in coordination with other forms of job-embedded professional development and can be led by central office staff who work intensively with principals to develop skills rather than an external coach or mentor (Honig, 2012). Different from communities of practice, which are small collegial groups that focus on joint work, this type of one-on-one learning between principals and central office supervisors can occur within the context of informal instructional observations, or walkthroughs, monthly principal meetings, supervisor conferences, or within more formal settings (Stein et al., 2004). Informal learning includes activities that are designed for the learner and can occur at any time within the context of the work environment (Zepeda, 2019).

Mentoring is a form of reciprocal learning in which more experienced administrators are paired with more novice administrators in a one-on-one setting to share their collective knowledge and assist the
leaders in advancing their instructional leadership practices (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Mentors can support new administrators in various ways; for example, they assist learners in making sense of newly acquired knowledge, suggest differing theories or ideas to increase student achievement, build mental models to demonstrate understanding of new ideas and practices, and introduce possible solutions to problems of practice (Villani, 2006). Not only do they share their experiences with mentees, but mentors can also challenge their mentee’s understanding of leadership practices through the use of talk moves, or discussion strategies, that utilize questioning to promote critical thinking and reflection (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Huggins et al., 2021). By modeling new tasks for school leaders, instead of simply introducing the concept through more traditional forms of professional development, mentors are, in fact, supporting the learning process while meeting the unique needs of their mentees (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Conceptual models are impactful guides for learning, particularly when mentors utilize metacognitive strategies to explain the process and rationale associated with the tasks. Since principals with three or more years of experience are often not afforded opportunities to work with a mentor, mentoring can be effective for these experienced administrators because they, as mentors, are recognized as valued members of the larger school community, sharing their learning experiences with others and helping other school community members learn and grow (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Johnson et al., 2016).

Coaching, which is a form of mentoring, can be beneficial in not only building the capacity of school administrators but the district team and entire organization (Huggins et al., 2021). Unlike mentoring, which occurs over an extended period of time and covers a multitude of topics, coaching can be accomplished within a shorter time and is effective in developing targeted skills (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Huggins et al., 2021). The personalized nature of coaching provides benefits that traditional forms of professional development do not. Strength-based coaching, a practice that concentrates on a principal’s strengths to improve deficits, can be applied within the context of the school setting, providing leaders with opportunities to reflect on current practices (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Huggins et al., 2021). Principal supervisors differentiate their work with school leaders in individual sessions based on the leader’s proven instructional leadership capability and current level of experience.
(Honig & Rainey, 2020; Huggins et al, 2021; Zepeda, 2015, 2019). Using evidence-based examples of the principals’ ability to be an instructional leader, principal supervisors create plans to support the leader’s individual growth (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Huggins et al, 2021; Zepeda, 2015). By embedding new learning into practical operations, principal supervisors are able to challenge learners using talk moves, which encourage problem-solving and critical thinking when needed, and to guide principals in reaching their potential (Huggins et al, 2021; Zepeda, 2015, 2019). For example, district and school leaders can conduct informal walkthrough observations jointly to evaluate classroom practices and identify strategies to improve instruction (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). These walkthrough observations not only provide essential opportunities to model instructional leadership behavior but also hold schools accountable for classroom practices that support teaching and learning (Stein et al., 2004). No matter the type of coaching model selected, all emphasize the importance of professional conversations, relationships, trust, and support (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Huggins et al, 2021; Zepeda, 2015).

Mentoring and coaching models can become catalysts for principals to think critically, self-reflect, question their current practice, and build their leadership skills through ongoing dialogue with an experienced peer or principal supervisor (Huggins et al, 2021). Mentors and coaches can affirm leadership behaviors, provide specific actionable feedback, and offer professional advice (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2014). In both mentoring and coaching, principal supervisors engage principals in conversations to strengthen leadership practices through the examination of school and student data; this allows the school leader to determine the needs of the school community and to identify what tools are needed to effectively implement school improvement initiatives (Zepeda et al., 2014). Coaching and mentoring take a collegial approach of transferring new knowledge into practice, reducing principal isolation and opening the lines of communication between leaders and supervisors in which principals can communicate their needs and the degree to which those needs are being met (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Principal supervisors and mentors do not solve the problems for the school leader or issue a district directive but take time to support the principal to develop and implement solutions to problems of practice (Huggins et al, 2021).
**Peer coaching.** To provide principals with the opportunity to engage in high-quality professional development, district leaders may consider how to offer programs that meet the needs of school leaders, encourage collaboration, and provide ongoing support to promote changes in instructional leadership practices (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Huggins et al., 2021; Rowland, 2017). However, if district leaders themselves are unable to provide these types of opportunities because of their own lack of knowledge or time constraints, they may consider peer coaching and observation. Peer coaching and observation are collaborative structures that allow principals to work with colleagues and take part in joint observation-based learning activities that can inspire innovation and can facilitate the transference of knowledge from conceptual learning into real-life application (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Hargreaves, 1994). Peer networks create opportunities for principals to learn from one another, network and provide meaningful feedback to one another, and engage in continuous professional dialogue (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, 2019). Similar to principal professional learning communities, peer coaching creates a community of practice to promote leader discussion concerning new ways to lead school reform initiatives and adopt innovative strategies (Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1999; Honig & Rainey, 2014). Through multiple phases, principals engage in theoretical presentations and modeling related to new learning, demonstrate the application of new knowledge by participants, and receive feedback from peers (Hargreaves, 1994; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015, 2019). Through this practice, principals have the opportunity to gain new insights through reflective questioning, feedback, data analysis, and inquiry (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015, 2019). However, without an established, trusting relationship, peer coaching may lose its effectiveness (Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015). Although it can be implemented in isolation, peer coaching compliments other forms of principal leadership development initiatives (Zepeda, 2015, 2019).

Hargreaves and Dawe (1999) argue that the benefits of peer coaching lie primarily in the support and companionship gained through participation. Researchers analyzed case studies and theoretical arguments to define the differences between contrived collegiality and collaborative cultures, using peer coaching as the vehicle for the comparison. Hargreaves and Dawe (1999) contend that the goal of peer...
coaching is to enable transfer of new learning from training into practice and to develop a culture of collegiality and exploration. Within this model, there are two discrete phases of peer coaching. The first initial phase concentrates on new learning through training, modeling, and feedback. Throughout this phase, educators receive technical feedback on the application of their new learning. After more training, peers focus on the mastery of the new learning through “collegial dialogue,” which is an essential component of peer coaching (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1999, p. 232). Researchers contend that issues may arise with peer coaching if partners do not have similar opinions, values, and views of learning since this type of job-embedded professional development is not solely dependent upon competence and technical skills. Administrators who attempt to quickly build collegiality through peer coaching may instead create a system of contrived collegiality. Since developing an authentic collaborative culture requires time, administrators may consider this before attempting to implement peer coaching practices. Another consideration is the scope of the coaching model. If the primary focus of the model is on learning and skill development and not on the organizational culture, peer coaching models may prove unsuccessful since practices are a product of contrived collegiality instead of the result of a collaborative culture (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1999).

Another possible method to engage principals in collaborative learning is through peer observation. Grouped based on contextual factors and school environments, principals participate in learning-based observation accompanied by group learning activities (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Zepeda, 2015). Peer observations can become a means by which principals share experiences, new theories, and learning gained through professional development (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). This type of reciprocal learning allows leaders to reflect on and analyze contextual problems of practice using evidence collected from observation (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015). Prior to participating in observations, principals are trained to identify not only issues within the school environment but innovative practices that can lead to improved student achievement (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). Feedback shared through the experience can lead to the creation of an action plan, assisting principals in effectively managing problems that may arise in their daily practice. Through collaboration
and dialogue, principals exchange a multitude of perspectives, varied experiences, and differing ideas with colleagues who can challenge each other’s thinking (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015).

**Action Research.** District leaders may also consider the use of action research when designing professional learning plans for school principals. Action research provides a different approach to professional development and learning within the context of job-embedded professional development (Huggins et al., 2021; Stevens, 1986; Zepeda, 2015). Because effective leadership involves more than simply remembering information, the leader must be able to apply the knowledge within a specific context (Stringer et al., 2010). Action research allows educators to identify a problem of practice and attempt to solve the issue through experimentation and investigation (Huggins et al., 2021; Stevens, 1986; Zepeda, 2015, 2019). Through a cycle of collecting data, analyzing it, and reflecting on its meaning, leaders can modify their practices and repeat the investigation to try alternative solutions (Bleicher, 2013; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Zepeda, 2019). The cyclical nature of action research empowers educators to identify a problem or goal, review prior research with a short literature review, develop a plan, implement that plan, evaluate its success, and revise the original plan for further investigation (Bleicher, 2013; Batagiannis, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Lewin, 1946; Williamson & Taylor, 1983). Action research spans the gap between research and practice, allowing educators to evaluate effective methods that lead to learning based on the needs of students within their school community (Batagiannis, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Stevens, 1986). Using action research, leaders can determine if the implementation of the treatment provides a relevant answer to the problem or in achievement of a goal (Williamson & Taylor, 1983).

This form of professional development is transformational because, through the integration of theory and practice, school reform initiatives are not superficial and do not only address surface-level deficiencies (Batagiannis, 2011; Stevens, 1986; Williamson & Taylor, 1983). Leaders engage in reflective practices that are built on an understanding of theory, not personal experiences and opinions (Batagiannis, 2011; Bleicher, 2013; Lewin, 1946; Zepeda, 2015). At the same time, action research is relevant to the
adult learner because it is based on the learners’ interests, is relevant to practice, allows leaders to refine their skills and develop new practices, and gain a deeper understanding of teaching and learning (Batagiannis, 2011; Stevens, 1986; Zepeda, 2015). Leaders begin to extend their thinking over time and develop an understanding and awareness of their daily practices, including their role in leading instruction and creating a collaborative culture (Batagiannis, 2011; Huggins et al., 2021; Stevens, 1986; Williamson & Taylor, 1983). By engaging in practices grounded in research and experience, leaders can enhance their self-efficacy, provide networking support for other school leaders, engage in collaborative efforts, and more effectively critique instructional materials and methods (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016).

Without extensive training and support, administrators may not be prepared to face the challenges of leading school improvement efforts or to support teachers in increasing their instructional efficacy (Boston et al., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2009). Carefully designed leader learning activities focused on instruction and high-quality teaching can enhance principals’ leadership skills (Boston et al., 2017). These types of carefully created, strategic supports can create opportunities for principals to succeed in leading school improvement efforts (Ford et al., 2020).

School systems adopting formal or informal job-embedded learning strategies create a structure in which principals can improve their instructional leadership practices through collaboration with colleagues, quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and continued reflection focused on their day-to-day work as leaders (Zepeda, 2015). To build a highly supportive environment, district leaders may consider offering a combination of individualized and collaborative learning opportunities that meet the needs of school leaders and support their collective learning goals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Zepeda, 2015; Zepeda et al., 2014). For example, professional learning communities, or communities of practice, provide principals with opportunities to engage in collaborative joint work and observation-based learning, which enables them to collectively apply research-based solutions to problems of practice (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Acton, 2021; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019). At the same time, coaching and mentoring can also be effective methods to engage principals in critical thinking and problem-solving in one-on-one settings (Honig, 2012). Regardless of the strategies utilized to build leader capacity,
professional learning is differentiated and based on the needs of participants, is relevant and useful, is continuous and extended over time, and is based in the context of the leader’s work (Acton, 2021; Boston et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Honig & Rainey, 2014; Rowland, 2017; Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda et al., 2014).

**Barriers to Implementation of District-led Support Initiatives**

Even though there are a multitude of challenges in providing administrative professional development, principals may receive some type of on-the-job training from district leaders in the form of supervisory communication, mentoring, or traditional staff development training. Johnson and colleagues (2016) surveyed principals across the United States concerning their experiences with the quantity, quality, and content of district-sponsored on-the-job support. Researchers noted less than one-third of principal participants received multiple forms of support, and the support they did receive was not related to their work as instructional leaders, which, as a result, was not found to be valuable (Johnson et al., 2016). Efforts to increase leader capacity may not be successful because of inconsistencies in district-wide implementation, either within the scope of the program or a lack of program coherence (Payne, 2017). For example, principals may be asked to repeatedly master new objectives or new learning disconnected from previous sessions, or principal supervisors may choose to alter or omit components of principal professional development they find time consuming or unfamiliar. There are several reasons why these programs may fail – the lack of time spent on professional development, failure to secure principal buy-in, an absence of follow-up structures, and the inability of district staff to problem solve and adjust plans in response to ongoing assessment. In addition, district leaders may be resistant to any alterations in their traditional roles. Central office leaders may attempt to manipulate data to reinforce the legitimacy of the district’s current organizational structures, traditional roles, and institutionalized policies (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Honig et al., 2017). District leaders, even new district leaders who may initially embrace a collaborative professional development approach, can revert to traditional organizational behaviors (Honig, 2009). Unless school and district leaders accept their new roles as
instructional leaders, the negative perception of the nature of leader support can limit its effectiveness even when it is offered to and requested by principals (Bauer & Brazer, 2013).

Conventional organizational structures and traditionally held beliefs about the role of district leaders can present barriers to effectively providing principals with instructional leadership support. Since allowing principals to have increased autonomy over school-based decision-making requires district leaders to relinquish control, they may be hesitant to do so and give up their power within the organization’s power structure (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hallett, 2003; Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Payne, 2017; Wong et al., 2020). Organizational power is related to the role individuals hold within the system and the resources they control, not necessarily the individual holding that position; therefore, the control over how resources are managed within the organization dictates the power structure (Lawrence, 2008; Morris, 2002). This is not the only way school systems maintain control over schools. Educational institutions wield power over the actions of administrators by regulating behaviors and beliefs through a reinforcement of social, cultural, and professional norms and assumptions (Lawrence, 2008; Mayer et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2020). For example, district leaders may provide advantages to groups of administrators who vocally support district policies, may reinforce previously established norms through structured routines, or may enact punitive measures against those who do not adhere to district-supported thoughts and actions (Bryk et al., 1999; Lawrence, 2008). These specific practices and exchanges have been widely accepted within school systems as being valid forms of organizational management (Hallett, 2003). Providing principals with opportunities to build their capacity as leaders and enabling them to utilize school resources without district oversight or interference disrupts the power structure and organizational system. However, if both district and school leaders are familiar with the system’s power structure, they may attempt to maintain the power balance to protect themselves against punitive measures (Morris, 2002; Wong et al., 2020). Even though district leaders maintain traditional forms of power within a system, this does not necessarily mean they are knowledgeable and are able to support growth, which is why providing principals and district leaders with professional development opportunities is necessary.
The bureaucratic nature of organizations can make change difficult, and district leaders can hinder successful implementation of school improvement initiatives, including leader professional development (Honig et al., 2017; Payne, 2017). For instance, district leaders may choose to sustain current practices because they may have limited knowledge of the characteristics of high-quality instruction, of how to support principals in leading instructional initiatives, or of adult learning and development (Honig et al., 2017; Neumerski, 2012; Payne, 2017). They may neglect to build their own capacity to aid principals in research or to develop their skills and knowledge through work with external experts (Honig et al., 2017). If central office staff have not actively participated in a successful implementation of school improvement initiatives or have been part of a successful school staff, they may have negative perceptions of teachers and leaders as being incapable of growth (Payne, 2017). In fact, district leaders may believe that school leaders are unable to successfully implement school improvement initiatives and lack confidence in their principals’ abilities as school leaders. In extreme cases, district offices may lack true leadership, and leaders may have misconceptions of their roles within the central office, which can lead to role ambiguity. In such instances, central office staff are thought to be incompetent and irresponsible, even lacking the ability to develop and sustain appropriate collaborative working relationships. However, without the support of district leaders, principals may lack the continued collaborative support needed to sustain new learning, and transference of new knowledge into a concrete, contextual situation may not occur (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Boston et al., 2017; Honig et al., 2017).

Effective system leaders are knowledgeable about research-based initiatives and possess a level of expertise to support principals within their roles and within the organizational structure to facilitate change (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Houle, 2006). If district leaders are limited in their capacity to improve principals’ instructional leadership, either because of deficits in knowledge of resources or research-based strategies, the overall goal to improve instruction to ultimately impact student achievement can be diminished (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019). Problems also may arise if district leaders provide too much or too little guidance and support to building-level administrators (Honig & Rainey, 2020). For example, if district leaders make decisions regarding the school’s focus or professional development
needs, school leaders can become apathetic and disengaged from school improvement initiatives. The leader may not attach meaning to district-led support, may not use new learning to improve practices, or may misrepresent the extent to which new learning is being implemented. However, even if district leaders are empowering school leaders to exercise their autonomy and lead school improvement initiatives, central office leaders still maintain a great deal of influence over school leaders either through coercive means or through persuasive practices (Wong et al., 2020).

Building-level leaders often make instructional decisions that align with recommendations of district leaders for a variety of reasons. Reminding principals of the expectations of the “district,” referencing common district norms and practices, using phrases like “this is the way we do things,” or labeling a decision as “research-based” or “best practices” can be ways in which district leaders can influence principal decision-making. Prior work connections between central office leaders and principals can also be a way to influence school leaders to follow district recommendations rather than make difficult choices that may or may not lead to success (Wong et al., 2020). However, positive professional relationships can enable central office leaders to express their opinions and principals to maintain autonomy without creating a hostile working environment. High-quality human relationships can be a determining factor in the success of school improvement efforts, and these efforts depend upon strong cultural norms that support collaboration and respect (Payne, 2017). Without social trust, obstacles may arise as leaders exercise power and authority. If central office staff believe in traditional district office systems and structures, ones that dictate school administrators defer to supervisors, reinforce hierarchical power structures, and focus on school-based management rather than instructional leadership, frustration with central office support may result (Payne, 2017).

**Research on Principal Job-Embedded Professional Development**

Redefining the role of district leadership from traditional managers of school operations to supportive leaders focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning may take considerable time and effort. Even if district leaders have the motivation, training, and support to transform their practices, inconsistencies in how principal supervisors work with school leaders may still occur. Such was the case
in two separate studies conducted by Honig and Rainey (2014, 2020) as they investigated how principal supervisors utilized a teaching and learning approach to engage principals in building their capacity as instructional leaders.

In two systematic empirical investigations between 2007 and 2012, Honig and Rainey (2020) studied the transformation of principal supervisors as they adopted a teaching and learning approach to support school leaders in building instructional leader capacity. For over 750 hours over a three-year span, researchers observed principal supervisors as they redesigned central office systems, structures, and practices in 9 public school districts in New York City. Throughout the transformation, high-quality professional consultants supported the organization and provided training to district leaders working closely with school principals. Findings in the Honig and Rainey (2020) study indicate that, although some principal supervisors consistently utilized a teaching and learning approach to build principal capacity, some did not and chose to retain the traditional role of monitor, evaluator, and school manager. In a few cases, principal supervisors adjusted their practices over time, increasingly incorporating a teaching and learning approach in principal supervision. Other principal supervisors conversely gradually decreased their focus on teaching and learning, reverting to traditional forms of district leadership.

Findings also indicated that principals who worked with district supervisors, who positively made the transition, grew in their capacity as instructional leaders; they spent more time on instructional leadership and gradually engaged in more challenging instructional leadership tasks over time. Honig and Rainey (2020) also reported that principals whose supervisors retained their traditional central office role demonstrated little growth in their instructional leadership abilities. In fact, principals stated that, in some cases, supervisors hindered their ability to focus on instructional leadership at their school sites. Researchers concluded that because principals still heavily rely on supervisors to guide them in school-based management tasks, central office leaders faced challenges throughout the transformation (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

Honig and Rainey (2014) also found similar inconsistencies in the way principal supervisors utilized the teaching and learning approach in their study of principal professional learning communities.
(PPLC), which is referenced in detail later. Principal supervisors who utilized the approach consistently during their work with leaders in PPLCs reported increased principal engagement in instructional leadership conversations and activities. Conversations in PPLCs focused solely on principals’ instructional leadership, and supervisors incorporated “joint work”, or collaborative tasks, and modeling to develop leadership skills. Principals in the positive change PPLC were presented with opportunities to serve as learning resources, which is an essential practice in the teaching and learning model (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Conversely, supervisors who were not as successful in leveraging the teaching and learning approach to leader development disengaged from PPLCs, allowed professional consultants to facilitate, or facilitated the professional meeting without utilizing a teaching and learning approach.

However, if district leaders can implement profound changes in district practices, make fundamental shifts in the organizational culture, and alter the professional values embraced by leaders, they can transform their practice to support teaching and learning as demonstrated in Bedard and Mombourquette’s (2015) study of rapidly improving and highly effective school districts in Alberta Canada. In a qualitative cross-case study, researchers investigated both district and school-level leadership practices that contributed to sustained increases in student achievement. Researchers interviewed district staff, principals, and trustees from three successful school districts - one urban and two rural - and identified four specific leadership practices that led to increases in student achievement: collaboration between school and district leadership to determine the district vision and goals, collective expertise in identifying evidence of student learning, targeted professional development and job-embedded professional learning aligned to the district’s vision and goals, and alignment of district resources, support, and structures to prioritize student learning (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2015). Leaders were able to successfully shift their focus from school operations to instructional leadership at both the district and school levels and, through collaborative structures, to solve problems through developing innovative solutions. District leaders adopted a job-embedded professional development model instead of relying on outside resources, workshops, and consultants. As a result of their efforts in
building principals’ instructional leadership capacity, the perception of district leaders was that of a valuable curriculum resource with in-depth knowledge of instructional strategies.

In both the Bedard and Mombourquette (2015) and Honig and Rainey studies (2014, 2020), researchers found that redesigning the role of district leadership to support leaders in building capacity yielded positive growth in principals’ instructional leadership practices. District leaders in all three studies worked collaboratively with principals to identify problems of practice and develop innovative solutions to improve student achievement using a teaching and learning professional development model. Although inconsistencies in how district leaders worked with principals were noted, changes in the organizational systems, structures, and culture were catalysts in how district staff supported principal development (Bedard & Mombourquette, 2015; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020). Before any transformation, district leaders may consider if the institutional culture and environment support such changes (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). In some cases, the bureaucratic rigidity of the traditional public school system may present overwhelming resistance to implementing change at both the district and school levels (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Payne, 2017). In other contexts, district leaders may embrace an appearance of innovation and transformation to gain legitimacy among stakeholders without relinquishing any true power to school leaders (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Honig, 2009; Mayer et al., 2013; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Scott, 1987; West et al, 2014). Principal perceptions of the organizational culture, the role of central office supervisors, and relationships with district staff can be factors that facilitate or hinder principal development and can be indicators of the principal’s willingness to accept support from district leadership when offered.

Relationships between district leadership and building-level leaders are not only defined by their roles - the power and authority each possesses - but also by their level of trust and mutual respect (Honig, 2009; Mayer et al., 2013; West et al., 2014). District leaders who establish open lines of communication, clearly articulate leader expectations, work collaboratively with school principals, and support school leaders in exercising autonomy rather than issuing directives may be successful in developing a level of
trust and respect needed to improve principals’ instructional leadership practices (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Blase & Blase, 1999; Chang et al., 2015; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Huggins et al., 2021; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; West et al., 2014; Zepeda, 2019). Effective district leaders cultivate respect through their knowledge of and experience in implementing research-based school improvement initiatives and navigating the system’s organizational structures. More importantly, they differentiate their work with principals, guiding them in reaching their potential (Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020; Houle, 2006; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015, 2019). Challenges may arise, however, if district leaders have limited knowledge of building leader capacity, of adult learning, or of high-quality instruction (Grisson et al., 2013; Honig et al., 2017; Neumerski, 2012; Payne, 2017). In these cases, inconsistencies in how principal supervisors lead efforts to build a principal’s leadership capacity may occur (Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020), which can create a sense of mistrust or lack of respect between principals and supervisors.

Alternatively, in strict bureaucracies that focus on district mandates, what may be considered administrative support can become a type of administrative surveillance to maintain bureaucratic controls over schools (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1999; Payne, 2017). If taken to extremes, the measures implemented to assist schools in reaching their goals, such as academic accountability measures, standardization, conformity, and bureaucratic impersonalization, can significantly hinder efforts to improve student achievement (Payne, 2017). Therefore, the interaction between principal supervisors and school leaders is an important factor in increasing principal effectiveness as an instructional leader, and the principal perceptions of these continued interactions can be indicative of their willingness to accept support and implement suggestions from district leaders.

District leaders may demonstrate their mutual respect for principals by offering differentiated support based on the leaders’ experience, current capacity, and environmental and contextual factors, which can be accomplished through individualized or small group job-embedded professional development. Since experience plays an essential role in adult learning, power structures influence adult learning processes because adults are not inclined to engage in learning unless it is meaningful to them (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). A one-size-fits-all approach to professional development limits the
adult’s ability to choose their own learning. By adopting ongoing, strategic job-embedded professional development practices, district leaders provide principals with opportunities to choose relevant learning experiences, develop a sense of collegiality with peers, and transfer learning into a real-life context (Rowland, 2017; Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda, 2015, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2014). Because principals are able to build their knowledge and experience, they are more confident and experience increased self-efficacy, which increases the likelihood that school reform efforts result in improved student achievement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Yan, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2014). Although literature supports the use of job-embedded professional development to build principal capacity, few studies examine principal perceptions of these types of supports, if offered. Contextual and environmental factors - such as the role of district leadership, the organizational culture and district power structure, and the relationships among leaders - can influence how principals view district-provided support and whether they are open to participating in or accepting of the support offered.

**Theoretical Framework**

Before the adoption of standards-based accountability policies, educational systems were often viewed as government-protected institutions that were shielded from external forces (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). Formal education systems remained focused on protecting the reputation of the institution rather than achieving formal goals and objectives since the tools needed to demonstrate proficiency were often lacking (Heck, 2004). However, within the current environment, pressures on educational organizations have forced systems to reexamine structures, policies, and rules to meet high-stakes accountability requirements (Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Rowan, 2006a). This study focuses on the role of district leaders in supporting principals in building instructional leadership capacity. By examining organizational structures within the school system, specifically the roles of both the district leadership and the school principal, I can provide insight into how changes in school structures and authoritative roles can impact principals’ development. As a result, the study will utilize New Institutionalism, with a specific focus on isomorphism and threat rigidity effects, as the theoretical framework.
Institutional Theory

According to Heck’s (2004) definition, an organization is a “formally structured collective” with the purpose of achieving a specific set of goals (p. 139). The achievement of these goals is accomplished through the implementation of rational actions, ordered processes, or patterns of behavior, which may include establishing a hierarchy of command and control, defining roles for leaders and workers, and clearly delineating rules, policies, and procedures to guide organizational behaviors (Heck, 2004; Selznick, 1948; Selznick, 1996). First introduced by Philip Selznick (1948), Institutional Theory focuses on these organizational structures and the relationship between individuals and organizations. Selznick argues that an organization’s structural integrity can be threatened by individual interests and outside forces, and these pressures can force organizations to act in ways that compromise their formal goals (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). The effect of individual choice, however, can be minimized if all individuals within the organization remain interchangeable (Selznick, 1948).

Overlooking the ethical considerations, maintaining a widget view of individual contributions to the organization successfully frees the organization from manipulation and ensures coordination and control remain fixed. At the same time, Selznick (1948) suggests that an individual’s personal interests cannot be separated from his or her work unless leaders maintain high levels of influence and stable, authoritative controls. As a result, leaders hold an essential position within an organization, and selection of individuals to fulfill decision-making roles inherently creates a division of interest and tension over authoritative control and power, which potentially can constrain organizational pursuits. Therefore, if individuals have discretionary decision-making capabilities, continuous evaluations of their actions are needed to ensure relevance and alignment with the goals of the organization (Selznick, 1948).

Utilizing Institutional Theory as the overarching framework for this study allows for the examination of how the current educational environment, demands for increased accountability, and macro- and micro-level pressures impact the roles of school system administrators. Traditional organizational systems defined the role of a building-level administrator as a manager, and district staff provided the resources needed for schools to remain operational. School leaders worked in isolation,
navigating the school environment without support. Traditional school structures and the roles of educational administrators are changing to coincide with demands for school accountability and the pressure to increase student achievement levels on state and national assessments. As a result, systems have been challenged to redefine the roles of school system administrators, to restructure the limits of authoritative control, and to redistribute power.

**New Institutionalism**

Building upon Selznick’s argument, social constructionists analyzed organizational structures from a cultural perspective, creating a “new institutionalism” that asserts that organizations earn acceptance and legitimacy through socially constructed measures (Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Scott, 1987). Therefore, New Institutionalism claims that organizational structures, behaviors, and practices are not only shaped by individuals but also influenced by ideologies, perceptions, societal values, and taken-for-granted cultural norms (Heck, 2004), otherwise known as “myths and ceremonies” (Olsen & Sexton, 2008). Myths define what is appropriate, legitimate behavior for organizations (Burch, 2007; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Heck, 2004; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Some organizations, like schools, are highly susceptible to cultural and social values to gain legitimacy because the technical output, or production of goods, is not concrete or easily measurable (Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). If these organizations adopt formal structures that reflect the cultural norms, social values, and acceptable patterns of behavior within mainstream society, the chances that the organization will be seen as legitimate and survive increase (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Heck, 2004). Therefore, organizations shaped by ceremonial myths can be more focused on gaining social legitimacy and survival than on efficiently meeting organizational goals. These perceptions are defined for each organization by those within the field and whose interactions and shared experiences define the organization’s reality (Heck, 2004; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Scott, 1987).

To examine leader roles within educational institutions, a study of the organization’s cultural norms, values, and ideologies can be considered. How administrative roles are defined within the organization is determined by those within the system itself and shaped by the community in which the
organization resides. Therefore, if external pressures challenge existing organizational structures, like in the case of accountability mandates, the organization faces pressure to adapt to meet these external demands while maintaining its legitimacy within the confines of the current cultural environment. As school districts redefine the roles of all system leaders to improve efficiency and technical output, they must consider how stakeholders will accept the new parameters of these redefined roles. When considering how organizations can do this, it is important to examine specific components within New Institutionalism—coupling, isomorphic pressures, and threat rigidity effects—to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these roles are defined.

**Coupling**

According to Meyer and Rowan (1991), organizations functioning within highly institutionalized contexts, like schools, depend upon creating systems and structures that coordinate with ceremonial myths to maximize the potential for survival. If the organization is unable to link its day-to-day technical activities with the myths and ceremonies in which the organization is based, problems may arise and misalignment may occur (Burch, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Weick, 1976). An example would be a school system utilizing a state-required curriculum that does not meet the specific needs of students within that district. This type of conflict can be challenging to solve if the organizational subunits or systems are interdependent; however, not all organizational subunits are interconnected. The level of responsiveness or connectedness of the organization’s subunits is known as “coupling” (Weick, 1976, p. 3). Tight coupling occurs when organizational subunits are closely linked, and the units are dependent upon one another and work in tandem. For example, system leaders may purchase state-approved tier one curricula and instructional materials since their adoption is tightly coupled with eligibility to receive some state funding. When organizational units are not dependent upon one another and operate independently, they are considered to be loosely coupled. Although both special education and English language learner programs are federally mandated, they operate independently of one another, and each requires specific practices to comply with federal laws. To achieve legitimacy and secure community support, the organization may consider tightly coupling daily practices with ceremonial myths and goals (Meyer &
Educational systems, attempting to conform to multiple policies and regulations that are potentially incompatible with schooling myths can instill uncertainty and ambiguity (Burch, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). In order to prevent the clash between formal rules and technical operations, organizations may become more loosely coupled, creating distance between the formal and informal activities within the organization – meaning formal structures are emphasized rather than the actual work of the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1991). As organizations focus on the externally created, socially supported structures, the commitment of external and internal stakeholders increases, achievement of social success is achieved, and the possibility of failure is diminished.

School systems were historically considered to be loosely coupled organizations, focusing more on societal legitimacy rather than technical efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Weick, 1976). The customary bureaucratic structure through which public schools were often managed was viewed as “mindless, senseless, and superfluous to the process of schooling” (Wolcott, 1973, p. 319). However, with the implementation of accountability mandates and increased governmental regulations, the educational environment is changing. School environments are becoming more tightly coupled, specifically as with state mandates associated with curriculum and standard-based instructional practices (Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Rowan, 2006a; Spillane & Burch, 2006). Efforts to tighten controls over teaching and learning have forced school systems to strictly implement standards-based instructional mandates and curricular content, while at the same time, monitoring student achievement outcomes and holding schools accountable for student performance (Rowan, 2006a). Therefore, the role of a school principal has evolved from school-based managers to instructional leaders, requiring administrators to focus their efforts on improving the technical core of instruction through participation in teacher professional development, mandated collaboration meetings, and monitoring of instructional practices (Spillane & Burch, 2006). These stringent controls, combined with the use of standardized testing and high-stakes accountability systems in which administrators and teachers are held accountable for student outcomes, may have influenced school systems to become more tightly coupled to satisfy policy-mandated outcomes.
Isomorphic Pressures

To maintain public trust, confidence, and continued support, organizations can earn and maintain legitimacy through conforming to taken-for-granted societal norms and ceremonial myths (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). One such example would be to preserve a more traditional school calendar and schedule in which students attend in-person classes from August through the end of May to satisfy community expectations. As a result, organizations adopt practices and behaviors that imitate successful organizations – ones that are facing similar problems and that are presented with similar opportunities - to improve effectiveness and ensure growth, which increases the chances of survival (Burch, 2007; Heck, 2004). The practice of adopting similar behaviors is commonplace among organizations that depend upon legitimacy as an indicator of success. Isomorphism is the practice of aligning organizational actions, policies, and practices to model organizations operating within a similar environment and striving to meet similar goals (Burch, 2007). Organizations may choose to adopt isomorphic structures or practices that have achieved external legitimacy, either because they have been deemed exemplary or routine (Burch, 2007; Scott, 1987). Conversely, organizations may be forced to adopt specific ideas or policies in response to governmental mandates, and a lack of conformity may result in failure to receive governmental funds (Burch, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). Although these newly adopted institutional structures may have little impact on organizational efficiency or effectiveness, the behaviors promote stability within an organization (Heck, 2004; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). For instance, district leaders may require all schools to implement specific instructional initiatives across a district – a one-size-fits-all approach – regardless of the program’s success in meeting the needs of all school populations. However, if schools maintain the appearance of familiar structures, they are more likely to be viewed as legitimate by the public even though they are funded by government agencies regardless of success and variations in performance (Meyer & Rowan, 1991).

The tendency of organizations to adopt isomorphic operational and structural similarities may be in response to external or internal forces that converge and exert pressures on the institution (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). Organizations, like public school systems, are especially
susceptible to external pressures because they do not possess clear technologies, or economic exchange, and do not traditionally produce concrete products (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Therefore, to gain legitimacy, schools often will adopt similar school improvement initiatives to combat external pressures and to appear innovative, progressive, or proactive. In some cases, these initiatives are focused more on legitimacy than achieving true efficiency and improvement (Burch, 2007; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Heck, 2004; Ogawa, 1994). For instance, district leaders may adopt a new reading curriculum based on the science of reading to improve student outcomes in third-grade standardized test scores. However, teachers may not receive adequate professional development or on-the-job instructional support to ensure the curriculum has been implemented with integrity. External pressures, like those that drive accountability practices, initiated by political, legal, or governmental agencies, are classified as coercive pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Coercive pressures are particularly effective in promoting isomorphic behaviors because of the endorsement of specific values, beliefs, and popular sensibilities; coercive pressures mandate desired behaviors and rely on sanctions or monetary penalties for non-compliance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Current high-stakes accountability mandates require states to identify schools that do not meet minimum standards of achievement for all students; administrators who lead these critical needs schools are mandated to attend a series of trainings, develop a comprehensive improvement plan, and make progress in improving student achievement. Adapting organizational behaviors to comply with these types of rules lends legitimacy and authority, decreases conflict, and ensures legal obligations are met (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Uncertainty remains, however, if these measures lead to actual improvement. They do instead create a sense of legitimacy for low-achieving schools.

Conversely, not all isomorphic behaviors stem from coercive pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). If organizations are dealing with new situations, they may search for and adopt popular solutions, programs, or initiatives that have generated successful results elsewhere (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). This tendency to imitate organizational behaviors in response to uncertainty is called “mimetic processes” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991, p. 69). According to Scott (1987), organizations,
like people, imitate other organizations they feel are superior and more successful. The decision to imitate other organizational behaviors may be strategic or may be an unconscious, convenient solution to maintain the organization’s legitimacy and survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Educational organizations often imitate behaviors gained from other schools and districts. For example, during curriculum adoption, district leaders may choose a curriculum used in surrounding districts that have demonstrated successful student results. The leaders will research what districts recorded the top student achievement and gains within that subject area and purchase those curricular materials with the hope that the results will be replicated. Another example is a state’s adoption of policies like that of a neighboring state in an effort to replicate successful student outcomes. For example, Louisiana’s adoption of literacy policies, which are focused on the science of reading and the retention of elementary school students who do not meet minimal proficiency standards on literacy benchmark assessments, are similar to those that were adopted in Mississippi.

On the other hand, cultural norms and societal values may change because of environmental factors, creating pressure on organizations to make structural or behavioral adjustments (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). This type of pressure to make organizational modifications, which is known as normative pressure, can result from changes in professional expectations or simply in taken-for-granted societal norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Scott, 1987). For instance, states have adjusted educational administrative leader certification requirements to include more flexibility in how principals are credentialed. The flexibility can be attributed to the lower number of qualified principal candidates graduating from accredited institutions combined with the growing number of vacant principal positions caused by increased principal attrition rates. In the current study, normative pressures to standardize professional development may provide stability and reinforce existing organizational structures and norms, creating a one-size fits most approach to educational practices. While this may give the appearance of steady improvement, the more unconventional, uncertain approaches, utilizing job-embedded experience, may produce more lucrative results.
**Threat Rigidity Effect**

However, the failure of schools to implement substantial reforms creates adversity for school leaders (Staw, et. al., 1981). Macro-level pressures, such as federal and state high-stakes accountability policies, along with micro-level pressures, like local district mandates, generate potential threats to the organization’s equilibrium as well as pose threats to individuals and groups within the organization (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). These types of coercive pressures can initially compel organizations to adopt isomorphic structures or behaviors (Burch, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). However, continuous coercive threats to organizations, which are perceived as a result of adverse circumstances within the environment, can lead to a reduction in legitimacy (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). Continual organizational threats can elicit maladaptive responses, including deliberately restricting information and relegating control to hierarchical positions. Any limitations to organizational behaviors force systems to become rigid and fixed (Staw, et. al., 1981). This maladaptive behavior resulting from a threat to the fundamental interests and goals of an organization is known as threat rigidity (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). Staw et. al (1981) suggest that these maladaptive behaviors are in response to new conditions within the environment in which prior behaviors are ineffective; however, the behavioral rigidity suggests that the organization reverts to previous problem-solving behaviors, even though these solutions appear inappropriate, which may be a factor in why school reform efforts remain largely unproductive (Payne, 2017).

Threats to the organization can also affect group dynamics; severe effects can cause loss of collegiality, isolation, feelings of diminished self-efficacy, and group dissension (Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). When group interests are threatened, the pressures to create uniformity within the organization are increased, and the organization may only seek consensus among group leadership, creating situations in which information is restricted, innovative solutions are eliminated, and power and control are relegated to dominant group members (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). Centralization of decision-making, whether it be within the organization as a whole or within a smaller division, reinforces the “tightly coupled links” of top-down decision-making, resulting in the
adoption of formalized activities and standardized procedures for the organization (Staw, et. al., 1981, p. 514).

**Applications of Institutional Theory**

Even though Institutional Theory and New Institutionalism continue to evolve, theorists within the social sciences apply the theory to explain where, how, and why organizational structures, policies, and goals develop (Scott, 1987). The benefit of utilizing Institutional Theory and New Institutionalism as a theoretical framework is that both theories provide an explanation of variations in organizational systems based on contextual factors (Heck, 2004; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Therefore, the theories are applicable in industrial spheres, governmental agencies, business management, and social sectors. For example, in educational institutions, New Institutionalism provides a justification for why some school reform efforts have not been more successful, particularly when adopted practices mimic initiatives that have been successful in other organizations with differing policies and cultures (Heck, 2004; Payne, 2017). These failed attempts to engage in significant school reform may be indicative of a symbolic act to appear innovative rather than an authentic investment in school reform or may signify an organization’s resistance to change (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Heck, 2004; Payne, 2017; Rowan, 2006a). Through this lens, the institutional setting, or more specifically the organization’s climate and participant motivation, influences the strategic implementation of new initiatives and to what extent the organization and its members must change their practices to effectively implement them (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975).

Because New Institutionalism contextualizes organizational structures and behaviors, researchers using it as a theoretical framework can connect organizational operations to the economic, political, and cultural environment and can rationalize how organizations respond to pressures and threats (Heck, 2004). Although it does not describe the change process itself, New Institutionalism reconciles changes in organizational behaviors as an adaptive response to explicit and implicit forces, complex relationships, and unforeseen shifts in societal expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Heck, 2004; Kezar, 2018). Because the theory provides a view of leadership at an organizational level, contextual factors that
contribute to leader development and decision-making are also explored (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). However, theorists contend, to understand and apply the theory as a whole, “old” and “new” Institutionalism must be reconciled so that theorists can utilize the theory to better address societal issues and policy development (Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Rowan, 2006b; Selznick, 1996). The reconciliation of the theories will allow for the expansion of how organizational changes in the social sector, in fields like education, are explained (Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Rowan, 2006b). Selznick (1996) argues that the reconciliation of both theories lies in Institutional Theory, which should explain and connect all organizational forms, structures, and rules. However, at the same time, Selznick advocates for researchers to pay thoughtful attention to the application of Institutional Theory in matters of policy and bureaucracy.

In spite of the ability of these theories to provide a viable explanation for the contextual factors that affect organizations, the weaknesses of both theories stem from what they do not address (Brint & Karabel, 1991). Because both theories focus on the conception of organizational structures and behaviors, neither addresses how individuals become catalysts of organizational change (Brint & Karabel, 1991; Heck, 2004; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Instead, the focus remains on the factors that seem to reinforce the organization’s established practices (Kezar, 2018). In addition, the process by which societal norms become embedded within an organization or culture, leading to institutionalization, is not explained (Heck, 2004). The influence of regulatory systems and powerful interest groups, the impact of individuals on organizational behaviors, and the importance of individual agency in decision-making practices are also not explored (Brint & Karabel, 1991; Kezar, 2018). Neither theory acknowledges anomalies that do not conform to standard patterns of the organization (Kezar, 2018). All of these limitations may be attributed to the theoretical focus on macro-level variables or the difficulty in accurately identifying implicit interests or shifts in societal expectations.

Since both Institutional Theory and New Institutionalism cannot adequately explain how change occurs, the implication is that change may not be possible (Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Meyer & Rowan, 2006). If there is a possibility that change can occur, the frequency and expediency of any change process will be hindered by the organization’s values and beliefs from which the organizational behaviors are
established (Kezar, 2018; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Conversely, if change does occur, both theories support the idea that powerful external coercive pressures or consistent organizational threats are likely required, and the magnitude and scope of these changes are dependent upon the power of the coercive pressure (Kezar, 2018). The implication that change is an impossibility within an organization may be attributed to the role of individuals. Since they are viewed as interchangeable, or “widgets,” the roles of all individuals are pre-determined, preventing any person from initiating change (Kezar, 2018; Weisberg et al., 2009). At the same time, they will be unlikely to identify needed changes since their behaviors are guided by the same societal norms and cultural expectations that influence the organization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). If individual behaviors have been institutionalized, motivation to become change agents within the organization is unlikely (Kezar, 2018; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). However, this does not account for the experiences of marginalized individuals who lack power within an organization and who may become catalysts for institutional change with an awareness of broader forces that guide organizational behaviors. Nevertheless, neither Institutional Theory nor New Institutionalism provides an explanation of how individuals can make behavioral changes within the organization (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006).

Disagreements over the definition of Institutional Theory methods, concepts, and measures have arisen because the theory focuses more on descriptions of organizational responses rather than the process by which these responses occur (Heck, 2004). DiMaggio and Powell’s explanation of the influence of mimetic pressure on organizations to assume isomorphic behaviors has been misinterpreted (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). As a result, rather than considering the cause, isomorphic practices are often attributed to mimetic pressures rather than normative or coercive pressures, which may be an inaccurate assumption. Institutional theorists also have conflicting opinions concerning the extent individual interests play in changing or shaping organizational behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1987).

Through the framework of New Institutionalism with a specific focus on isomorphism and threat rigidity effects, the study will analyze principals’ experiences in participating in job-embedded professional development led by district-level administrators. To better understand how administrative
roles can impact the success of improvement initiatives, the organizational structure of the school system must be understood. For example, the organizational environment and culture of the system must be considered as structural components can have dire impacts on the acceptance and resulting success of improvement initiatives – such as efforts to build instructional leadership capacity among principals. The extent to which principals are afforded autonomy, even in instances of controlled autonomy, in curriculum implementation, instructional leadership practices, and teacher professional development can impact student achievement and school performance. Even though principals believe in their autonomy, organizational structures, decisions by district leaders, or authoritative power structures may prohibit principals from exercising any autonomy. The role of the leaders within the school system - both at the district and school level - is pivotal in determining the effectiveness of initiatives that target principal instructional leadership development. Traditionally, the role of a district leader has been more evaluative; therefore, district leaders - offering support and guidance, rather than punishments and reprimands - may encounter resistance because efforts may appear to be in opposition to the district’s traditional organizational structures. Likewise, the system’s organizational culture impacts the relationships among school leaders and district staff - more specifically the level of trust and respect among leaders and the limits of authority for both principals and district staff. Finally, questions concerning the loose or tight coupling between district office decision-making and school operations can also affect the principals’ perceptions of instructional leadership support. As a result, principals’ perceptions of job-embedded coaching and district-level support will be influenced by the organization’s structures, environmental influences, and cultural norms.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

As the purpose of the study was to investigate principals’ perceptions of district-led job-embedded professional development within a traditional public school setting, the research methodology used a qualitative, explanatory embedded single case study (Eckstein, 1975; Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Principals’ understanding and beliefs about district-led instructional leadership support were best examined through their own voices and experiences as school leaders. Using New Institutionalism, isomorphism, and threat rigidity as the theoretical framework for the study, the context in which principals work was also an important factor in understanding their perceptions. Since each school district has a differing organizational structure and culture, the examination of a school district, its organizational cultures, and principals’ perceptions of how district leaders support their leadership development can lead to a deeper understanding of how district leaders build principal capacity and how principals respond to these supports.

The single case study focused on a traditional public school district located in the southeastern part of the United States. Although this district has similar student and teacher populations to neighboring districts, there were notable differences in the district-wide systems and structures that guide school leadership practices. The focus on one school system provided an opportunity to understand how district structures and organizational culture affect principals and their instructional leadership development, leading to the following research question:

How do principals perceive job-embedded professional development and instructional leadership support provided by district office staff?

Research Design

Qualitative research is an inductive research process in which observational data gathered from a relatively small group of participants is collected and analyzed to identify patterns, holistic meanings, or themes (Lichtman, 2013). Many qualitative research studies are primarily concerned with answering the question “why” (Lichtman, 2013). The goal, however, is to investigate a social phenomenon, human behavior, or human interaction, which can be accomplished by observing people acting together within
their natural setting (Lichtman, 2013; Stake, 1995). Because qualitative research is concerned with behavior and interactions, participants are purposefully selected because of their individual characteristics and their ability to provide information that may be relevant to the study’s research question (Maxwell, 2013). In these cases, information from the participants cannot be obtained from other sources. Participant information is gathered and analyzed through observations or discussions with the researcher, sometimes using both visual and verbal communication (Lichtman, 2013). However, qualitative research methods are not limited to interviews alone and can include other methods of data collection, like observation, to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). The data collected is then analyzed to search for patterns, and from these patterns, researchers can identify themes or important ideas.

In a qualitative case study, the goal of the researcher is to conduct an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within a real-world setting (Lichtman, 2013; Yin, 2018). A case study authentically creates a complex, holistic description of a phenomenon to explain how or why it exists or develops (Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). What makes a case study distinct is that any boundaries between the phenomenon and the context of the case cannot be easily separated, and contextual factors become essential to understanding the phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Therefore, the emphasis of the study is focused on the case, and within the established boundaries of the case, researchers study the events, the context, and/or the important occurrences (Stake, 1978). Researchers can establish the boundaries of the case because of characteristics, behaviors, or situations (Lichtman, 2013). The case then becomes a “bounded system,” which is separated by time, place, and context as a static object rather than a dynamic system or process (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Researchers may choose to study the phenomenon or case because of its uniqueness, exemplary status, or representativeness of a typical situation (Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). They can represent multiple realities or can reflect variability within a phenomenon or group studied (Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, in this study, understanding the case is more important than any themes that may emerge (Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).
The case and the context of the case reveal information not only about the phenomenon but also about persons within the bounded system. Through the collection of qualitative data, researchers attempt to develop a “relativist perspective,” or an understanding of how different participants view a system (Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Because of the multitude of variables and perspectives that impact the understanding of a single case, researchers may narrow the scope of the study by specifying what data is collected, what individuals should be included, and in what frame of time the study taking place (Yin, 2018). To determine how to limit the data collected, researchers can establish a clear connection between the case and the research question and can predetermine a theoretical framework. Even though case studies develop an accurate understanding of a specific phenomenon, the understanding is limited to the context in which the study takes place (Stake, 1995).

Case studies can be complex, involving the exploration of contextual meanings, processes, and multiple intervening variables (Eckstein, 1975; Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). To better understand how principals perceive district-led supports within a specific organizational culture, the study required the collection of multiple perspectives of leaders from various geographical areas and grade-level configurations within a traditional public school system (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). As a result, I used an explanatory, embedded case study research design. The purpose of an explanatory case study is to provide a plausible explanation of the hows or whys of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). With this type of case study, I examined the complex activities and events of the case to conclude as to why the phenomenon exists or has evolved. The study design and data collection lend itself to the exploration of “rival explanations” (Yin, 2018, p. 331). At the same time, embedded cases involve the systematic exploration of an element within the larger organization. This type of case study focuses on specific subunits within the organizational structure, the interaction between the subunits, and the resulting impact (Yin, 2018). After the subunits have been analyzed, findings from the subunits are connected to the holistic case, or larger unit of study (Yin, 2018). Since the study focuses on district leadership, school-based administrators, and the organizational culture that influences the interaction between individuals within the school system, utilizing this type of research design allowed for the investigation of
perspectives of both district and school-based leadership along with the organizational culture of the school system as a whole.

**Lincoln School District**

Lincoln School District, classified as a traditional suburban district, services approximately 15,000 students in Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade within its 29 schools, which are comprised of 18 elementary schools, eight middle schools, three high schools, and a career magnet center. In 2019, the school system was identified by the state department of education as an ‘A’ district, ranking in the top five of all districts in the state in overall student performance. In 2021, the district was again recognized for its gains in student achievement, which was the third highest in the state. Geographically, the district has three distinct regions, known as the north, central, and south; however, each region encompasses multiple communities or townships. The demographic make-up of students varies within each region with higher percentages of white and Hispanic students residing in the southern part of the district and a higher percentage of black students attending schools in the northern part of the school district.

Within the district offices, the Superintendent oversees both operations and teaching and learning initiatives; however, he delegates the supervision of principals to the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Director of Elementary Schools, currently a white female with over 31 years of experience, leads instructional initiatives in all 18 kindergarten to fifth-grade schools with the assistance of one math and one reading curriculum specialist. School configurations vary. Seven of the district’s 18 elementary schools are Pre-K through fifth grade. Eight of the district’s elementary schools have a “lower” and “upper” school configuration. The lower school serves students in grades Pre-K through second grade and a separate “upper” school services students in grades third through fifth. Three elementary schools in the northern part of the district are configured by grade level; one is a Pre-K through first-grade school, another is a second and third-grade school, and the third services fourth and fifth-grade students. The majority of the district’s elementary principals are white females with more than five years of experience. However, in the northern region, a black female principal leads the district’s only comprehensive intervention required school, and a newly appointed black male principal leads the
second and third-grade feeder school. All middle schools within the district, conversely, have a sixth through eighth-grade configuration; high schools serve ninth through 12th-grade students. Overseeing all secondary schools, the Director of Secondary Education leads a curriculum team with four curriculum specialists each with experience teaching in the four core areas of instruction, English language arts, math, science, and social studies. In addition, the Director of Secondary Schools, currently a white male with over 27 years of experience, also supervises six curriculum coaches, who support teachers in their instructional efficacy. Curriculum coaches are assigned to a geographical region of the district – two in the north, two in the central region, and two in the south. Elementary curriculum coaches, conversely, provide support to teachers multiple times per week at two assigned school campuses; the coaches report directly to the school principal but are evaluated by the Director of Elementary Education.

In the fall of 2021, Lincoln School District began the process of adopting a new teacher evaluation rubric, which was implemented the following year. Throughout the 2021-2022 school year, district leaders and school administrators discussed rubric components in preparation for multiple training sessions held over the summer. Implementation began with the district leaders’ training in January 2022; district leaders were trained with the sole purpose of enabling principal supervisors to provide administrative support during full district-wide implementation in 2022-23. In the summer of 2022, all school administrators - principals, assistant principals, administrative assistants, and coaches - were trained to evaluate teachers using the NIET (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching) teacher evaluation rubric. Beginning in the fall of 2022, district leaders contracted with NIET to provide principal support in using the newly adopted rubric, which included training led by a NIET Senior Support Specialist, monthly principal meetings centered on teaching and learning, and principal supervisor site visits.

For the past two years, Lincoln School District leaders received little support and fewer opportunities to engage in professional development due to external societal and environmental factors. Prior to recent events, principals attended principal training in the form of monthly principal meetings that were focused on statewide data analysis and standards-based instructional practices. Because district
leadership focused on instructional practices in these monthly training sessions, principals within the district enjoyed controlled autonomy, specifically in their school scheduling, teacher professional development, school-wide curricular initiatives, staffing, and control of financial resources. Within the past three years, district leadership changed, which included a newly appointed Superintendent in 2020 as well as the Director of both Elementary and Secondary Education. New ideas have been implemented, and district leadership has a renewed interest in teaching and learning, which included a resurgence of monthly instructional leadership meetings and additional means of principal support. Although curricular materials are mandated by the district, principals were afforded controlled autonomy; however, the level of controlled autonomy has been altered. According to current district practices, Lincoln principals can choose the school’s curricular focus, lead teachers in implementing new school-wide instructional initiatives, determine the frequency and structure of teacher collaboration, hire staff, establish intervention schedules and delivery systems, lead teacher professional development, and maintain control over the school’s financial resources. Within the past three years, leaders of Lincoln School District methodically implemented plans to support teachers’ instructional efficacy and principal leadership capabilities to positively impact student achievement, such as the adoption of the NIET teacher evaluation rubric, renewal of monthly principal meetings, support for struggling schools provided by the state department of education, and contracted consultant support from a professional NIET Senior Support Specialist.

Lincoln School District was selected as a case subject for a variety of reasons including its geographic proximity to the local university Hill State University and the different types of professional development principals were afforded. In addition, I had professional knowledge of Lincoln, which afforded me access to professional development opportunities offered in the district.

Role of Theoretical Framework

The theoretical or conceptual framework is an important component of any research design as it determines the focus from which the issue is examined or the problems to be understood (Maxwell, 2013). Within qualitative case studies, the contextual factors and theoretical framework from which the case is viewed supply a guide in which the case is bounded, and research is conducted (Stake, 1978, 1995;
Yin, 2018). Coincidentally, the theoretical framework for the study, New Institutionalism focusing specifically on isomorphism and threat rigidity, explains how organizational behaviors and systems are influenced by cultural norms and values, which adds a layer of importance to the study’s context (Daly et. al., 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). The organizational culture of each educational system varies; no school system or district – public, private, or charter – is completely alike.

Contextual factors determine what district initiatives are adopted, how those initiatives are implemented, and to what extent initiatives are supported and evaluated. It stands to reason, then, that principals will have differing perceptions of district leader support (Maxwell, 2013). These perceptions can be influenced by the culture of the district, the district’s power structure, and the decision-making hierarchy. At the same time, the relationships and interactions between staff and the principal characteristics, such as their level of expertise, school performance rating, geographic area, race, gender, and grade level configuration, can alter their perceptions of how district leaders deliver instructional leadership support. Other factors may impact how principals experience job-embedded professional development, such as the quality of leadership support, professional development, and school leader expectations. Understanding these factors is essential to understanding the case itself. The theoretical framework provides the frame from which to bind the case through the investigation of the organization’s culture, structures, and behaviors.

The school district’s culture and structure inform district leaders’ decision-making and their rationale as to what types of district-led, leadership support should be offered. For example, the goal of district leaders may be, in fact, to increase instructional leadership capacity among building-level administrators. Interventions may be needed to address deficiencies among new or struggling leaders. The district may be searching for a one-size-fits-all approach to provide sweeping changes across the district. Conversely, leaders may decide on a differentiated approach. In the case of Lincoln School District, several coinciding events have influenced district leaders’ decision to implement renewed efforts to provide some variety of professional development. State mandates for schools labeled as needing
“comprehensive” or “urgent” intervention (CIR and UIR respectively) require leaders at these schools to receive specific types of training and leadership coaching. Because whole student populations or sub-groups of students are not meeting adequate yearly growth, school leaders in CIR and UIR schools receive training in instructional leadership teams and teacher collaboration. With the implementation of a new teacher evaluation rubric, Lincoln schools contracted outside consultants to assist leaders with the understanding and implementation of the new processes. The consultant works with leaders to conduct on-site observations, providing principals with the opportunity to collaborate on scoring and teacher feedback. Lincoln School District was able to launch new initiatives because of an influx of federal dollars (ESSER money) related to recent social and environmental events. In utilizing New Institutionalism as the theoretical framework for the study, data collection protocols and observations can focus on the critical contextual elements, such as motivations behind support and environmental factors that may influence principal perceptions.

**Review of Previous Case Studies of Educational Change**

Both qualitative and quantitative case studies in related areas of research can be found within existing literature. Although a portion of case studies found within literature use a quantitative survey case study methodology, Olsen and Sexton (2009), Honig and Rainey (2014), and Heffernan (2018) utilize a qualitative case study methodology. These three research studies are related to the current study because of their focus on related topics or the use of a similar theoretical framework; descriptions of which are detailed in the subsequent section.

Olsen and Sexton (2009) studied teachers’ perceptions of the implementation of reform initiatives within a large underperforming high school in Southern California. Chosen because of the diverse demographic population, current level of school performance, and history of failed reform efforts, Olsen and Sexton interviewed six English teachers, all of whom had varying levels of experience and backgrounds. Specific teachers were chosen because they had different teacher leadership roles within the school during their tenure. Researchers focused on how the implementation of reform efforts affected
interpersonal relationships, policies, and the culture of the school through a theoretical framework of organizational behavior, specifically focusing on threat rigidity.

Using the theoretical framework, Olsen and Sexton (2009) explored how federal and state policies shape school cultures and subsequently how schools react to these changes by implementing reform initiatives that impact teachers’ work. In interviews, teachers reported tensions within and between faculty groups, negative opinions of administrators, and dissatisfaction with reform efforts that support a culture of deprofessionalism. Teachers reported that administrators actively restricted communication, limited collaboration, isolated teachers, and increased pressure on teachers to reform their instructional practices. Olsen and Sexton (2009) concluded that through the loose coupling of instructional expectations and administrative engagement, administrators perpetuated teacher isolation, hostility, and alienation. In response to the external threats of federal and state accountability, administrative controls increased, and simultaneously teacher communication, resources, and collaborative opportunities were restricted, supplying evidence of threat rigidity effect (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). Olsen and Sexton’s (2009) study contributes to my research design because of the researcher’s use of threat rigidity as the framework as well as its overall focus. The case study design allowed researchers to examine an organization’s response to outside threats and participants’ perceptions of their responses.

Honig and Rainey (2014) studied a mid-sized urban district during the implementation of principal professional learning communities (PLC) using a single comparative, embedded qualitative case study methodology. With over 100 hours of observational data, 150 documents, and 46 semi-structured interviews, researchers investigated how the roles of six school administrators hired to serve as Instructional Leadership Directors (ILD) differed in their leadership practices to strengthen principals’ instructional leadership capacity. Through observing these collaborative sessions, researchers provided a description of central office instructional leadership directors’ implementation and facilitation of principal PLC.

Using sociocultural theory and communities of practice as the conceptual framework for the study, Honig and Rainey (2014) found that, although the principal PLC meetings were held within the
same urban district, each Instructional Leadership Director (ILD) facilitated PLC meetings differently. In fact, not only did structures and meeting objectives vary, so did the participation of the ILD, principal engagement, and meeting outcomes. Honig and Rainey (2014) concluded that principal PLC meetings focusing on joint work as well as modeling, developing, and using specific skills and tools were more conducive to administrator learning, led to principal engagement, and encouraged transfer of learning into a real-world context. Other findings suggest that leveraging principal capacity and using principal knowledge and experience as resources were well received among principals. Central office leaders who used a teaching-oriented strategy in one-on-one ILD meetings or used a differentiated approach to better meet the needs of principals were more successful in building leader capacity. The study of principal professional learning communities is important within the context of my research design because of the focus on job-embedded professional development within one school district and the contextual factors that contribute to its implementation.

In a three-year qualitative case study, Heffernan (2018) followed two highly experienced principals who participated in a district initiative to increase autonomy, specifically in recruiting and hiring staff and planning staff development. Through a series of interviews, Heffernan (2018) asked both principals and a senior district leader about their perceptions of reform efforts to increase autonomy. From the data collected, the researcher concluded that rhetoric supporting principal autonomy in making staffing decisions did not support current practices. Principals felt as though they did not have control over hiring practices but utilized autonomy in different ways to support initiatives in their schools. Heffernan concluded that experienced principals maintained more autonomy than principals with less experience or with a less advantageous position within the system. However, additional variables may have influenced leader perceptions of these reform initiatives. Heffernan’s (2018) study also informs my choice of research design because of the focus on principal perception of autonomy and the organizational systems and structures that informed how autonomy was granted to principals.
Table 1

Principal Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Configuration</th>
<th>Leadership Experience</th>
<th>School Grade</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>Middle School 6 - 8</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Elementary 4 – 5</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattie</td>
<td>Elementary PK – 5</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Elementary PK – 2</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delilah</td>
<td>High School 9 – 12</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Elementary PK – 5</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Elementary 3 – 5</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irma</td>
<td>Middle School 6 - 8</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda</td>
<td>Elementary PK – 5</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evie</td>
<td>Elementary PK – 5</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Middle School 6 - 8</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>Elementary PK – 2</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stan</td>
<td>Middle School 6 - 8</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>High School 9 – 12</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Participants

Since the focus of the study was principal perceptions of district-led professional development, it stands to reason that participants for the research study were school principals. To ensure that leader voices were represented in the study, a purposeful sampling, representing 50% of the principal population – or 14 principals - in the school district, was recruited to participate (Maxwell, 2013). Participants in the sampling had varying levels of experience in school leadership, led a variety of grade level schools in each geographical area, had varying degrees of success in student achievement as measured by school.
performance scores, and were reflective of the diversity of the principal population (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Criteria used to select participants also considered the experience level of each principal, eliminating new principals with less than one year of experience because of their lack of opportunity to participate in extended professional development and because they lacked the experience to answer questions related to their newly obtained role as a school leader. To meet selection criteria, participants understood the limits of controlled autonomy and attended professional development led by district staff. Therefore, principal participants were able to address how they perceive instructional leadership support provided by principal supervisors, the context and conditions under which the support was provided, and their understanding of the district’s organizational structure, cultural norms, and guiding principles.

Prior to contacting participants, the system superintendent was contacted to secure permission to collect data. Participants were contacted through an initial email and a subsequent phone call (Maxwell, 2013). Lincoln Schools had an overrepresentation of white females in leadership roles; throughout the entire district, there were only three black female administrators, one newly hired black male administrator, and three white male administrators. Because of the lack of administrative diversity, the district was under a desegregation order. Representative participants included a white female high school principal, a white male high school principal, two white male middle school principals, a black female middle school principal, one white female middle school principal, seven white female elementary school principals, and one black female elementary school principal.

To better understand the organizational culture, structure, and environment in which the study takes place, district leaders, more specifically principal supervisors, were also recruited to participate. District leaders provided a thick description of the district’s organizational structure, cultural norms, and guiding principles. They also provided information on the success of district initiatives, how implementation plans were developed, and how principal support was determined. Principal supervisors evaluated school leaders, oversaw principal professional development, and supported leaders in building their instructional leadership capacity. District leaders were contacted to participate through email with a
follow-up phone call. In Lincoln, both the Director of Elementary and Secondary Education were recruited to participate.

Data Collection

To ensure that qualitative data collected provides evidentiary support for the findings and conclusions about the case, I collected data from several sources and used multiple collection methods, a process known as triangulation (Maxwell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Yin, 2018). Triangulation of data allowed me to understand multiple perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Through this process, multiple sources of evidence were used to find commonalities among data (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Yin, 2018). Therefore, a benefit of using this process was that the risk that conclusions concerning the case were biased because data was collected through only one method was reduced.

The primary data collection method within the study was participant interviews. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was utilized during two 45 to 60-minute principal interviews with each participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Fourteen principals from Lincoln School District were interviewed. To ensure that a variety of principal voices were recorded, purposeful sampling included a representative number of male and female principals, of ethnic and racial groups, of school performance, and of grade levels: elementary, middle, and high. In the initial interview, principal questions focused on their perceptions of controlled autonomy, instructional leadership practices, district-wide support, and organizational culture and structure. The second interview delved into principal perceptions of the most recent district-provided professional development. On an as-needed basis, principals were asked follow-up questions during the second scheduled interview or with a phone call. Additional data was collected through district leader interviews. District leaders, who serve as principal supervisors, participated in two 45-minute interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol. Similar interview structures and questions were used in both the principal and district leader interviews with the initial interview focused on district culture and organizational structures, processes to support leaders, and leader autonomy. In the subsequent interview, district leaders were asked to discuss plans for leader
professional development and building leader capacity. The goal of each interview was to gain insight into principal perceptions as the professional development was taking place and insight into district-level principal supervisory staff as to their rationale behind how professional development was planned and implemented.

The second method of data collection was observation of principal professional development (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Emerson et al., 2011). Open-ended observation notes were recorded in a field note journal using a split-page notation format, which allowed for the recording of both descriptive and reflective notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Emerson et al., 2011). During the observation, I initially recorded notes through jotting, a brief written record of events and impressions, and completed field note descriptions and reflections following each observation (Emerson et al., 2011). Principals attended monthly principal meetings; district leaders planned these meetings to build principals’ knowledge. Observations of a sampling of principal meetings and one-on-one coaching were conducted, noting the meeting content, engagement of district leaders, rationale of the professional development (state-mandated or district-mandated), and the method in which the support was provided. Artifacts from the monthly meetings were also collected to support observations recorded in field notes. Observations preceded principal and district leader interviews so that inquiries concerning principal perceptions of the meeting including the content, rationale, delivery, and supports offered could take place.

A field journal was maintained throughout the data collection process (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). In addition to the field journal providing documentation of my descriptive observations and reflections, it provided evidence of reflexivity to monitor researcher bias throughout the investigation. Field journal notes included researcher perceptions, thoughts, and developing insights (Emerson et al., 2011).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis, interviews, and observations were evaluated to determine if principals across the district held similar perceptions or if principals had differing opinions. As a part of this process, all participant voices were recorded and acknowledged (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Since the district is considered a bounded system, data collected from the district was analyzed, which allowed conclusions to
be drawn about the holistic case. Semi-structured interview sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim through transcription software; each manuscript was reviewed for accuracy (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Observational data was recorded during the observations using field notes, which documented both descriptive and reflective notes ((Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Emerson et al., 2011). Jotting was used during the observation, and following each observation, field notes were augmented with more detailed notes, reflection, and preliminary analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Emerson et al., 2011).

For each case, interviews, observations, and artifacts were coded using segment-by-segment open coding during the initial coding process, which is a process through which the researcher deconstructs data to develop new insights to interpret phenomena (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Following the initial coding, transcripts were coded using a priori coding to determine if specific instances of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressure influenced the types of professional development offered to principals. After transcripts and field notes were initially coded, initial codes were synthesized, organized, and integrated into focused, selective codes to represent larger concepts. When possible, in-vivo codes were utilized; in-vivo codes are labels or codes that are quoted words or phrases that represent participant perspectives and actions (Charmaz, 2006). During initial coding and again once codes were collapsed into selective codes, I compared case transcripts. Selective codes were examined to determine if the codes represent the whole of the work – both in context and condition. Selective codes reflected the interactions recorded and observed that cause occurrences and their consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). From the selective codes, themes were identified that represent the whole case. The themes reflected not only the participant’s perceptions of district-led support but also communicated their views of the organizational structure and culture (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). As a result, an understanding of the case study emerged, specifically how the district’s organizational culture and structure affected principals’ perceptions of the professional development and support they received.

Trustworthiness

The nature of a qualitative case study is that it is grounded in a naturalistic inquiry perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, 1988). Naturalistic inquiry is founded in emergent evidence, collected within a
real-world, uncontrolled environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). As data is collected, each case study is evaluated on its credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, meaning is the method of inquiry appropriate to the problem being investigated, are data collection methods consistent, are conclusions reached using the same techniques, and is the researcher acknowledging and taking steps to reduce bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, 1988).

The credibility of each case study depends upon the role of the investigator; it is a result of the interaction between the researcher and the context in which the phenomenon exists (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Credibility is achieved when the chosen methodology is consistent with the problem studied and the belief system on which it is based and is reflective of multiple realities of the participants. If the chosen methodology does not align to the problem studied or the theoretical framework selected in which to view the problem, the validity of the findings may come into question. In some instances, qualitative case study methodology may be associated with researcher bias because the human researcher is the research instrument (Yin, 2018). Using a triangulation of the data, the threat of bias was reduced since data collection was not from one single source. To ensure the case reflects principals’ experiences, participants were asked to evaluate the data collected through member checking (Lichtman, 2013).

Choosing a diverse purposeful sampling increased the likelihood that the sample was representative of the participants within the district, allowing all participant voices to be accurately communicated (Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

Because of the nature of case study research, findings have limited transferability to other contexts; transferability is the ability of results to be applied within other environments, settings, or contexts (Lichtman, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1988). The experiences and perceptions of principals within school systems across the United States are influenced by a variety of factors – the organizational culture, state accountability, geographic locations, and societal beliefs and values. Understanding the organization’s behaviors and structures was an essential part of understanding how the theoretical framework, New Institutionalism, was applicable to the case study. As each district has developed unique norms and values, those structures and behaviors are different and uniquely fitted to the district (Maxwell,
Therefore, any findings from the case study may be different if the study is replicated within another district. There are exceptions, however. If district structures are similar and the case study is used metaphorically, transferability is possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Other exceptions are if the case study is used to further learning or to reconstruct or re-examine principal’s perceptions within another school system environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, 1988).

Dependability is similar to meeting the threshold of credibility in that it is dependent upon how the methods were designed for the problem being studied. Therefore, measures of dependability can be understood by knowing a description of the case study’s context and how the contextual factors influenced the process by which data was collected (Lichtman, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1982). As the principal investigator, I have knowledge of Lincoln School District’s culture and organizational behavior. I know many of the participants professionally. Knowledge of the district’s formal and cultural structures allowed for opportunities to collect relevant data to my proposed study, both written and unwritten, and apply this understanding within the context of New Institutionalism, isomorphism, and threat rigidity.

Another question is the confirmability of the findings, or corroboration of the findings by others (Lichtman, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1982, 1988). This requires evidence of the findings and a confirmation that conclusions were drawn from evidence gathered during data collection. Triangulation of the data through interviews with principals and directors as well as observations of professional development practices provided evidence of the study’s confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Finally, throughout data collection, a field journal was maintained to note evolving ideas, methodological inconsistencies, and thematic evidence. Keeping a field journal encouraged my conscious reflectivity, ensuring that I was aware of and acknowledged researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1982, 1988).

**Ethical Considerations**

Several ethical considerations arose within the context of the study. I, as the researcher, have professional knowledge of Lincoln district office staff through my occasional work with school leaders. Since I conducted the study, preserving the confidentiality of participants was essential. However, the ability to maintain confidentiality was limited with such a small sampling as there are only 29 principals.
within each district. There were careful considerations of how participants’ identities were concealed to eliminate the possibility of reprisal or condemnation as a result of participant responses. Because of the difficulties in maintaining anonymity, a few principals were hesitant to participate in the study or may not have answered the questions truthfully. To address these issues, I maintained principal anonymity and assigned pseudonyms for all participants to conceal their identities. Any observations conducted, for example, observations of principal PLCs, occurred separately from any interviews conducted. Participants from the interviews were not always the subject of the observation. Because there were limited numbers of white male and black female principals in Lincoln School District, references to principals did not divulge their race. With the underrepresentation of principals of color, as the researcher, I will ensure their voices are well represented among their white counterparts. Another consideration was that principals may have felt as though they were mandated to participate in the study because of our professional relationship. To ensure that principals have the freedom to refuse to participate if they wish, I communicated with them using my student email account outside of work hours.

**Researcher Identity and the Role of the Researcher**

The researcher’s role is pivotal in qualitative research as this individual is the “primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 21). All areas of data collection, including the selection of the environment, gathering information, and describing the contextual factors, are processed through the researcher’s eyes and ears, or their lens. Because researchers process the information based on prior experiences and individual realities, their perceptions and beliefs may influence research findings, which creates an inherent bias (Lichtman, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Although bias cannot be eliminated, researchers can reduce bias by bracketing, a process through which an acknowledgment of researcher’s views occurs (Lichtman, 2013).

I am an educator. I have been a teacher, a curriculum coach, a school administrator, and now a district leader. I served as an administrator for over 11 years in another school district, leading a historically low-performing school with a high discipline rate. Students attending the school were from diverse backgrounds and communities. When I first arrived at the school, which received a ‘D’ rating for
academic performance, the school faced a multitude of challenges, including a culture of low expectations and underperformance, teacher dissatisfaction and isolation, and widespread occurrence of student discipline. Over the course of three years, work on improving teacher instructional efficacy through targeted instructional leadership behaviors yielded great success. Changes due to teacher turnover caused student performance to decline. As a result of the decline in school performance, district leaders exerted pressure to improve student test scores.

As a researcher, I maintain a constructivist epistemology, believing that the context in which the study takes place is essential to understanding the phenomenon or issue (Lichtman, 2013). Because each participant was affected by their environment, participants’ points of view varied depending upon experience; hence, perspective and understanding were affected by the environment. For instance, a principal leading a high-performing school in an affluent white neighborhood had differing experiences and a different voice than a leader working in a low socioeconomic community with a racially and ethnically diverse student population.

Limitations

The primary limitation to the study was the role of researcher bias. As an educator, I maintain a professional relationship with many Lincoln principals. The position that I hold may skew data collection and findings as a few principals were hesitant to participate in the study or to share their thoughts and opinions during the interview because they feared reprisal. Principals may have also withheld information or have been less than forthcoming in their responses. In addition, when interviewing participants or observing principals engaging in professional development sessions, prior knowledge of participants, presenters, or topics may have hindered my ability to be an impartial observer. So as a result, when collecting data in Lincoln Schools, I was cautious of my position of power and simultaneously acknowledged my bias and position. To accomplish this, I assured participants that all data collected was kept confidential. I did not reveal participant names, pseudonyms, race, gender, or any other identifiable demographic information to other district or school-level colleagues throughout the study. I scheduled principal interviews during non-working hours if possible. During observations, I set aside my work
responsibilities and focused solely on recording low inference notes during each session. Once observations were recorded, I read observational notes thoroughly before recording further observations and reflections to reduce bias. To further reduce bias and ensure participant voices were heard, I provided all participants with the opportunity to review transcripts thoroughly by member checking. In participant selection, I recruited participants with whom I only have a professional relationship. Any leader with whom I had a personal relationship was excluded from the study. I was continually reflexive as a researcher, ensured data was triangulated, and acknowledged my bias to reduce the interference of my professional role in data collection and analysis.
Chapter 4: Results

Lincoln School District offers all principals traditional forms of professional development throughout the school year, including a three-day Instructional Leadership Summit held each summer and monthly principal meetings held most Thursdays following the district’s school board meetings. Four of the district’s 28 principals are afforded additional support. An elementary school principal who leads a school labeled comprehensive intervention required (CIR) by the state and two middle school principals who lead schools labeled urgent intervention required (UIR) receive job-embedded coaching, which is provided by a district supervisor, a representative from the state department of education, and/or a consultant from a state-approved vendor. Additionally, one of the elementary school principals has been provided with additional leadership support and, as a result, has been assigned to work with two other elementary principals serving as peer coaches. Although described as being beneficial by most principal participants, data collected through observation and participant interviews indicate that district-led professional development focused heavily on state and district policies, school-based management, and curriculum implementation. However, for the principals leading underperforming schools, the additional support they received combined traditional professional development and job-embedded coaching, which enabled the principal to build instructional leadership skills and transfer the new learning into practice.

For peer coaches, providing additional support meant that they worked collaboratively with their colleagues to conduct informal walkthrough observations and provide teachers with feedback.

Principal perceptions of district-provided professional development were favorable because principals believed the information they received assisted them in their daily practices. Although they believed they were instructional leaders, Lincoln principals primarily functioned as school site managers, overseeing day-to-day school operations and implementation of district-adopted curricula. Professional development provided by district leaders reinforced the principal’s role as a manager rather than an instructional leader. Because of their belief and trust in district leaders, principals complied with district expectations, except in specific instances in which principals believed that teachers or students may be negatively impacted. Findings of the study revealed four major themes – how to be a leader, I don’t get
much of that, it does drive a lot of our work, I’m just doing what I know, and building leaders aspiring to be middle managers.

**How to Be a Leader, I Don’t Get Much of That**

When asked about the professional development that the district offered, fewer than half of the participants discussed their attendance at the Instructional Leadership Summit. The Summit, a three-day conference style form of professional development offered to all district administrators, provides opportunities for district leaders to introduce new initiatives, standards, or curricula; inform leaders of state and district policies; and introduce or reinforce district expectations. Stan, a veteran middle school principal, described the summer summit as an opportunity for district departmental leaders to “update[s] us… [on] the goings on of what's happening in the district.” The three-day summit is divided into two sections. One day is dedicated to reviewing district policies; departmental leaders from human resources, maintenance, technology, and finance deliver short reports on any changes in district policy. Two days are devoted to instructional practices. Although principals are unsure how these topics are determined, sessions are teacher focused. This past summer, principals learned about new social studies standards, a new math curriculum, and the Writing Revolution, which is a curriculum used to build writing skills from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Middle school principal Elizabeth concurs stating that the Summit is a “plethora of different things that happened” across the district and provides principals with information on “anything new coming out.” Dan, a high school principal with four years of experience, describes the Summit as “something to take to the teachers…usually dealing with instruction” but questioned the applicability to every school leader across the district. “I don't know … how it relates to all principals or all campuses, because just like teachers, there's different levels of expertise. There's different areas of need.” Although participants described topics presented at the Summit as being focused on classroom practices, this past summer, district leaders offered a “root cause professional development” session. In this session, principals were asked to analyze their school data, to identify areas of need, and to determine the underlying causes of these problems of practice. The presenter modeled a process to analyze data using an Ishikawa, or fishbone, diagram to identify the root causes of common problems encountered on
most campuses, such as increased discipline rates or low mathematics scores on the state assessment. From there, principals were asked to create an action plan to address the root causes they identified to address the problems on their campus. High school principal Delilah, along with three other leaders, specifically referenced this training as being beneficial in planning for the school year, stating it was “probably …one of the best leadership professional development I had in a while.” Delilah continued:

I thought it was good because sometimes we just say… [I have to] increase [the] assessment index, but what is the real problem?... It really made me stop. I’ve always wrote goals… but it made me stop and say this is a problem, but how can I fix it?

Delilah appreciated the opportunity to think about the challenges she faced on her school campus and to work collaboratively with her leadership team to build an action plan to address them. Since principal professional development offered at the Instructional Leadership Summit is often focused on curriculum and instruction, leaders are not often afforded the opportunity to attend sessions focused on instructional leadership, which raises questions as to the ability of district leaders to offer effective professional development that focuses on instructional leadership.

**We Talk About Curriculum or Other Things That We Might Need to Know**

Conversely, all principals discussed their perceptions of the monthly principal meetings held on Thursdays following school board meetings. Lily, an elementary principal, appreciates the monthly meetings because it affords her the opportunity to stay informed:

The day after our school board meeting, we meet as a principal team … with our supervisor … [and] curriculum specialists…. I feel that that [meeting] is a great way of growing us because first, it keeps us informed. We know what's going on. Most months the superintendent comes to speak to us…So that has definitely been beneficial.

Data collected during an observation of a regularly scheduled monthly principal meeting indicate that meetings are comprised of two sessions, the initial meeting with the Superintendent followed by separate sessions specifically for elementary and secondary principals. The Superintendent led the opening session with updates from the most recent school board meeting, which involved school board observances,
upcoming employee stipends, human resource policy revisions, and changes in safety procedures and protocols. Following the 45-minute session with the Superintendent, principals received updates on facility management, maintenance, and a new contract process led by the business manager. The initial session, which lasted for 117 minutes, was followed by a break to allow principals to move into sessions with their direct principal supervisors – Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education. When asked about professional development opportunities offered by the district, principals specifically referenced these monthly meetings and their appreciation of the information they received as a result. However, the structure and content of the meeting were informational rather than focused on the development of any professional skills. Even though the delivery of the information was classified as professional development by most principals, the session did not provide any real instructional leadership development.

Observations of the subsequent elementary and secondary principal sessions indicate that, although meetings varied in length, the content focused heavily on district implementation of “new high-quality curriculums.” According to Jim, Director of Secondary Education, and Katherine, Director of Elementary Education, “meetings are really curriculum heavy” because “it seems like there's always something new … in one of the subjects… a new curriculum coming out or standards have changed.” Both Directors believe that principals need to be aware of district expectations of classroom practices prior to engaging in professional development to build their leadership capacity. Being “well versed” in curriculum ensures that principals can effectively monitor its implementation, and the directors believe that this consistency will ensure schools will perform according to their expectations. Because, in their opinion, principals have varying levels of experience and instructional leadership ability, Directors use professional development to provide all principals with a basic understanding of curriculum and to standardize instructional practices. Any professional development centered on leadership and leadership practices has not been well “thought out” by district leadership, according to Lincoln’s Director of Secondary Education:
We probably don’t spend as much time talking about actual leadership. … I don't know that we've actually identified and said … this is where we want to live in terms of actual leadership, I don't think we've gotten to that point yet.

In fact, Lincoln principals have few opportunities to attend professional development focusing on instructional leadership practices. Aside from the most recent Instructional Leadership Summit, which hosted a session on root cause analysis, professional development offered to leaders within the last few years was concentrated on district-adopted curricula and teaching practices. For example, although over half of principals interviewed stated that professional learning communities (PLC) were the foundation of their instructional leadership practice, participants did not receive professional development on this topic, or others aimed to improve student achievement. To describe the monthly meetings, middle school principal Irma states, “We talk about… curriculum or other things that we might need to know about. Each curriculum coach facilitator, they do a presentation on what's going on in that particular content area.” Curriculum Specialists lead professional learning related to a specific core content area – English language arts, reading, math, science, or social studies – during every monthly meeting. Jim and the secondary team plan professional learning topics for each meeting over the summer based on the district’s secondary focus. Conversely, the elementary team works with Katherine monthly to determine what professional development will be offered. Although Katherine claims to use data-informed practices to determine the focus for the monthly professional development, curriculum specialists always present information related to reading and math in these sessions. Although each curriculum team uses a different approach to planning professional development for principals, leader professional learning in Lincoln lacks a consistent focus, a strategic intent, and a process to support principals in transferring learning into practice.

However, observation of the secondary meeting indicated that only 40 minutes of the 130-minute session focused on math curriculum, state and district planning guides and documents, and curricular resources. Nearly two-thirds of the meeting was dedicated to presenting information on federal program compliance, state accountability, and principal responsibilities. In her presentation, the Director of Federal
Programs reviewed documentation needed to ensure principals’ compliance with the parent and family engagement initiative and to guarantee mentor teachers receive their dedicated stipends. Following this changes in a state accountability measure were addressed in the presentation given by the Supervisor of Accountability. During his 30-minute lecture-style presentation, the Director of Secondary Education discussed leader responsibilities, specifically reminding principals of district expectations related to informal walkthrough observations and their autonomy to lead instruction at their school site: “You run your school – not the coaches and not the curriculum people… information should go through you … you need to lead PD….” Although never explicitly stated, the focus of the secondary principal session led by the Director and his curriculum team appeared to reinforce the Director’s expectations of how principals completed informal teacher observations. For example, the secondary mathematics curriculum specialist modeled how to use district and state resources to conduct informal walkthrough observations.

Throughout the presentation, the curriculum specialist referenced documents from the district, such as pacing guides and common district assessment schedules, while completing a hypothetical teacher observation using the district walkthrough instrument. To ensure that the information presented in professional development sessions is transferred into teachers’ practices, coaches supporting secondary schools attend the same monthly meetings as administrators, and assistant principals and administrative assistants attend similar quarterly meetings in which a condensed version of the information is redelivered. Although the expectation of secondary principals is that they serve as leaders of their schools, the observed professional development did not support their growth as instructional leaders. Instead, the professional development provided them with information to manage federal program compliance and accountability mandates and to use state documents to complete informal observations of math lessons. In order for principals to effectively lead teaching and learning at their school sites rather than rely on district leaders, professional development focused on instructional leadership skills may be warranted.

Elementary principals were presented with similar information, including topics related to complying with federal program requirements, understanding the components of state accountability, and using curricular materials to complete informal walkthrough observations. However, unlike secondary
principals, elementary principals were required to return for afternoon sessions to learn about the upcoming social studies curriculum release as well as district guidance on developing literacy plans for students who struggle in reading. Even though the Director of Elementary Education believes that “instruction is the least prioritized thing” in the district, she provides principals with “continuing…support… through a modeling process, providing that professional development piece once a month” as a part of her job to “support principals in any aspect of their job.” She continued, “If administrators are going to monitor the implementation of something, they have to be well-versed in that.” Second-year elementary principal Jenny appreciates the continued focus on curriculum and instruction, “I do feel like we definitely spend more time on curriculum and instruction, which is great.” According to Katherine, meeting topics are often revisited to provide principals with a deep understanding of the curriculum, “I wouldn’t say that our professional development is always new learning… it … may be revamping and revising what we already know.” Some elementary principals disagree. Veteran principal Evie argues that the monthly professional development that elementary principals attend is based on “the flavor of the month,” and “it’s focused directly on whatever program is the hot topic at the moment.” Because the Director of Elementary Education and her team plan professional development monthly using the most recent student performance data and recommendations by the state department of education, the sessions are focused on whatever topic the team feels is important to address. Because the meetings are often in reaction to student data, professional learning is not strategic, focused, and reinforced over time to ensure that transfer takes place. Although reading and math are consistently the subjects of monthly professional development, principals are constantly being introduced to new programs or curricular materials recommended by the state department.

During an observation of the elementary principal professional development sessions, curriculum specialists in each content area presented information related to this month’s “hot topic,” which included small group instruction and components of the district-adopted, state-approved curricula. In sessions concerning English language arts and mathematics, curriculum specialists presented steps outlining how teachers can use benchmarking and progress monitoring data in their small group instructional practices.
Social studies curriculum specialists presented components of the soon to be released state approved curriculum, Bayou Bridges. Each curriculum-related presentation lasted for 60 minutes and accounted for over two-thirds of the meeting time. Principals take notes on the information presented in each session and ask questions because, following each meeting, the expectation is that principals will use the information within their current practice and redeliver it to teachers in professional learning community meetings. The Director of Elementary Education explains, “It makes the principal reflect upon the practices in their school and they … have to bring [the information] back to PLCs and [use the information] through … walkthrough data collection.” To ensure that district expectations are clear to administrators and faculty alike, the elementary curriculum team presents the information to instructional coaches as well. “The following day what happens is the instructional coaches get that same professional development that we've given to our principals,” Katherine explains. In fact, the goal of the elementary team is that all “teachers, coaches and principals” receive the “same … professional development.”

According to Rose, an elementary principal leading the only comprehensive intervention required (CIR) school in the district, this type of practice is beneficial “because it's not something that's coming like from the district to me, to them. … everybody got the same message.” Without the need for redelivery, Rose states that her administrative team and faculty can collaborate on the best way to implement the new learning.

Observation of the monthly principal meeting indicates that the roles of district leaders in Lincoln are consistent with the traditional roles of central office staff, which are to ensure compliance with federal, state, and district mandates, policies, and regulations and to influence principals in their work as school building managers (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Ford et al., 2020). School management, educational policy changes, safety, and effective curriculum implementation accounted for the majority of topics presented in each session with the elementary principals receiving additional information on analyzing student achievement data in reading and math. These findings are consistent with research indicating that over 80% of principal professional development focused on similar topics presented to Lincoln principals (Levin et al., 2020; Lewis & Scott, 2020). With the focus strictly on delivery of
information and curriculum implementation, district leaders created a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development in order to standardize administrative practices. According to research, district efforts to standardize school operations and micromanage classroom practices instead of building principal instructional leadership capacity may become problematic, hindering improvements in instructional practice and preventing increases in student achievement as intended (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017). Whether district leaders in Lincoln possess the ability to lead improvement and/or instructional initiatives is unknown, but the absence of professional development focusing on building leadership capacity and the sole dependence upon curriculum specialists to deliver the professional development was noted (Burch, 2007; Litchfield, 1985). Since their professional development is concentrated on implementing curricula and using curricular resources, principals may be unprepared to serve as instructional leaders and may not possess the skills needed to influence improvements in teaching and learning, to motivate teachers, and to introduce school-wide classroom strategies, which may positively impact student achievement (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008; Neumerski, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014).

Some Component of Professional Development

Data collected through principal interviews suggest that principals believe that they may need different types of professional development that are not solely focused on curricula and curricular resources. Veteran middle school principal Stan believes that administrative preparation programs “don't teach you really how to principal in the real world” and that assistant principals may not have the capacity to lead a school without additional support and training. “As an assistant, I basically did discipline and buses,” Stan recounts. More recently appointed principals expressed a need for professional development that concentrates more on instructional leadership. Dan, a high school principal of four years, explains:

As far as growing instructional … leadership traits …, I don't find those happen…. Not out of ill will … And even when we go to …our monthly principal meetings, I'm glad that we get some
Although Lincoln principals working under a previous administration were afforded opportunities to build their instructional leadership skills, new district administrators have a different approach to professional development. Miranda, an elementary principal of one of the district’s A-rated schools, agrees that in terms of professional development focused on “how to be a leader, I don’t get much of that.” According to elementary principal Evie, however, previous central office administrators provided opportunities for principals to build their leadership capacity, “the supervisor would come to the school … see everything… [I] felt like they knew you better and some of the routines of your school. … we would strategize on different ways to …address certain topics….\)” Evie, and other veteran principals, discussed the individualized support they received from previous district leaders, and as a result, they felt supported in their roles as school-level decision-makers and were more confident in their leadership abilities. When asked about her professional development experiences, Pattie spoke of past opportunities to attend various out-of-state conferences:

We were encouraged for a while, and we went … as a district for certain things… that was good because we were all going together. … we all went to Model Schools in Florida… but we didn't just go, we would have meetings after our sessions. … I haven't done that in a long time, but I felt that that really kind of gave me a little leg up on things.

By attending out-of-state conferences, Pattie and other principals were afforded opportunities to learn new strategies, build their leadership capacity, and collaborate with other educators around the country. Principals and district staff then met to discuss their new learning and collaborated to determine how the learning could be applied to practice. Because principals and district leaders collaborated following the daily sessions, principals felt supported and were encouraged to use their new learning to improve student outcomes. Evie also recounted how previous district leaders attempted to build principals’ agency over
their own professional learning through book studies. “But to teach us to do different[ly], like leadership skills, book studies, we haven't done that in many years.”

The need to provide principals with professional development to strengthen their understanding of classroom practices stems from the belief that principals lack knowledge of curriculum and instruction. In separate interviews, both Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education stated that only 30% of their principal reports had the capacity to be strong instructional leaders. In fact, Jim believes that several principals may not be capable of effective instructional leadership because of their teaching experience, or lack thereof, “I've got some principals … that … maybe they didn't teach a core subject or maybe they're more so that old coach administrator.” Jim believes that they lack the fundamental knowledge to understand the academic direction of the district. Katherine also believes that a leader’s background can be a predictor of the administrator’s ability. In describing one of the elementary principals she believes lacks instructional leadership capacity, Katherine states:

I would say about this principal … she has little to no elementary experience. So, it really hurts her. She never was an elementary teacher. …she was a high school special education teacher.

And so, I don't think she knows really what good instruction looks like because she hasn't been exposed to it.

As a result of these beliefs, Jim feels as though it is his responsibility as the Director of Secondary Education to ensure that future principals have the curricular knowledge needed to lead all secondary schools in Lincoln. “I guess you would ask … how does that happen? How do we live in that world that … only a minority of them [principals] actually [are what] we would consider to be strong curriculum and instructional leaders?” There are a multitude of reasons why Lincoln principals may be unprepared to lead teaching and learning initiatives, including the absence of effective professional development. Stan and Harold both described their experiences as assistant principals as primarily focusing on discipline and transportation management while their principals assumed all responsibility for instructional leadership. As principals, they both struggled to become instructional leaders but were able to build their capacity with district leader support. Because district professional development has been concentrated on
curriculum implementation and school-based management for the past four years, principals have not had the opportunity to grow as instructional leaders. Along with the absence of district professional development, principals have not attended out-of-state conferences or networked with other educators. Unlike previous district leaders, the Elementary and Secondary Directors no longer prioritize providing all principals with job-embedded support. Although Assistant Principals receive a condensed version of the professional development offered to principals, this only occurs quarterly. The district’s lack of focus on building the instructional leader capacity of school administrators has created a situation in which very few principals can demonstrate strong instructional leadership skills.

It Really Defined What It Was I Should Be Doing

Exceptions to the district’s one-size-fits-all approach to professional development have been documented. Among the district’s 28 schools, three schools – one elementary and two middle schools – have been identified by the state as needing urgent or comprehensive intervention. Because these schools are currently underperforming, the state incentivizes districts to accept additional training opportunities and support from a state representative and/or a consultant from a state-approved vendor. The administrator leading Lincoln’s CIR elementary school receives multi-tiered support, combining traditional forms of professional development with job-embedded coaching. Both middle school principals whose schools are labeled urgent intervention required (UIR) have been offered job-embedded coaching opportunities, but only one of the principals participates in the initiative. Elementary principal Rose believes that the additional support was a key factor in building her capacity to successfully lead a labeled school:

When I became principal, … I had that background knowledge but going through professional development …[with] NIET, the LDOE, … all the different support system[s], the professional development was aligned. So … what I learned in one place, I would hear the same thing in another. … it started making a lot of sense…. it really defined what it was I should be doing in regards to …best practices, NIET, TAP, all of that was aligned.
In addition to participating in traditional training sessions, Rose receives job-embedded coaching with both a representative from the state department of education and a consultant from a state vendor, the National Institute of Excellence in Teaching (NIET). As a part of the agreement with the state and state-approved vendor, a district supervisor is required to participate in the coaching sessions. During an observation of a coaching session between a middle school principal and a NIET Senior Support Specialist, the Support Specialist modeled how to use data and data analysis to set relevant, attainable goals using a teaching and learning approach. After she explained and modeled the process, the principal was asked to generate goals for another content area using the same steps. In every session, a district supervisor actively participates, and for Rose, she values the feedback she receives, “She [the district supervisor] comes in, provides support, give[s] feedback, observe[s] our clusters [and] leadership team visits, as well as do[es] walkthroughs with us in the classroom. And it's been very supportive.”

Although this one-on-one coaching practice was only utilized with three Lincoln principals, the use of a collaborative teaching and learning approach to building leader capacity can demonstrate improvements in leader performance and develop practices to improve student outcomes (Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020; Zepeda, 2015). Because the consultant utilized modeling strategies in the coaching sessions, the district leader and principal were able to learn new skills and work collaboratively to solve problems of practice within the context of the leader’s school (Augustine et al., 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012, 2019, 2020; Mayer et al., 2013). By requiring district leaders to participate and be an active partner, school improvement efforts are not over-reliant on outside experts but become a shared responsibility between the principal and central office staff (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017). This type of job-embedded coaching is only offered to the lowest performing schools in the district, those consistently earning a D or F school performance rating, because it is mandated by the state department of education.

One of the principals whom the Elementary Director feels may need “additional supports from other principals” was offered the opportunity to engage in peer coaching. Different than the support
provided to CIR and UIR schools, additional support was offered to the principal because of the decline in school performance data over the past two years. The principal, who chose her peer coaches, works with two principals from nearby schools at least three times per month to informally observe teachers and provide them with feedback. Sophie, who serves as a peer coach, explains:

> We are ... working with each other to observe ...at different schools...we kind of observe for 20, 30 minutes and ...talk about what feedback we would give, what are some things that went well, what are some things that...we ...could grow on.

Peer coaching observations indicate that these ongoing sessions are more like collaborative meetings rather than coaching sessions. The principal coach asks questions about the teacher’s student achievement data and offers her thoughts on the teacher’s performance. Together, both principals decide what feedback to send to the teacher. Although peer coaches do not introduce new learning nor provide principal feedback, they do collaborate with the principal to explain their thought process while completing informal walkthrough observations. Peer coaching accompanies other tasks assigned to the principal as a part of her district support, which involves tracking time in classrooms, professional learning community meetings, and working with teachers. The Director of Elementary Education explains, “Really the big bulk of her day really needs to be spent on observation and feedback.” She offered the principal the opportunity to participate in peer coaching because she “wasn't quite sure if she knew, when she would give feedback, if she actually knew what … good feedback would look like.” Sophie believes that her work as a peer coach has been mutually beneficial for all principals involved; I was “just kind of sharing different things that we do … just little things. ...And then they were like, well, that's a great idea.... just something as simple as ...that can be helpful.” For example, Sophie shared her practice of making announcements 5 minutes before the first intake bell, which she does to save instructional minutes. After sharing that idea with other principals, they, too, began that practice.

Peer coaching and observation allow principals to work with trusted colleagues in completing observation-based learning activities that can aid them in committing new learning into practice (Aas &
Paulsen, 2019; Hargreaves, 1994). Whether the opportunity to engage in peer coaching arose from the district leader’s lack of knowledge, from her lack of time, or at the principal’s request, the struggling principal is able to learn from her peers through continual collegial dialogue and feedback (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1999, Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, 2019). Principal coaches were specifically chosen because of their previous trusting relationship with the principal and their experience as veteran leaders (Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015). Because the Director of Elementary Education suggested that sessions focus on informal teacher observation and feedback, the collaboration has centered around the curricular learning gained through their monthly principal meetings (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). Although principal meetings do not focus on instructional leadership, peer coaches provide a model for the struggling principal to assist her in her daily practice (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015). Even though both types of job-embedded coaching practices may be beneficial for many other Lincoln principals leading more successful schools, this practice is simply limited to the four principals who lead underperforming or declining schools.

**It Does Drive a Lot of Our Work**

Principals believe that their monthly professional development provides them with the information they need to align their practices with not only the district vision but with state initiatives as well. All principal participants believe that state initiatives, policies, and mandates had some effect on the professional development they receive. Many principals, like Elizabeth, believe state mandates have a great deal of influence over monthly professional development because “the [district] wants to be in line with what the state is telling us.” Principals, like Harold, a veteran middle school principal, believe that state mandates have 100% influence over district-led professional development, and Katherine agrees, “It is a major factor because it [the state] does drive a lot of our work.” However, Secondary Director Jim disagrees, “I honestly, I don't think it plays that much of an impact…if something is coming down from the state, …I don't know if I would call it professional development, more so … just relaying information…” In fact, Jim believes that state mandates do not have a “real big part in what the principals are doing on a day-to-day basis.” The stark contrast in principal supervisors’ beliefs concerning the
influence of state initiatives on principal professional development may be the result of a multitude of factors, including their knowledge of instructional practices, their experience as school leaders, current state initiatives, and the collective experience of the elementary and secondary curriculum teams.

Whereas Elementary Director Katherine and the elementary curriculum specialists rely on state initiatives and pilot programs to inform leader professional development, the Secondary Director does not. Instead, Secondary Director Jim leverages his previous experience and success as a school principal to influence current middle and high school leaders in more authentic instructional leadership practices. Secondary curriculum specialists and coaches provide Jim with anecdotal and observational data concerning current classroom practices, which also inform what topics are presented to secondary principals. Conversely, elementary principals are strongly encouraged to simply follow state initiatives introduced by the elementary curriculum team, which are strictly focused on curricular resources and materials rather than more authentic instructional leadership practices.

Data collected through observation of the monthly principal meeting provides some evidence that the state department of education does, in fact, have a profound impact on the professional development Lincoln principals receive in their monthly meetings. For example, a portion of the professional development is led by the Superintendent and is informational in nature, mainly consisting of updates on policies, state laws and initiatives, and school-based management (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Elementary and secondary principal breakout sessions focus on the role of school leaders in ensuring teachers are utilizing the district-adopted, state-approved tier one curricula in their classrooms (Adamowski et al., 2007). The differences in how district leaders perceive what impact state directives have on the day-to-day operations of a school may have an impact on how they interact with principals they supervise and may influence how they establish and communicate district expectations related to the curricula. Although non-compliance with state directives may result in negative consequences, such as decreases in federal funding, in student results on standardized state assessment, and in school ratings, each director responds to pressure from the state department of education differently (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014).
In addition to state initiatives and mandates, both principals and principal supervisors discussed the importance of the district vision in planning principal professional development. In the past five years, sweeping changes have occurred in top central office personnel, including the Superintendent and Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education. “I think the last couple of years, since … we have [had] a new superintendent, we sort of have had to refocus where the district [is], [and with what] our current superintendent believes,” Katherine explains. Realizing the Superintendent’s vision requires that much of the professional development focuses on observation and feedback, specifically what the elementary and secondary curriculum teams have determined as essential classroom practices. Since the directors and their curriculum teams are solely responsible for principal professional development, they have a predetermined idea of “what needs to be done and how it needs to be done,” according to Jim, the Director of Secondary Education, to encourage “what kind of teaching practices …we want… within our schools.” The Directors believe that, by developing principals’ ability to recognize components of the adopted curriculum and these essential instructional practices, principals are better able to complete the minimum number of required informal observations, which is an important step in aligning their practices to the Superintendent’s vision.

Consistent About What They All Know How to Do

Top district leadership, including the Superintendent and Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education, believe the role of a district leader is to support principals in their instructional leadership practices. For elementary school principals, this requires them to ensure teachers are implementing the district-adopted, state-approved tier one curriculum “with fidelity.” Katherine feels as though supporting principals requires having a “cohesive idea… of these are the things we are going to focus on… get really good at.” Therefore, much of the professional development principals receive focuses on implementing scripted curricula as intended. In fact, similar professional development presentations are delivered to assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teachers with principals attending the same or similar professional development because “when you have a team of people getting that same information, it's easier as a principal to … push it out in your building.” Although the suggestion to implement tier-one
curricula with fidelity has never been explicitly mandated by the district, elementary principals are expected to redeliver the information learned in monthly principal meetings to their teachers and use the information to conduct informal observations. “I mean, ultimately, we want those things being used in the classroom. So, the monitoring of the walkthroughs is how they’re going to monitor … whatever professional development we provide,” Katherine contends. Because principals comply with these expectations, elementary teachers are encouraged to use all high-quality curricular materials with fidelity. In fact, five of the eight elementary principals interviewed said curriculum implementation was their schoolwide instructional focus for the year. Principals not following these unspoken district mandates receive corrective feedback from the elementary team. Third-year principal Mia explains, “Anytime there's something that comes up that does not align with … district initiatives and the vision of the district, feedback is given as far as what's expected to be and how it's expected to be corrected.”

Even though Secondary Director Jim believes that the role of a district leader is to support school principals, supporting principals for him means to “remove the clutter, remove anything that … is just getting in their way…. so that they could … focus on … teaching and learning, and that's it.” As a result, the secondary curriculum team takes a different approach to leader professional development. The focus of each professional development session is on the Director’s expectations of what principals “should be looking for in walkthroughs, or what does alignment look like, or what kind of teaching practices … we want to encourage in our schools.” Jim explains, “If you want to get expected results, then you need to get real consistent about what they all know how to do.” However, unlike elementary principals, secondary principals believe they have the autonomy to make instructional leadership decisions and be the “curriculum leader” on their school campus. Elizabeth explains, “Basically the information, whatever information we're getting, we have the autonomy to do what we want with it at the school because every school's different, right?” Even though principals may perceive they have this type of autonomy, the Director has influence over their instructional leadership decisions, including their schoolwide instructional focus. All secondary principals interviewed stated they were focused on working with teachers to plan lessons in which students were reading, writing, and speaking in classrooms every day.
This consistency in the schoolwide focus across secondary schools is at the suggestion of the Secondary Director. Jim comments:

I mean, all of my conversations with principals at any given time, … all fall into the same kind of general topics, the things that I think are important…. I’m always preaching about …reading, writing, and discussing… I’m going to say that until I retire… Instead of just saying, oh, you know, student engagement, nobody knows what that means. Nobody understands actually what that looks like. …That's kind of my gospel.

Jim’s belief that principals lack an understanding of student engagement is influenced by anecdotal and observational data collected by curriculum coaches and specialists in their work with teachers and leaders across the district. In offering one example, Jim explains, “We [were] looking at high school teachers and they're standing in front of classrooms and …they're talking at kids for 50 minutes - very traditional, very direct instruction, just boring. Poor actual teaching taking place.” Because of examples like this, Jim concluded that secondary principals may have misconceptions about student engagement. Furthermore, the conclusion contributed to his conviction that only one-third of secondary principals have the knowledge and skill to be considered an instructional leader. For principals like Dan, the message to promote reading, writing, and speaking has been consistently communicated for years until he finally implemented the Director’s suggestion, “he had told me for years that was his big thing … it just made sense, the more we spoke about it… I think that has probably been our most frequented conversation between he and I, that one topic.”

For both elementary and secondary principals, district directors provide “support” by promoting consistent leadership practices across the district and offering widespread solutions to problems of practice. Some elementary principals perceived district support as a directive. However, secondary principals held more positive perceptions of support from the Secondary Director, describing it as “just a conversation” about their current practices. No matter their perception of the support they received, principals complied with their supervisors’ suggestions for a variety of reasons. Many of the elementary leaders felt that following the suggestions provided by the curriculum team would improve their practice
as an instructional leader. Elementary principal Mia states, “I want to do better… I am new and taking advice from my district supervisor… seeing … what she did and what she brought the school through; I have great respect for that.” Other principals felt as though they could trust district leaders to make decisions that benefitted students. Irma explains, “I trust people. I say they're in that position for a reason. They have a certain skill set, expertise, knowledge. So, I'm going to trust that first.” Trusting district leaders to have the best interest of children in mind has an added benefit, Miranda explains, “because I can blame them if it all goes south.” Although Miranda, an elementary principal who leads one of Lincoln’s top-rated elementary schools, complies with district expectations, she questions decisions made by the district leaders particularly when the decisions are inconsistent or not well thought out. Implementing “ten different things” can be overwhelming and time-consuming for principals like Miranda, but she complies because of the threat of state accountability.

Most of the professional development offered to Lincoln principals is to establish clear expectations of the principals’ roles as instructional leaders, which is to monitor the implementation of the state-approved tier-one curricula through informal walkthrough observation (Marks & Printy, 2003). District expectations are left to each principal supervisor to determine based on their understanding of the Superintendent’s vision, which is to support principals and to ensure all leaders implement a robust observation and feedback cycle. However, the overreliance on district support has proven to be problematic and has created situations in which Lincoln principals no longer lead their schools but serve as managers or monitors of district decision-making (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Control maintained by principal supervisors, in fact, has undermined principals’ abilities to lead by limiting their role to monitoring curriculum implementation (Litchfield, 1985; Neumerski, 2012). Nevertheless, principal supervisors appear to have built trusting relationships with principals, as evidenced by eleven of the fourteen principals interviewed stating that they trust district leaders to make the right decisions to improve student achievement (Honig, 2009; Mayer et al., 2013; West et al., 2014; Zepeda, 2019). Therefore, this added “benefit” of trusting district directors to become instructional leaders is that principals are not responsible for any declines in student achievement.
I’m Not a Rebel

Both elementary and secondary principals stated that they found the monthly professional development presentations useful in improving their daily practices, stating emphatically that they were not “rebels” and trusted “the district” to make the “right decisions.” The trust placed in district leaders, however, is not absolute. Ten of the fourteen principal participants knowingly disregarded, delayed implementation of, or disagreed with a directive issued by their principal supervisor. Principals practiced a quiet rebellion in which they not only made decisions that were in opposition to a district mandate but, in some cases, hid their actions from their principal supervisor. For example, when Katherine directed veteran principal Evie to change her schedule to create self-contained kindergarten classrooms, she did not comply. “I completely disagreed…. There was no law against it. It was a personal opinion …. I didn't do it. She doesn't know I'm [not] doing it. She still doesn't know. … I don't feel the need to tell her.” Evie made the decision to departmentalize her kindergarten classes to retain her highly effective teaching staff. Evie explains:

We gave it our best [and set a] goal for six weeks…. I had a teacher about to quit. And I’m like, nope, you are either going to have three different teachers that are all amazing or you’re going to have a different sub every day.

Although Evie argues that she “follow[s] the rules,” in this case, she made a decision to benefit her students and staff rather than comply with her supervisor’s directive; “I’ll justify [it] and ask for forgiveness later,” she explains. Pattie, like Evie, is a veteran principal who is normally a rule follower, “I absolutely will try to do it…,” she argues. She also adds that, if district leaders suggested she make changes that were not aligned to her style of leadership, she would refuse to comply. This belief is based on a prior experience in which a previous supervisor demanded Pattie make changes at her school to ensure practices were consistent across the district. “I did not like that,” she states, “I had the data to prove that what I was doing worked… and the next year I got to do what I wanted.” Pattie and seven other principal participants believe that, if student achievement data supports current practices, principals should retain the autonomy to make those instructional decisions.
The quiet rebellion was most prevalent among elementary principals, who disagreed with the mandates issued by the elementary supervisory team to utilize curricular resources provided by the district. In this mandate, teachers were required to use slides that accompanied the reading curriculum, which greatly limited teacher agency and caused dissent among veteran teachers. Elementary principals, when faced with teacher concerns or the threat of a teacher resignation, made instructional decisions to support teacher autonomy in the classroom, regardless of whether it contradicted district directives given during principal professional development. Second-year principal Jenny explains that, when faced with a decision to support her teachers or follow the mandate, she chose to do what benefitted students:

Some teachers … who are my best said, ‘I went to my [old] flip chart … so my kids could see … a visual.’ ‘I said did you do what's best for that kid?’ ‘Yeah.’ Then you did what you needed to do. So, mandates like that … tied our hands. I might've gave them some leniency because they were doing what's best for children.

Decisions to maintain teachers’ classroom autonomy and disregard district directives were more likely to be made by veteran elementary principals with the exception of second-year principal Jenny. Jenny, like veteran principals Evie and Pattie, uses data to support her instructional leadership decisions. As an assistant principal at a lower-performing CIR labeled school, Jenny had additional opportunities to build her capacity as an instructional leader with training and job-embedded coaching sessions provided by NIET, a state approved vendor. Before allowing her teachers to have agency over their instructional practices, Jenny consulted “past data” to determine if her “teachers can grow students.” By using student achievement data as well as data collected from her observations, Jenny made the decision to “back her teachers.”

While some veteran elementary principals allowed their most successful teachers increased classroom autonomy, they also exercised professional judgment in implementing district mandates and policies. If principals felt as though directives were unclear or would place undue pressure on teachers and students, they would delay implementation. Sophie argues that she adopts “bits and pieces depending on… what fits and what we can use.” Because as a principal she is “pulling people off the cliff on a
regular basis”, she has to be cautious of what “extra” tasks are assigned to teachers. Regarding district directives, “If might is in a sentence when something is presented, then it doesn't happen … if it's a you might want to try this, that goes into the store … for later use.” In communicating with her teachers about new initiatives, Pattie also considers where “I’m at with my school and where my teachers are.” Instead of immediately communicating with her teachers about a change in their instructional practices or additional tasks they need to complete in order to comply with state or district requirements, she hesitates: “I don't necessarily jump in… [if] I don't feel like the district is a hundred percent ….“ When in the most recent principal meeting, the presenter was unsure about district guidance on the new state-required literacy plans, Pattie chose not to implement the plans until district staff had established clearer expectations.

While elementary principals quietly rebelled against the district directives given to them during professional development, secondary principals voiced their dissatisfaction with the district’s informal walkthrough observation mandate. Middle school principal Elizabeth and high school principal Dan felt that assigning each school a specific number of informal observations to complete instead of encouraging principals to complete quality teacher observations with targeted, actionable feedback was not productive. “I don’t understand why I have to have a certain amount. I should just be supporting the teachers that need to be supported…. I just don’t know why I have to put a number on it,” Elizabeth argues. While Secondary Director Jim believes that establishing a minimum number of walkthrough observations is important to “set a standard …you have to complete in a given period of time,” Dan feels as though his inability to meet this standard causes him to “feel defeated.” He argues that, by focusing on other tasks that might take precedence over informal observations, he experiences a sense of failure, which he feels is unwarranted. “I feel like we're judged on how many walkthroughs we do, though there's a million other things to be judged upon.” Although their actions are consistent with the expectations established by the Director of Secondary Education, in the case of Elizabeth and Dan, their feelings about these mandates may influence their compliance with current and future district directives.
Lincoln principals’ quiet rebellion against district mandates allowed them opportunities to exercise “authentic” instructional leadership by recognizing teachers’ abilities to meet the needs of their students and allowing them the autonomy to adjust their instructional practices (Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2009, p. 9). Although they were not given autonomy, elementary principals used data to determine the instructional needs of their students and to expand teacher agency when needed (Grissom et al., 2013; Neumerski, 2013). They used their knowledge of the faculty, including the teachers’ ability to deliver instructional content to advance student achievement, when deciding to implement district directives. Since these decisions directly or indirectly contradicted district directives, principals concealed their thoughts and actions to avoid reprisal (Bryk et al., 1999; Hallett, 2003; Lawrence, 2008; Morris, 2002; Wong et al., 2020). Dan’s feelings of failure when he is unable to complete the number of walkthroughs the district deems appropriate may be mitigated with job-embedded coaching or differentiated support (Acton, 2020; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Yan, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2014). However, the district’s one-size-fits-all approach to instructional leadership practices, support, and professional development may be a contributing factor to declines in principals’ confidence and feelings of self-efficacy. If principals continue to practice this type of quiet rebellion against district expectations, it may hinder future efforts to build principal capacity or create obstacles for district leaders who wish to offer support.

I’m Just Doing What I Know

Perception among principal participants is that Lincoln is a “trailblazing district” and that district leaders embrace new initiatives before other school districts across the state. Although the perception was based on the accomplishments of previous district leaders who were pivotal in increasing Lincoln’s district performance rankings to the third highest in the state, there is no current data to support the perception. For instance, aside from the state department of education conference held each spring, few principals in Lincoln attend conferences or regional meetings and only four have any contact with educators in other districts. Principal supervisors provide principals with “support” through traditional forms of professional development focused on state initiatives or curriculum implementation. Only
principals who lead underperforming schools or have non-proficient evaluation ratings are afforded “additional support.” Therefore, this belief stems from experiences with prior district-level staff who encouraged administrators to attend out-of-state conferences, promoted networking with other school leaders, and served as mentors to build principals’ capacity as instructional leaders. The isolation reported by many Lincoln principals may also contribute to their perceptions of district innovation since they lack knowledge of comparative leadership models (Acton, 2021). Currently, most principals in the district trust and respect district leaders and their ability to lead the district even when faced with inconsistencies in professional development and the support offered to school leaders.

Most Lincoln principals work in isolation with little knowledge of other schools within the district, of administrative practices in other districts, and of emerging trends and innovative research. “I don't know what else is out there … I'm just doing what I know. … I don't know any other way,” states Elizabeth, and this is true for the majority of Lincoln principals. Out of the 14 principals who were interviewed, four had some knowledge of professional development in other districts, mainly through their personal or family connections. Rose, one of the principals with family connections in another district, stated “Based off just conversations with them, sometimes I feel like our district is ahead. Because I will talk about things and they’re like we didn’t get that yet.” From these types of conversations, the perception of Lincoln principals is that district leaders are “ahead of the game.” However, when asked about how often they receive professional development on emerging trends in education, only five principals referenced a national trend, like the resurgence of the science of reading, rather than a current state initiative. Even though the information principals receive is delivered exclusively by district leaders, when presented with opportunities for new learning, principals embrace the prospect. For example, Evie, concerned that the district would not extend the science of reading training to principals, invested in the training for her leadership team, “They [the district] were doing this with the coaches, and I was intrigued… So, I did it. We paid for it…. because I was not sure where the district’s thought was…” To broaden their leadership capacity, Elizabeth reads literature on current educational trends with her assistant principal while Pattie looks for opportunities to attend conferences,
which she personally funds. This is not true of all Lincoln administrators, and since they often work in isolation, principals’ perceptions that district leaders are innovative and forward thinking are maintained because information they receive is limited and provided by district leaders (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981).

Principals’ perceptions of district innovation may also stem from their prior experiences with district leaders and mentors from previous administrations. Two of the principals interviewed discussed their experiences attending out-of-state conferences or visiting neighboring districts to network with other school leaders. Pattie recounts her experiences attending out-of-state conferences with other school administrators and feels as though the conferences were most beneficial when principals would “go over some of those ideas and … what we learned.” Recently, principals were given the opportunity to attend a conference locally on literacy, “That one is amazing. It’s national… good scientific stuff behind it,” Pattie continues. Evie remembers when principals were allowed to research initiatives to benefit their schools, “we went to a PD somewhere and it was interesting to see … what other districts did.” Veteran principals spoke about their experiences with retired district supervisors who mentored them. Harold credits his knowledge of instructional leadership to his previous supervisor, “I’ll give [her] a lot of credit for building that … for me…. She would… make site visits and we’d have conversations… it was a cycle of constant feedback.” Even in her first year as a principal, Delilah felt as though her strengths were in understanding curriculum and instruction because of her prior mentoring experiences, “I had a very strong mentor … So, I knew what I had to do with curriculum.” For Pattie, that type of support provided a strong foundation for her as a school leader, “The way that supervisors have grown me… was to meet with me and to encourage me and to have me understand … you’ve got the foundation, you have the pieces, let’s just get you comfortable where you are.” Veteran principals, like Pattie, Delilah, Evie, and Harold, received guidance and support as a result of their relationship with district leaders who served as mentors early in their administrative careers. This support combined with opportunities to collaborate with leaders in other districts and to attend out-of-state conferences enabled veteran principals to become more knowledgeable and confident as building-level leaders.
It's a Conversation

Although principals did not refer to a formal mentoring program within the district, all secondary principals referenced virtual one-on-one meetings with the Director of Secondary Education. Scheduled every five to six weeks in addition to the monthly in-person principal meetings, the hour-long meeting provides Jim with an opportunity to have conversations with his principal reports. In these meetings, principals provide the Director with data related to common district assessment results, attendance rates, disciplinary infractions, and state accountability projections. They are also able to update him on the progress toward their school goals documented on their action plans developed at the onset of the school year. Jim explains, “We share a slide deck with them, … a template… [with] school goals and actions. …this is what my attendance is looking like. This is what discipline is looking like. It basically covers every aspect of the operation.” During these calls, the Director can pose questions and hold conversations with principals on the status of their schools. Many of the secondary principals described these calls as opportunities for growth. For Irma, this is also an opportunity to ask questions and voice her concerns as well: “We …go over our slides and he gives feedback on all of my data and all of my slides…. Any other concerns I may have. … I have that time to bring that up with him as well.” Most of the secondary principals felt that Jim’s questions and feedback during these calls were more like conversations. “It’s a conversation. And …instead of feedback, he makes me think and reflect more,” Elizabeth contends. Although the Director does not mandate or direct principal decision-making, he is able to provide feedback, advice, or opinions to effectively influence their leadership practices. Despite this, secondary principals feel as though they have the autonomy to accept and implement the Director’s feedback or to simply “agree to disagree.” Nevertheless, the monthly sessions provide Jim and his curriculum team with updates on school data and progress toward meeting goals. Jim explains, “I have been able to… keep that focus where it belongs on the important things. … every conversation that I have with my principals;” for secondary principals, Jim believes the important things involve maintaining a vision of what “good teaching and learning” looks like; understanding the curriculum; having credibility, trust, and “buy-in;” and being able to implement new initiatives. Having implemented the virtual meetings within the last
year, Jim is not sure how the meetings will impact the principals’ instructional practices. “I’m not exactly sure where that’s going to lead…. I haven't quite envisioned it yet in my mind, but I believe that that is going to be the process that creates a very meaningful principal observation.” Although the principals describe the meeting as a “coaching” session, the meeting is an opportunity for evaluation of the schools’ current data, for feedback on the data presented, and for Jim to influence principal decision-making.

Conversely, elementary principals receive little to no feedback from their director unless the feedback is corrective. Rose states she may receive feedback, “maybe once or twice within a year,” but she is unsure if this is because she has “other people” providing her with feedback and support due to her school’s CIR status. However, Rose’s experience is the same as other elementary principals. New principal Jenny, who leads a kindergarten through second-grade elementary school, has not received her first year’s evaluation; “[Katherine] is waiting on scores, LEAP scores, but I’m not a LEAP school. So, I felt like that could have been done without scores,” Jenny argues. Since her students do not currently take statewide standardized assessments, known as LEAP, Jenny believes her evaluation results could have been communicated more promptly. Being one of the district’s most accomplished and most experienced principals, Pattie does not expect much feedback from her director. Even though she contends that the amount of feedback is “not as much as I want,” she still believes that “every now and again, everybody just needs to know that, like hey, you’re doing the right thing.” Much of the evaluative feedback elementary principals receive is corrective in nature. Mia explains that “when feedback is needed, it’s definitely given… not formally given, but it’s definitely informally given as often as needed.” A few of the principal participants, like Miranda, were asked to “type up my own evaluation.” This was Lily’s experience as well, “we get evaluations twice a year, but she sends us the evaluation and we have to give her the evidence, and then after that, she just scores it.” Inconsistencies in the feedback and support given to principals in Lincoln are symptomatic of how district leaders interpret the Superintendent’s vision of support for school leaders.

*We Know What Our Focus Is*

As the Director of Secondary Education, Jim believes that professional development is important
to ensure principals have the skills to lead regardless of their background and experience; he states “If you think that all principals begin on their first day of work already knowing how to do the job and everything about it, then I guess you wouldn't think [professional development is] important. But… principals… [have] different experiences prior to becoming a principal that need to be considered.” As a result, the goal of professional development in Lincoln is to prepare principals to successfully fill their administrative roles. Because monthly professional development offered to elementary principals centered solely on implementing the district-adopted curricula with fidelity, six of the eight elementary principal participants reported that this was their instructional leadership focus this school year. However, two of the district’s elementary principals chose not to adopt curriculum implementation as their schoolwide focus because of the additional training opportunities and leadership coaching they received through NIET. By combining traditional professional development with job-embedded coaching, these principals were able to build their instructional leadership skills and, through coaching support, transfer their new learning into practice (Rowland, 2017; Stein et al., 2004; Zepeda, 2015, 2019; Zepeda et al., 2014). Rose, the elementary principal who currently leads a CIR school, and Jenny, who worked with Rose as an Assistant Principal, used skills they learned through NIET to conduct learning walks, a process by which principals collect observational and quantitative data to identify the needs of their students and teachers. Rose and Jenny initially learned about the learning walks through previous NIET trainings and have since implemented this form of data analysis into their daily practices. Rose explains “As a leadership team, we look at data, teach[er] observational data, student data. … based on that we look at the needs of the school, [and] we know what our focus is.” Through this process, Rose discovered that her teachers’ instructional practices were not student-centered:

So, this year we are focusing on student engagement and the gradual release model where students are working independently… we just need to become proficient with it because we still see that lack of engagement. It's more teacher talk, and we want our students to be independent thinkers. So that's our focus.
The additional professional development Rose received because of her school’s low-performing status and CIR labeling afforded her the opportunity to engage in authentic instructional leadership tasks. Rather than simply following the Director of Elementary Education’s suggestions, Rose uses the skills she acquired because of the additional opportunities for professional development combined with the feedback she receives as a part of her state-mandated visits to be an instructional leader. Similarly, Jenny uses the skills she developed in her work as an Assistant Principal at Rose’s school to conduct learning walks with her instructional leadership team, which assists her in determining her school’s instructional focus. Because of the close working relationship that Jenny and Rose shared as administrators, Jenny also depends upon Rose’s guidance and advice as she navigates her new role, “I always go to [Rose]. What are [you] working on? What have [you] seen? It's still the same cycle … what are your needs based on the walkthroughs. So, I've really carried over a lot of that.” As a result of their prior professional relationship, Rose provides Jenny with the mentoring support she needs to build her capacity and confidence as a school leader, which enables her to continue to use the skills she acquired and to engage in authentic instructional leadership practices.

*Not Just Being a One-Size-Fits-All*

Under the supervision of previous district leadership, a few principals report experiencing similar inconsistencies in the different levels of feedback and support they received. Veteran principals like Pattie, Evie, Harold, and Delilah recounted their experiences being mentored by district leaders early in their careers. These experiences helped to build their leadership capacity. In her first year as a principal, Lily describes her previous supervisor as being “just a godsend” because “all she wanted, I felt, was for me to be successful and she would’ve done anything in her power to make me successful.” However, not every principal experienced the same level of support. Aside from the mentoring she received in her first years as a principal, Pattie’s experiences with district supervisors were different than Lily’s; “I’ve been in this [role] for like seven years and I’ve probably had seven supervisors…it was…learning them and what they wanted and what they felt… other times … I was just an added thing to someone else’s job.” The inconsistencies in the types of support and feedback principals receive may cause frustration among
principals who want district leaders to support them, to provide guidance when needed, to serve as a resource, and to value their suggestions.

When asked about the role of the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education, principals had similar responses. The Elementary Director’s “role is to oversee elementary schools … but looking at not just being a one-size-fits-all,” argues Jenny. Evie agrees that the role of the director should be to “just see what’s going on at every school and support every school in whatever direction they’re in because we are all different.” Pattie and Harold see the role as more than to simply monitor schools and evaluate principal performance. Pattie concludes, “I do think that they should be overall coming up with ideas that impact the district and then means to support it … then coming actually into schools and having conversations with principals or going into classrooms,” and Harold believes that they should be problem solvers since they should have the “wisdom or experience” to garner the respect of the principals. In Lincoln, district leaders, not principals, are expected to solve problems of practice, to guide instructional practices, and to lead new initiatives. At the same time, principals believe that Directors should support them by providing individualized guidance and feedback, instead of simply offering them a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development.

However, it is the one-size-fits-all approach to professional development that allows district directors to control much of the day-to-day school operations and ensure all schools implement standardized instructional practices (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig & Rainey, 2020). According to principal perceptions, “district support” would require Directors to spend more time in schools, to visit classrooms, and to differentiate their work with principals (Acton, 2021; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Zepeda, 2015). To accomplish this, principal supervisors would need to relinquish control over day-to-day school operations and support principals through a combination of monthly principal professional development and job-embedded coaching, which is like the current model adopted by the state to support lower-performing schools (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017). Using differing methods of principal support, such as monthly meetings and job-embedded coaching, district leaders can
guide principals in building their instructional leadership capacity, which will enable them to become
authentic instructional leaders and more autonomous leaders (Chang et al., 2015).

According to participants, principals perceive district leaders as being innovative, often leading
the effective implementation of state initiatives ahead of other school districts. These perceptions,
however, are not supported by data collected during principal interviews and observations of the monthly
principal meetings. Much of the professional development principals receive in Lincoln uses a traditional
approach, focusing on school-based management tasks or on teacher-centric classroom practices (Elmore
& Burney, 1997; Rowland, 2017). Because directors believe that principals lack an understanding of
curricula and district expectations, they have identified professional development based on a deficit
model, which does not provide principals with needed leadership skills (Acton, 2021; Zepeda et al.,
2014). This year, Jim acknowledged the need for additional principal support and has set up one-on-one
virtual meetings with principals every six weeks. Although principals describe these meetings as coaching
sessions, topics discussed during these meetings are centered on school data, more specifically
benchmarking, discipline, and attendance data, as well as school-based management concerns. When
opportunities to influence principal decision-making arise, Jim has conversations with principals about
what he believes are best practices in classroom instruction (Wong et al., 2020). These meetings, although
beneficial to principals, are not considered coaching, which is focused on the development of specific
targeted skills, not an instrument for evaluation or monitoring (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Huggins et
al, 2021). According to the secondary principals interviewed, the meetings are not opportunities for
inquiry, new learning, or solving problems of practice, and the focus is not on improving principal’s
instructional leadership capacity (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Grissom &
Although some principals have engaged in reflective conversations with Jim that they feel have grown
them as instructional leaders, that was not the consensus of these one-on-one meetings according to many
secondary principals in Lincoln.
District leaders play a key role in supporting principals by building their instructional leadership capacity through professional development (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Honig & Rainey, 2012). Instructional leaders establish a vision, determine the instructional schoolwide focus, motivate teachers to engage in school improvement, and lead efforts to improve teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2005, 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008; Neumerski, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014). Even though the perception among Lincoln principals is that they serve as instructional leaders, findings indicate that most elementary principals and all secondary principals implement the suggestions provided by the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Neumerski, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016; Weisberg et al., 2009). Instructional leadership for 12 of the 14 principals interviewed stemmed from their ability to complete informal walkthrough observations and have a designated time for teacher collaboration. In Lincoln, district leaders, not principals, standardize school operations, influence the school-wide focus, and solve problems of practice using a one-size-fits-all approach to school leadership (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Huggins et al, 2021). Because district leaders overseeing elementary and secondary schools have different interpretations of school operations, there are inconsistencies in how principals are supported, and efforts to build principal capacity may prove unsuccessful (Payne, 2017). Considering the state department’s approach to support labeled schools, which is to combine traditional forms of professional development with a structure for coaching, observation, and feedback, the type of support and professional development Lincoln principals receive may not yield improvements in student outcomes as intended (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Elmore & Burney, 1997).

On the other hand, because of her school’s CIR label, Rose is offered additional support, which utilizes traditional training and coaching, to build her capacity as an instructional leader and to enable her to make decisions that can lead to improved student outcomes (Fullan, 2000; Hefferman, 2018; Steinberg, 2014; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; West et al., 2014). These support structures are established by the state department of education as a part of an effort to improve school performance. During monthly visits with a district-level supervisor and support staff from the state department of education, Rose discusses her
school-wide plan for improving student achievement, which is supported by student test data analysis and data collected during classroom observations (Augustine et al., 2009; Grissom et al., 2013; Leithwood et al., 2019; Litchfield, 1985; Neumerski, 2013). In response, district and state personnel offer guidance and specific actionable feedback (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; DeJong et al., 2017; Grissom et al., 2013; Houle, 2006; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). The coaching Rose receives ensures that she is supported in transferring knowledge gained through the professional development training provided by the state and NIET into practice (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Skills, such as collecting classroom data through learning walks, are essential to building Rose’s capacity as an instructional leader. As the only principal who is afforded such support, Rose is able to use observational and student achievement data to establish a focused approach to instruction and to develop long-range instructional plans (Augustine et al., 2009; Hallinger, 2005; Honig, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Neumerski, 2012; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Zepeda et al., 2014). Ironically, no other elementary principal is afforded the level of autonomy that is afforded to Rose. Even in the district’s top-rated schools, elementary principals practice instructional leadership by informally observing teachers to monitor curriculum implementation. These findings are inconsistent with research by Grissom et al. (2013) that suggests that lower-achieving, less effective schools often lack effective instructional leadership to improve school performance. In spite of stated principal perceptions, there is little evidence to support Lincoln’s “trailblazing” status.

**Building Leaders Aspiring to be Middle Managers**

The perception among Lincoln principals is that instructional leadership simply involves supervising professional learning community meetings, observing teachers, and ensuring that the curriculum is implemented with fidelity. However, instructional leadership, or administrative influence over school-wide teaching and learning initiatives, staffing, and curriculum implementation, requires more of school leaders (Neumerski, 2012). In Lincoln, district leaders retain control over much of the decisions regarding teaching and learning. Based on their perceptions that many principals lack the ability to be effective instructional leaders, directors have identified district-wide expectations for classroom instruction, established administrative instructional leadership practices, and directed leader professional
development. Principal supervisors reinforce the practices they believe to be effective, based on their experiences as school leaders and their personal vision for teaching and learning. Secondary Director Jim states, “I’m pretty firm in what I believe needs to be done and how it needs to be done. It's kind of a straightforward, just simple thing. That’s where I live. It's what my vision is.” Based on their own ideas of effective classroom practices, combined with their interpretation of the Superintendent’s vision, the Directors either establish expectations or use their influence and repeated contact to ensure principals comply with their suggestions. As a result, principals are relegated to more of a traditional managerial role (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Neumerski, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). This does not appear to be problematic as both secondary and elementary principals state that they trust district leaders and agree with the district vision and direction. Lily maintains that she is “good with district decision[s],” explaining that “in terms of my students, curriculum wise, I’m good. I feel that we are on the right track.” Rose agrees, “I’m okay with the district telling us, Hey, you gotta do this…I trust their opinion…” Principals’ unwavering trust in district leaders’ decision-making suggests that principals lack the confidence in their own abilities as instructional leaders to make decisions that would lead to increases in student achievement (Beausaert et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Yan, 2020). This may be caused by the overreliance on district leaders to make instructional leadership decisions and to solve problems of practice (Honig & Rainey, 2020). However, this may also be a direct result of the principals’ acceptance of their role as a middle manager.

Because principal participants trusted district leaders to make sound instructional decisions, very few of them expressed the need for increased autonomy. For example, Pattie said that she does not like the idea of increased autonomy because of the difficulty keeping abreast of educational trends, “I don’t know if I would actually like that because I actually like the ideas and the overall things coming from the district.” Harold is satisfied with the level of autonomy he is afforded because district leaders maintain, “open lines of communication, transparency, and that my voice as the principal is being heard at the district level.” Many of the principals who stated they would not want more autonomy did so for various reasons, such as the time restrictions that would prevent meaningful research, the perception of current
unlimited autonomy, or the fear of making significant decisions without district support. In fact, only four of the 14 principals interviewed wished to have the increased autonomy to choose curricula, explore new instructional initiatives, and make instructional leadership decisions. Of the principals who stated they would welcome increased autonomy, three were elementary principals. Elementary principals Mia and Sophie both expressed a need for “more flexibility within those curriculums… something that was less regimented,” to enable them to make adjustments in instruction if needed. “When we’re talking about the way that students learn and the different types of learners and instructional strategies that we could be using to meet the needs of our students, … we have less autonomy with that,” Mia explains. Even though Mia and Sophie desired more autonomy to address the needs of their students, they understood the “district standpoint” and wanted to support the district vision. Since high school principal Delilah is “not a fan of all the curriculums that were chosen,” she would consider choosing different options if available. With the exception of Delilah, Lincoln principals believed their curricular choices were limited because the state department of education requires districts to use state-approved curricula. They also feared the threat of accountability, believing that autonomous decisions may have a negative effect on their school performance rating. However, because the majority of Lincoln principals accept their role as middle managers, they are willing to follow district leaders’ decisions regarding curriculum and instruction.

Although Mia understands the “purpose behind a lot of things being structured in the way that they are,” the power to control instructional decision-making within the district lies with district directors and occurs without much principal input. Principals had differing opinions concerning district-level decision-making processes; six principals believed district leaders used data to inform their decisions, five believed a committee of district staff collaborated to arrive at a decision, and three believed that laws and mandates influenced district choices. When asked about the district decision-making process, Katherine stated, “I think it could be improved, the way we make decisions at the district level.” She feels as though sometimes district leaders only “pretend to make joint decisions… I feel like the person who is responsible kind of already has made the decision.” Each director is able to develop principal expectations based on their own experiences and ideas because of the lack of cohesive, collaborative decision-making
at the district level. This hierarchical structure allows each director the power to direct teaching and learning across the district and to ensure curriculum is being implemented consistently in every classroom. At the same time, the top-down management style eliminates innovative thinking and restricts communication to limit the influx of new information, which can eventually result in isolation and group dissension (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981).

Although they did not take part in district decision-making, three of the principals interviewed believed district leaders were open to their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions. This was especially true for Jim who has developed positive working relationships with the majority of secondary principals. Principals like Delilah, who worked with Jim as a teacher and administrator before his promotion to a district director, feel as though Jim is willing to consider her opinions, “I have been blessed… I worked with our director for years,” Delilah explains. “I talk to [him] once a month when we have our slide deck day… he is constantly in contact with all of his principals.” Elizabeth feels as though Jim “acts more as a mentor… supporting me … giving me advice or telling me steps in order for me to be a better leader.” The relationships between Jim and the secondary principals empower principals like Dan, Irma, and Stan to approach Jim with their opinions and concerns. Dan laughs:

He’ll always give his opinion… I feel as though I can have conversations with… [him]. And we can both say what we think and feel and there’s no hard feelings…whether we agree or disagree, he gives us enough autonomy to say, look, if that's the decision you want to make, fine. … he lets it known that he always has our back, which we, which I, wholeheartedly appreciate because no matter if it was his choice or not, he's going to support what the principal decides.

Even though secondary principals feel as though they can communicate with Jim, Harold feels like the district could do more to consider “the principal’s voice” when making decisions. Dan agrees, particularly when it relates to principal professional development, “I don’t know …how it relates to all principals or all campuses, because just like teachers, there’s different levels of expertise.” Although principals like Dan believe that district leaders are open to his suggestions, district leaders can do more to ensure that principals have a “voice” in district decisions.
Jim believes that a successful leader maintains a vision of what “good teaching and learning” looks like, understands curriculum, has developed credibility, trust, and “buy-in” within his or her school, and can implement new initiatives. Ironically, principals receive very little professional development to build these skills. According to secondary principals, the professional development they receive is rarely focused on leadership skills required to recognize the needs of their school campus, strengthen the school’s culture and climate, implement school improvement initiatives, or build the capacity of teachers and staff. The secondary team instead develops principals’ abilities to recognize and evaluate the teachers’ use of curriculum and to use state and district guides. Periodically, Jim and his team encourage principals to share ideas and current practices within the meetings to foster collaboration. In conversations with principals or the curriculum team, Jim learns about new programs or techniques that are being used and asks the principals to talk about it, spurring conversation:

One of the most effective things about the PD is them … being able to talk to each other… they get real comfortable with … being able to do something within their school when they know somebody else is doing it.

Jim’s practice of meeting with principals monthly to discuss school operations is beneficial, allowing him to identify these new programs or techniques. However, only a few of the topics discussed during these monthly meetings relate to instructional leadership; they instead focus more on school-based management and student discipline. With a singular focus on school-based management, curriculum, and informal classroom observations, secondary principals will not receive the professional development needed to become the strong instructional leaders the Secondary Director envisions, leaving secondary principals to remain middle managers.

**We Just Established a Group**

In addition to their structured collaboration, a small group of middle school principals and all high school principals have established communities of practice outside of the monthly principal meetings (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). High school principals collaborate frequently and present ideas to the Secondary Director for approval. “We’re trying to do our best to kind of be all on the same page in high
school,” Delilah states, “… we talk a lot… once a month we meet, but it’s also spur of the moment as well when needed.” Three of the district’s middle school principals also collaborate, but not all middle school principals are included in their group. In the middle school community of practice, principals in similar geographic locations or who have previously worked together engage in problem-solving when situations arise – both of an academic or managerial nature. Harold explains, “We do have a group text…but…it is usually us… [Stan] and I for sure… I guess we still have that middle school trust factor…It’s just… still learning [a] new person.” Trust among principals was a major factor in their willingness to build collegial relationships and collaborate outside of the district-structured setting.

Collaboration also occurred among the elementary principals both in and outside of district-structured professional development. Katherine says that in elementary principal monthly professional development “we do a lot of collaborative grouping.” She believes that this practice will allow her to better evaluate principals’ needs, “just listening to how they speak to one another, you can gauge their knowledge.” Sophie contends that elementary principals “collaborate on a regular basis, but that’s on our own. That’s not from a district level.” Findings from interviews suggest that collaboration is inconsistent among elementary principals with principals forming small groups based on geography and prior relationships. Evie explains, “Our other principal groups we’re very close. So, we support each other and kind of share… with each other.” According to Evie and Sophie, principals collaborate through daily texts, phone calls, visits to one another’s school, and over lunch in between district meetings. Principals also felt as though they needed to build a support structure to navigate the changes across the district. “When you are the principal…you are kind of on an island, an island by yourself,” Lily states, “I do rely a lot on my core principal team… we just established a group… it’s more of a support group.” Whether the principal groups collaborated about instructional leadership, school-based management, student discipline, or simply provided one another with support is unknown. However, principals worked together to make sense of the district directives, mandates, and suggestions given to them by their directors.

Although principals need practice and central office support to build their instructional leadership capacity, district-led professional development in Lincoln rarely focused on the leadership skills district
leaders claim they valued (Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Six of the 14 principal participants felt as though they could express their thoughts and concerns to district leaders, but none were involved in decision-making at the district level, particularly in developing professional development topics that fit their needs and current leadership capacity (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Even though principals trust district leaders to lead the district in the “right direction,” Lincoln’s organizational culture places principals in a more traditional school-based manager role, leaving the instructional decision-making power to principal supervisors (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016, Zepeda, 2019). Affording principals, like Mia and Sophie, the autonomy to make instructional decisions would require Katherine and Jim to relinquish control and their power within the organization (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hallett, 2003; Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Payne, 2017; Wong et al., 2020). The need to standardize administrative and instructional practices across the district by developing district expectations that align with the district vision reinforces the power directors have over administrative actions (Hallett, 2003; Lawrence, 2008; Mayer et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2020). Whether Katherine and Jim are able to progress from developing principals’ curricular knowledge to building their capacity as instructional leaders is unknown. Nevertheless, to support and protect one another as they navigate the challenges of the organizational culture, principals have developed communities of practice (Morris, 2002; Wong et al., 2020). Communities of practice, which were developed through principals’ prior working relationships, are based on trust and mutual respect (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). These types of relationships can be beneficial in improving school performance (Payne, 2017). However, if district staff continues to strictly control instructional practices to control principal actions, frustration with central office leaders may result.
Chapter 5: Discussion

For principals in Lincoln School District, access to professional development is largely limited to monthly principal meetings, an annual state department of education sponsored conference, and a district-sponsored summer instructional leadership summit. Principal perception of district-led professional development is favorable because, through their monthly meetings, they are informed of recent federal, state, and district policies, mandates, and initiatives. They also believe that the information provided assists them in managing day-to-day school operations and enables them to ensure the district vision is realized. Much of the information presented in the monthly meeting surrounds school-based management topics, such as safety, federal program compliance, and state accountability measures.

Because the district, once ranked third in state for their achievement in district performance, has witnessed a decline in student achievement scores over the past four years, district leaders have refocused their efforts on increasing student achievement. As a result, monthly principal meetings also include sessions related to curriculum and instruction. In these sessions, curriculum specialists have been tasked with ensuring principals recognize the components of the state approved, district adopted, tier one curricula and with modeling the specific instructional practices district leaders expect to see in classrooms. Through these demonstrations, principals are encouraged to implement these tools within their practice and redeliver the information to teachers. Many of the principal participants meet district leaders’ expectations, stating they use the information received in monthly meetings to complete weekly informal teacher observations, which is an essential part of the district vision.

Although principals are asked to be instructional leaders by completing observations, managing professional learning communities, and developing professional development at their school site, they rarely receive professional development to build their capacity to accomplish this (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). In fact, monthly meetings are designed to ensure principal compliance with district mandates rather than building instructional leadership skills. Even during the Instructional Leadership Summit, a conference-style professional development held in the district each summer, sessions are focused on teachers’ instructional practices and on policies governing school-based
management with few sessions directed toward building principals’ instructional leadership capacity. One such session held this past summer focused on root cause analysis, which enabled principals to identify the underlying causes of problems of practice on their school campuses; however, these types of sessions are rarely offered by the district. To reinforce compliance, the professional development principals receive is redelivered to teachers, coaches, and assistant principals. However, according to principal participants, the consistency in how professional development is delivered assists them in implementing the suggested practices at their schools. For new principals, the focus on curriculum and instruction is beneficial to strengthen their understanding of their new leadership role.

In Lincoln, principal supervisors utilized a one-size-fits-all approach to leader professional development, reinforcing a picture of principals as compliance managers. Although principals claim they trust district leaders and the district vision, they also admit to practicing a quiet rebellion in which they made authentic instructional leadership decisions that conflicted with district mandates. The attempt to standardize instructional leadership and classroom practices stems from a maladaptive response to coercive pressure. However, because each principal supervisor held different interpretations of the district vision, inconsistencies in organizational behaviors and the predominance of organizational sub-cultures resulted.

A One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Principal professional development in Lincoln is similar to more than 80% of the professional development offered to school leaders nationally, which is focused on school-based management, student data analysis, and curriculum implementation (Levin et al., 2020; Lewis & Scott, 2020). At the same time, many Lincoln principals have limited meaningful contact with other school leaders, have no exposure to professional development outside of what the state department of education offers, and are isolated in their practice (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer & Silver, 2017; Fullan, 2000; Sparks & Bruder, 1987). With the focus being compliance rather than building leader capacity, many of the principals in Lincoln are unprepared to fulfill the role of instructional leader because they lack the knowledge and skill, which is similar to patterns seen nationally (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Hallinger,
Most principals believe they serve as instructional leaders; however, they establish a school wide focus, introduce instructional strategies, and monitor instructional practices that solely align with district directives rather than addressing the needs of their school community (Acton, 2021; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Neumerski, 2013; Steinberg, 2014; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016; Weisberg et al., 2009). Instead of building leader capacity, district leaders maintain a more traditional role, ensuring principal compliance with federal, state, and district mandates, policies, and regulations (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Ford et al., 2020). In Lincoln, this also includes identifying specific instructional practices favored by district directors and the curriculum team, who conduct much of the professional development offered at the monthly meetings. Whether this focus on curriculum implementation and instructional practices rather than skills to build leader capacity is due to district leaders’ inability to direct this type of professional development is unknown (Burch, 2007; Litchfield, 1985). However, a continued focus on school operations and on micromanagement of instructional leadership may not only stunt efforts to increase student achievement but may also create frustration among school principals (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017). This overdependence on principal supervisors to make instructional leadership decisions has created conditions in which principals are serving as middle managers in which they simply monitor compliance of district directives (Honig & Rainey, 2020; Litchfield, 1985; Neumerski, 2012). However, not all Lincoln principals are averse to this overdependence on principal supervisors. Whether this is because they lack confidence in their abilities to serve as instructional leaders or they believe by following district directives they will avoid any responsibility for declines in student achievement is unknown (Beausaert et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Yan, 2020).

According to participating principals, state department of education policies and curricular mandates influence much of the professional development they receive. Observational data collected during a monthly principal meeting provides some evidence to support these beliefs. For instance, newly adopted state social studies standards, new curricula for both math and social studies, state math
curricular resources, and a state law concerning third grade literacy plans were the foci of recent principal professional development in Lincoln. Whether this concentration on curriculum and curricular resources is to increase student performance on statewide assessments or to ensure the district continues to receive state funding, coercive pressure to follow state policies and mandates appear to greatly influence principal professional development (Burch, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). However, despite outward appearances, district leaders disagree over how much influence the state has over professional development. While the Director of Elementary Education believes the state maintains a great deal of influence over school operations, the Director of Secondary Education does not. As a result, much of the professional development elementary principals receive concerns what the state labels high-quality instructional materials, or tier one curricula, and the implementation of said curriculum “with fidelity” (Adamowski et al., 2007). With the strict adherence to the curriculum and the adoption of these types of isomorphic practices, the Director of Elementary Education and curriculum team believe that schools can increase student achievement and raise school performance results to better compete with neighboring districts (Burch, 2007; Scott, 1987). Although secondary principals are afforded similar types of professional development related to the implementation of tier one curricula, principals were not given strict guidelines regarding implementation; in most cases, however, secondary principals encouraged teachers to implement the scripted lessons as intended because of the professional development they received. By strictly following state mandates, adopting new state academic initiatives, and using tier one curricular materials, district leaders appear to be proactively taking steps to improve school performance; however, these actions may only provide the appearance of innovation to secure the district’s organizational legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Nevertheless, the adoption of isomorphic practices may only promote the appearance of legitimacy and may not produce the desired result, which is school improvement, increased student performance, and instructional efficacy (Burch, 2007; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Heck, 2004; Ogawa, 1994).

The tendency of district leaders to focus on curriculum implementation, specific instructional practices, and school-based management during the monthly principal meetings creates a one-size-fits-all
approach to professional development. While the elementary curriculum team reinforces strict adherence to the curricula and the use of approved curricular materials, the secondary director and the curriculum specialists encourage principals to standardize instructional practices by promoting reading, writing, and speaking in every classroom. Whether through influence or informal mandate, district leaders establish organizational expectations for instructional practices through district professional development (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Wong et al., 2020). The Superintendent, aside from demanding that principals conduct informal teacher observations and that district leaders provide support for principals, delegates oversight of curriculum and instruction to the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education. Because each director is responsible for decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development for the schools they supervise, they can establish and communicate their expectations, which are based on their personal experiences, beliefs about effective instructional practices, and their interpretation of the district vision. Normative pressure caused by the change in district leadership over the past four years have necessitated adjustments in professional expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Scott, 1987). For district leaders, the standardization of instructional practices develops consistency and stability across schools; however, the one-size-fits-all approach may only appear to lead to continual improvement.

Quiet Rebellion

While uniformity seems to be the goal of professional development, not all principals in Lincoln consistently follow district policy, mandates, and suggestions. In specific instances, principals made decisions that conflicted with district expectations or a supervisor’s recommendations. To circumvent mandates and expectations, over 70% of the principals interviewed practiced a quiet rebellion, in which they actively disregarded, disagreed with, or delayed implementation of district directives. The decision to disregard district expectations often stemmed from teachers’ dissatisfaction with curricular decisions, or more specifically the strict adherence to tier one curricula. In other cases, principals delayed launching new initiatives if they believed district leaders were uncertain about future operations or if they believed teachers would not be able to complete additional tasks. To protect themselves from corrective feedback
and to maintain the appearance compliance, principals concealed their decisions to ignore district mandates or delay implementation of a new district initiative (Morris, 2002; Wong et al., 2020). Veteran elementary principals rebelled more often than secondary principals, who believed they had the ability to make decisions they felt benefitted teachers and students. Even though secondary principals appeared to be more compliant, they were more likely to express their dissatisfaction with district directives. For example, secondary principals disagreed with the district establishing a minimum number of informal observations to be completed weekly because they felt those numbers were unrealistic. Principal dissatisfaction with district expectations may be a result of their limited understanding of and contribution to district decision-making. Fewer than 30% of principal participants stated that they were able to communicate their needs to district leaders, that district leaders would be open to recommendations for professional development, and that professional development would be offered to address their needs. Rarely did these conversations between principals and administrators take place, and district leaders did not gather data from principals to determine their needs before developing any administrative professional development sessions.

An Interpretation of the District Vision

Principals in Lincoln have differing opinions as to how district leaders make decisions. Over 40% believe that district leaders use data to inform decisions, over 30% believe that they use a collaborative decision-making process, and over 20% believe that decisions are a result of coercive pressure. According to district directors, principals’ perceptions of district decision-making is only partially true. Although district leaders use data to inform their decisions, they often make decisions in isolation. In fact, district directors retain control of all decisions regarding school operations, and the district’s administrative team only “pretend” to make collaborative decisions. District level decision-making is often left to the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education, who make decisions based on their personal philosophy about effective teaching practices and their interpretation of the Superintendent’s vision. Directors also disagree about the influence state department of education policies have on day-to-day school operations. As such, directors determine how closely principal practices will align with state
recommendations regarding curriculum implementation and the use of suggested supplementary resources. Since the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education do not utilize a more inclusive and collaborative management style, principals do not often have opportunities to contribute to or assume control over school-based decisions (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Directors continue to retain control over decision-making and manage organizational behaviors based on their understanding of and reaction to contextual factors, conditions within the organization, and coercive and normative pressure (Heck, 2004; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995).

Because the district’s organizational structure enables the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education to oversee and control school operations, the Superintendent’s vision is often interpreted differently. Lincoln’s Superintendent, who has been in his position for four years, believes that the role of a district leader is to provide support and promotes the adoption of a strong observation and feedback cycle, which can assist principals in monitoring school operations. The Elementary Director’s interpretation of support is extremely structured. Although the goal of the district’s monthly professional development sessions is to provide principals with information related to curriculum, instruction, and school-based management, elementary principals perceive these presentations as informal mandates. Though informal, according to the Elementary Director, principals are expected to follow the mandates if they are to support the district vision. Non-compliance with the informal mandates is swiftly addressed, and elementary principals receive corrective feedback. Aside from this, elementary principals rarely receive timely actionable feedback from their director. Conversely, the Director of Secondary Education maintains a different interpretation of support, which is to persuade principals to implement specific schoolwide initiatives. Through conversation and reflective questioning, the Secondary Director uses his relationship with principals to promote “his gospel,” which is the importance of reading, writing, and speaking in every classroom (Payne, 2017). All the secondary principals interviewed valued the relationship with the Secondary Director because of his willingness to listen to their thoughts and concerns and to converse with them over pending decisions. These conversations were held regularly through virtual monthly one-on-one meetings between secondary principals and their supervisor. Called
coaching sessions, the meetings provided the Secondary Director with the opportunity to review school data and address principal concerns; instructional leadership coaching did not take place during these sessions. Because of the trust established between the secondary principals and their supervisor, they felt their decisions would be supported despite any disagreement. At the same time, the trust between principals and the director was evident in how principals accepted and implemented the information they received during monthly professional development. Although principals believed they had the autonomy to lead teaching and learning initiatives at their schools, they all implemented and followed the director’s guidance.

A Maladaptive Response to Coercive Pressure

Aside from the specific instances in which principals quietly rebelled against district directives, Lincoln principals repeatedly claimed they trusted district staff, described them as trailblazers, and, because of their leadership, considered the district to be at the forefront of new initiatives and innovative practices. However, because the majority of principals worked in isolation or in small collegial communities of practice, the information they received was controlled. At the urging of the Superintendent, district leaders hold monthly meetings, but information principals receive in these sessions is often limited. Through these professional development sessions, principal supervisors and the curriculum team provide directions, or informal mandates, to guide principals in meeting district leaders’ expectations and aligning their practices with the district vision. The extent to which these informal mandates are enforced are dependent upon the directors’ discretion. Principals consider the professional development they receive greatly influenced by the state department, or more specifically by statewide assessments, which determine their school performance ratings. Any ideas, instructional strategies, and initiatives that have not been district-approved are dismissed and discouraged.

The pressure of high-stakes accountability can create instability within a school system because the lack of success on state assessments can threaten the organization (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). With decreases in student achievement over the past four years, the continued success of the district is questionable, and the district may be faced with a reduction in legitimacy (Daly
et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). To ensure that school performance does not decline, district leaders have adopted isomorphic structures and behaviors, such as homogenous instructional practices, controlled instructional leadership behaviors, and a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development (Burch, 2007; Meyer & Rowan, 1991). With the adoptions of isomorphic practices, school operations became more tightly coupled with district leaders’ decision-making resulting in standardized procedures across the district and uniform organizational behaviors (Staw, et. al., 1981). Over time, the coercive pressure placed on administrators to increase student achievement and improve district and school performance have caused district leaders to engage in more maladaptive behaviors in response to these continual threats, which is known as threat rigidity effect (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). Although more apparent with elementary school principals than with secondary leaders in Lincoln School District, organizational behaviors have become more fixed and rigid (Staw, et. al., 1981). District leaders mandate standardized instructional practices, intentionally restricted information, and eliminated innovation; decision-making within the district is centralized to a small group of district leaders (Daly et. al., 2011; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Staw, et. al., 1981). Principals have become monitors of curriculum implementation and district approved instructional practices.

A Picture of Principals as Compliance Managers

District supervisors in Lincoln, rather than creating opportunities to build principals’ instructional leadership capacity, have become micromanagers (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). While principals, instead of guiding daily instructional practices, have become monitors, ensuring that the state approved curricula are implemented with fidelity and specific instructional practices are consistently utilized (Adamowski et al., 2007; Marks & Printy, 2003). Directors regulate administrative behaviors and beliefs by continually referencing how these decisions support the district vision and, consequently, are able to maintain their position within organization’s power structure (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hallett, 2003; Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Lawrence, 2008; Mayer et al., 2013; Payne, 2017; Wong et al., 2020). Elementary principals who do not adhere to district mandates, both formal and informal, are subject to receiving corrective feedback, which is a common form of
organizational management in school systems (Bryk et al., 1999; Hallett, 2003; Lawrence, 2008).

Conversely, secondary principals, who believe they have autonomy, do not actually have decision-making power (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hefferman, 2018). Instead, the power to make school operational decisions remains with the Director of Secondary Education, who uses his influence to persuade principals to adopt his suggestions (Adamowski et al., 2007; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Ford et al., 2020; West et al., 2014). Whether through influence or coercion, district leaders in Lincoln use professional development to ensure principals meet their expectations and adhere to all district directives (Wong et al., 2020).

The justification for hierarchical decision-making is based on the directors’ evaluation of the instructional leadership capacity of the principals they supervise. District directors believe that principals may not have the experience nor skill to be true instructional leaders. In fact, according to the Directors, only 30% of Lincoln principals have the knowledge and skill to be an instructional leader. In some instances, directors felt as though, because of a principal’s teaching experience, the administrator was not capable of identifying effective instruction nor able to deliver quality, actionable feedback. Therefore, professional development in Lincoln is based on a traditional deficit model (Zepeda et al., 2014). District staff chose to ensure instructional practices were consistent across the district by developing principals’ abilities to monitor curriculum implementation (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Rowland, 2017). Whether district leaders are unable to develop this type of professional development because of the difficulty in addressing the needs of individual principals or because they themselves have a superficial understanding of how to build leader capacity to promote student learning is not evident (Augustine et al., 2009; Honig et al., 2017). Despite their belief that principals lack the skills to be effective leaders, district staff seldom offer the type of principal professional development that creates opportunities for principals to gain leadership skills (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). In fact, district leaders have not yet considered what leadership skills principals would be encouraged to use and how this professional development would be presented (Acton, 2021).
To become effective instructional leaders, principals require practice in supervising, monitoring, and motivating teaching and learning at their schools (Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2010; Honig, 2009). Although principals routinely spend time with teachers in professional contexts and complete informal classroom observations, school administrators lack the leadership skills needed to improve student outcomes because they monitor compliance rather than respond to the needs of students and faculty (Hallinger, 2005; Houle, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2008, 2019; Litchfield, 1985). Effective instructional leaders coach teachers, provide academic feedback, and use data collected from informal observations to make improvements in instructional practices; they regularly collect, analyze, and evaluate student outcomes all to advance teaching and learning (Augustine et al., 2009; Grissom et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2005; Neumerski, 2012; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). District leaders, in an effort to standardize practices, have minimized principals’ roles and have diminished their responsibilities as school leaders (Neumerski, 2012). By not actively supporting principals and providing them with the professional development needed to strengthen their instructional leadership skills, Directors may have hindered principals’ abilities to effectively serve as school leaders because of the effect on their motivation, morale, and feelings of self-efficacy (Beausaert et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Yan, 2020). The absence of district support in building instructional leadership may become problematic considering the importance of effective instructional leadership practices on school improvement (Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Steinberg & Yang, 2020; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

In Lincoln, principals leading underperforming or declining schools, receive additional support in the form of job-embedded coaching. As the elementary principal who leads the district’s only CIR school, Rose benefits from the additional support she received provided by the state department of education (Augustine et al., 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012, 2019, 2020; Mayer et al., 2013). It is because of the additional state support that allowed Rose to deepen her professional practice, grow as an instructional leader, and make authentic instructional leadership decisions based on the needs of her school community. The tight connection between the traditional professional development and the job-embedded coaching made new learning action-based, relevant, goal oriented, and problem-centered; Rose was able
to use her new learning within the context of her school and received support to transfer the new learning successfully (Chang et al., 2015; Honig, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014). Ironically, because of her school’s CIR status, Rose was able to practice more authentic instructional leadership, which included using quantitative and qualitative data to make informed decisions about her school-wide focus. By receiving this type of job-embedded professional development, Rose became more confident in her abilities, which increases the success of school improvement efforts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Yan, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2014). Unfortunately, Lincoln does not offer all principals access to job-embedded professional development opportunities, despite its benefits (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2020).

At the Director of Elementary Education suggestion, one of the elementary principals received peer coaching support to develop her skill in completing informal walkthrough observations and providing teachers with effective feedback (Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Hargreaves, 1994). According to peer coach Sophie, the collaborative work, which allowed them to share their practices with one another, benefited not only the principal receiving the coaching support but the peer coaches as well. Although the peer coaching sessions did not focus specifically on instructional leadership practices, the sessions provided the principal with a model to meet the expectations of the elementary director and the peer coaches with new suggestions to bring back to their schools (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Huggins et al., 2021; Zepeda, 2015). The opportunity to conduct joint observations, to engage in professional dialogue with trusted colleagues, and to network created learning opportunities for both veteran and novice principals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Rowland, 2017; Zepeda, 2019). Although peer coaching was only offered to one elementary principal, these types of joint learning opportunities can be beneficial for all principals because of the companionship and networking gained through participation (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1999).

**Trust in District Leaders and Belief in the District Vision**

Despite the district’s one-size-fits-all approach to professional development, lack of professional development to build leadership skills, and district control of instructional practices, principals mostly
complied with the majority of district mandates. The reasons include that they trust district leaders, believed in the district vision, and were confident that district leaders made curricular and instructional decisions that increased student outcomes. Only 28% of principal participants desired more autonomy over curricular and instructional decisions. Secondary principals, specifically, believed they had unlimited autonomy but, at the same time, acknowledged that they followed district curricular mandates and adhered to district pacing guidelines. Principals who coveted more autonomy did so for two reasons. Either they disliked the chosen curriculum and wanted to have the freedom to choose, or they wanted more flexibility in determining schoolwide instructional practices. Another reason elementary principals followed the structures established by the Director of Elementary Education was because it absolved them of accountability. Principals believed that, if implementing the curricula with fidelity causes declines in student achievement, district leaders can be held accountable because school leaders were simply following required district directives. Principals have absolved themselves of responsibility and accountability for potential declines in student outcomes, which can be an indication of disengagement and apathy (Honig & Rainey, 2020). Eventually, this level of disengagement may negatively affect principals’ confidence in their ability to continue to serve as instructional leaders (Beusaert et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2018; Yan, 2020).

Although principals placed their trust in district leaders to make decisions that benefit students and increase student achievement, their lack of autonomy may become problematic. Because principals are unable to make decisions based on their own ideas and beliefs to achieve a specific outcome, they may experience decreases in feelings of self-efficacy and in their intrinsic motivation to lead (Federici, 2013; Ford et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A principal’s ability to establish a vision, to motivate teachers to accept ownership of a school’s success, and to build a collaborative and supportive school culture can be determining factors in the success of a school (Chang et al., 2013; Ford et al., 2020; Mitani, 2018). Instead of having the autonomy to lead their schools, principals currently serve in a more managerial capacity, relinquishing much of the decision-making power to principal supervisors (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Mayer & LeChasseur, 2013; Weiner &
Woulfin, 2016, Zepeda, 2019). However, if principals were afforded more autonomy to contribute to district decision-making, to choose curricula, or to establish schoolwide instructional practices, district leaders would no longer retain their level of power within the school system (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hallett, 2003; Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Payne, 2017; Wong et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, many principal participants valued the little professional development they received. In fact, principals felt as though they did not receive enough opportunities to attend professional development based on their needs nor did the professional development, they received build their capacity to serve as an instructional leader. Professional development in Lincoln rarely focused on the instructional leadership skills in which district leaders said they placed the most value, such as building a strong culture and climate, leading new initiatives, and building teacher capacity (Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). At the same time, principals felt that district leaders should do more to solicit their ideas about their professional development needs (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Veteran principals discussed their experience with previous district administrators who took a different approach to developing principals’ leadership skills; principal supervisors served as mentors, coached principals, and encouraged them to seek alternative solutions to problems of practice. It is because of this type of support that veteran principals consider themselves to be confident and experienced instructional leaders (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2016; Steinberg & Cox, 2017; Yan, 2020; Zepeda et al., 2014). Because of the changes in district leadership, principals no longer are afforded this level of support. However, to continue to receive some support, veteran principals have developed collegial relationships to encourage one another, to make sense of district directives, and to solve problems of practice. Principals collaborated with colleagues with whom they trusted and had a previous professional relationship. Although directors claimed that principals were encouraged to collaborate during monthly meetings, principals did not consider contrived collegiality to be collaboration (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1999).

**Organizational Sub-Culture**

Variations in principal supervisors’ interpretation of the district vision and their beliefs as to
what extent the state department of education influences school operations has created sub-cultures within
the school system. Because the Superintendent’s vision is ambiguous, lacking both clarity and
comprehensiveness, the norms, values, and expectations of each sub-culture have become more
predominant within the organization. Among elementary schools, the organizational sub-culture is one of
strict adherence to informal mandates and district directives. Principals who make decisions that are
perceived to be misaligned with the district vision are subject to immediate corrective feedback. Monthly
principal meetings are opportunities for the curriculum team to issue informal mandates rather than build
principal capacity through professional development. Conversely, secondary principals feel as though
they have unlimited autonomy to lead their schools. The Secondary Director, rather than issuing mandates
or directives, uses proximity and persuasion to influence principal decision-making. Although principals
believe they can “agree to disagree” with the director, they eventually comply with his suggestions. For
secondary principals, monthly professional development is primarily focused on how principals can meet
the Director’s expectations, which includes the curriculum specialists modeling the completion of
informal teacher observations.

Although the norms and expectations are different within each sub-culture, both elementary and
secondary principals are limited in their autonomy and in their ability to serve as authentic instructional
leaders. Because of the organizational structure, the Directors of Elementary and Secondary Education
guide district decision-making and oversee all aspects of school operations (Hallett, 2003; Honig, 2009;
Mayer et al., 2013; West et al., 2014). In addition, they determine what types of professional development
principals receive, the focus of the professional development, and what level of autonomy principals are
afforded. Since they claim that principals lack the skill needed to be instructional leaders, they utilize a
traditional, deficit-based, one-size-fits-all professional development model that focuses on curriculum
implementation, state and federal mandates, and summative data analysis (Burch, 2007; Elmore &
may also reflect district leaders’ inability to plan effective professional development that builds the
instructional leadership capacity of principals because of their own lack of knowledge and/or skill
As a result, principals are not provided opportunities to build leadership skills and are reduced to managers of district expectations. Their autonomy is limited, and they are reliant upon district directors to determine their school-wide instructional focus. The organizational structure and sub-cultures reinforce the power and control of district directors, rather than create opportunities for principals to exercise any autonomy or to lead teaching and learning at their school sites (Honig, 2009; Mayer et al., 2013; West et al., 2014).

Even though district leaders take a more traditional approach to leadership, Lincoln principals perceive them to be innovative, forward thinkers. With notable exceptions, principals claim that they trust district leaders’ decisions, which they believe benefit the district and lead to improvements in student achievement. However, the trailblazing status merely involves the appearance of innovation, rather than provides an accurate depiction because district leaders have more continuous connections with outside world (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Honig, 2009; Mayer et al., 2013; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Scott, 1987; West et al, 2014). It is the perception of innovation that enables the district to maintain its organizational behaviors and existing power structure. In fact, district leaders have adopted practices that may create challenges for principals who wish to take an active role in leading school improvement efforts (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Elementary school principals, in particular, receive corrective feedback for decisions that the Elementary Director believes do not support the district vision. The rigidity of this type of bureaucratic leadership, which supports top-down decision-making and micromanagement, can deter principals from making decisions that benefit their school community (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Payne, 2017). As of result of this rigidity, some principals quietly rebelled, a practice in which principals ignored, deferred implementation of, or disagreed with district directives. In most cases, principals disregarded district directives when they believed doing so would benefit students and did so without district knowledge because they feared reprisal (Morris, 2002; Wong et al., 2020).

Principals who district leaders believed needed additional support, such as the principals leading schools labeled underperforming by the state or schools with declining school performance scores, had opportunities to engage in job-embedded professional development. As a part of a support plan, the
Elementary Director assigned peer coaches to the underperforming principal. In this model, the principal and peer coaches worked collaboratively to share ideas and improve their practice. On the other hand, the principal leading the district’s only CIR school received support from the district and state during monthly visits. Combining traditional forms of professional development with coaching, the elementary principal believed that she improved her instructional leadership practices because of the continuity and consistency of the professional development she received. Ironically, principals leading non-labeled schools or receiving a satisfactory evaluation were not offered these types of supports. Although principals believed that monthly calls with the Secondary Director were coaching sessions, the sessions, in fact, focused primarily on managerial topics and data used to monitor school progress. Instructional leadership topics were not often discussed. Since the organizational culture influences principals’ perceptions of any job-embedded coaching or district supports that are offered, any types of job-embedded professional development offered to school principals may be considered additional help, which can be viewed as negative and potentially punitive in nature.

**Principals’ Perceptions of Professional Development**

Study findings indicate that principals appreciated the district professional development they received each month because they believed the information would assist them in leading the day-to-day operations of the school. In these meetings, the Superintendent not only updated principals on new laws, policies, and initiatives, he solicited their opinions and asked questions when needed. Principals were able to learn about the inner workings of the district and share their thoughts with him. Monthly meetings served to establish regular and open two-way communication between principals and the Superintendent concerning their needs and the district’s ability to meet their needs (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Sessions led by the curriculum specialists, in which principals learned how to monitor curriculum implementation and use specific district-approved instructional strategies, were more beneficial for new principals. Since new principals may be underprepared to serve as instructional leaders because of topical gaps in leader preparation programs, they appreciated the focus on curriculum and instruction, which assisted them in learning their new role (Acton, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022;
Villani, 2006). However, some principals questioned the applicability of the curriculum focus for all principals, believing that each school and each leader has different needs. Veteran elementary principals described these monthly sessions as the next “hot topic,” which involved whatever new program or initiative the state department of education recently promoted as being effective in improving student outcomes. Secondary principals believed that district staff could do more to solicit opinions from principals to determine what types of professional development may be needed. Although opportunities for leaders to attend district-led professional development have increased, Lincoln, like many other school systems across the U.S., did not offer authentic, job-embedded differentiated learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2020; Lewis & Scott, 2020). Because district professional development rarely provided principals with the opportunity to learn about leadership or build their instructional leadership capacity, they felt that the professional development sessions were greatly influenced by state department initiatives. Although principals described these meetings as professional development, only a few sessions presented could be considered true professional development. The lack of high-quality leader professional development in Lincoln, which focused on implementing district-adopted curriculum and school-based management, is consistent with national trends according to research studies (Adamowski et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Johnson et al., 2016; Rowland, 2017; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

Because District Directors maintained control over teaching and learning, principals functioned as middle managers rather than authentic instructional leaders. Although Lincoln principals believed they had the autonomy to serve as instructional leaders, their role was primarily to complete informal observations and provide time for teachers to collaborate in professional learning community meetings; the power to make real decisions was often limited (Adamowski et al., 2007; Hefferman, 2018). District Directors reinforced these misconceptions concerning the role of an instructional leader through professional development offered each month. In fact, elementary principals were expected to follow the informal mandates presented during their monthly sessions or were subject to corrective feedback if they failed to comply. Conversely, secondary principals, believing they had autonomy, were able to transfer
new learning into their practices if they considered it beneficial. Secondary principals who did not choose to implement suggested practices held conversations with the Secondary Director, who used his relationship with them to influence their decision-making. Some principals believed that they did not always receive enough professional development to effectively fulfill their role; however, it may be that principals did not receive the professional development needed to build their capacity as school leaders. Whether this was a result of district leaders’ inability to build principals’ instructional leader capacity, plan for individualized leader support, or identify characteristics of effective instruction is unknown (Honig et al., 2017; Neumerski, 2012; Payne, 2017).

Even though autonomy is considered to be one of the most vital conditions ensuring leader success, principals professed that they were satisfied with their level of autonomy and trusted district leaders to make decisions that would improve student outcomes (Federici, 2013; Ford et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Claiming that they agreed with many of the decisions made by district leaders, principals claimed they consistently meet district expectations and adhere to district mandates. Since the support principals receive can affect their ability to lead, some principals argued that district leaders should do more to differentiate their support instead of the current one-size-fits-all approach to professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Elementary principals wanted more feedback from their principal supervisor, believing that this role was to provide more job-embedded support. Veteran principals, who under a previous administration received such support, felt that this type of mentorship or coaching assisted them in improving their instructional leadership skills. Principals’ desire for more job-embedded support is seemingly contradictory to their trust in district leadership to control teaching and learning initiatives. Principals stated that they followed district leader directives for various reasons. However, if principals receive too much guidance from district leaders, they may not be prepared to address academic challenges if they occur (Honig & Rainey, 2020). For some, the benefit of following district mandates is that principals can avoid professional accountability. If student outcomes decline for any reason, district leaders, not principals, would be responsible since principals are simply following district directives. Whether they lacked confidence in their ability to lead, feared accountability, or were
complacent in their role, many principals stated that they were content with their roles as middle managers.

Even though principals emphatically claimed they trust principal supervisors, their trust was not absolute, and principals did not always agree with district decisions. Some principals disagreed with district directives, such as establishing a minimum number of informal observations, directing teachers to implement curricula with fidelity, or mandating the strict use of curricular materials. As a result, most Lincoln principals chose to practice a quiet rebellion in which they secretly chose to disregard district directives, postpone implementation of new district initiatives, or outright disagreed with central office staff about district expectations. This type of quiet rebellion enabled principals to meet the needs of students and teachers without being subject to corrective feedback or punitive action. By quietly rebelling, principals were able to cope with the demands of their jobs and find solutions to near impossible challenges, becoming “street level bureaucrats” (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977, p. 2). Elementary principals were more likely to quietly rebel than secondary principals, who were more likely to publicly disagree with directives.

Because they often worked in isolation, principals valued support, collaboration, feedback, sharing of resources, and mentorship (Aas & Paulson, 2019; Hargreaves, 1994; Sparks & Bruder, 1987). For example, to provide principals with additional levels of support, the Secondary Director held virtual meetings with principals every six weeks to discuss school data, discipline rates, and principal concerns. Although described as coaching sessions, the meetings were more evaluative, providing the Director a chance to review school data. Through these conversations, however, principals could communicate their concerns, express their opinions, receive feedback, and reflect on their practices, and as a result, principals found value in these one-on-one meetings (Aas & Paulson, 2019; Sparks & Bruder, 1987). Both elementary and secondary principals supported one another by developing tight-knit informal communities of practice (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Established because of previous professional relationships with trusted colleagues, the communities of practice depended on one another to make sense of district directives and to solve problems of practice.
Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Findings of the study suggest that the organizational structure of a school system may have a decided effect on how district leaders provide professional development and build principals’ leadership capacity. The Superintendent, along with district leaders, may consider developing a clear, comprehensive district vision that includes and examines the role of district leadership, the level of autonomy principals are afforded, and the types of support principals are offered. District staff may also review and evaluate the process by which district leaders make decisions and may adopt a more collaborative process to include both central office staff and school leaders if one does not exist. To ensure they can identify and address the needs of their school community, principals are afforded the autonomy to practice more authentic instructional leadership, which may include the ability to determine their schoolwide focus, suggest specific instructional strategies, and adjust classroom instruction as needed. Increasing principal autonomy may require the roles of district leaders to be redefined from decision-maker and evaluator to coach and mentor. Increased autonomy and accountability for school-level decision-making may eliminate the current practice of quiet rebellion. Principals and their district-level supervisors can engage in open communication to solve problems of practice, increase instructional efficacy, and improve student outcomes.

For districts beginning to explore the possibilities of increasing leader support, principal supervisors in charge of building principal capacity and developing professional development may survey principals to better determine their professional development needs. Instead of focusing on curriculum implementation and school-based management, district leaders may plan traditional professional development that enables principals to practice authentic instructional leadership. For example, principals may need additional assistance in leading school improvement initiatives, building teacher capacity to deliver effective instruction using scripted curricula, and using data-informed practices that improve student performance. Rather than learning about the latest state-sponsored initiative, principal meetings become opportunities for principals to collaborate and learn about leading instruction on their school campuses. Following traditional professional learning, principals participate in job-embedded coaching,
which provides targeted support to transfer their new learning into practice within the context of their school setting. As a result, principal learning is relevant, action-based, problem-centered, and differentiated (Honig, 2012; Zepeda et al., 2014). Job-embedded coaching sessions with district leaders become opportunities to collaborate with principals, provide them with feedback, conduct observations, and solve problems of practice. This type of support reduces principal isolation, and district leaders share in the responsibility for school improvement. All principals receive some form of support, which is no longer limited to underperforming or declining schools. If district leaders lack the knowledge and skill to provide this type of professional learning and support, they may contemplate building their own instructional leadership capacity alongside their principal reports. Through a cohesive model connecting traditional professional development and job-embedded coaching utilizing a teaching and learning approach, principals can transfer new learning into practice.

There are alternatives for school systems that find this support model, a combination of traditional professional development and job-embedded coaching, challenging to implement. Districts with limited time or human resources may consider identifying veteran principals to lead peer coaching or peer observation efforts. District leaders may encourage principals to collaborate, either through building informal communities of practice or more formal professional learning communities, to create a culture of collaboration across the district. Principals who are able to build their instructional leadership skills, become more confident in their abilities to serve as instructional leaders and gain agency over their learning. If principals have more autonomy and gain agency over their learning needs, they will be more likely to accept the responsibility and accountability for student outcomes.

**Implications for Theory**

Researchers using New Institutionalism as the theoretical framework for future studies examining school systems may consider how the lack of a cohesive central organizational structure impacts the organization’s sub-units. Without a centralized focus, sub-units may become more predominant in establishing distinctive organizational cultures, creating inconsistencies and conflicting behaviors within the organization. These inconsistencies in organizational behavior may become more pronounced if the
leaders adopt a bureaucratic leadership model, creating situations in which leaders are free to interpret the organizational vision and may adopt maladaptive responses to organizational pressures.

Organizational responses to coercive pressure - both external pressure from outside forces and internal pressure from within the organization to maintain legitimacy - may result in positive increases in student performance. The threat of increased accountability can create a sense of urgency for teachers and administrators to successfully implement school improvement initiatives that yield positive gains in student achievement. While there is research to explain how educators react to continuous external coercive pressure, more research may be needed to investigate how leaders react to internal coercive pressure. While principals of low-performing schools face increased external coercive pressure from the state to improve student achievement through labeling and mandated state support, principals of higher-achieving schools may confront internal coercive pressure to continually demonstrate improvements in school performance. Similarly, district leaders may also face internal coercive pressure, particularly when there is an overall decline in student achievement. For district leaders, continual internal coercive pressures, which may be perceived as threats to the organization’s legitimacy, can cause leaders to limit communication, standardize school operations, and become more fixed and rigid; these maladaptive responses to internal coercive pressures result in threat rigidity.

Implications for Future Research

Based on these findings, further research may be needed to investigate what effect an organizational structure and/or culture has on leader professional development, district decision-making, and the level of autonomy principals are afforded. Researchers may consider how principal supervisors plan professional development, how their experiences and beliefs impact their planning, and how they account for individual differences among principals. Studies may investigate how successful leaders navigate instructional leadership when teachers are mandated to use state-adopted scripted curricula. More research may also be needed to understand how and to what extent coercive and normative pressures impact district-provided professional development and how school leaders and district
administrators respond to internal coercive pressure. Since this is a case study, future research may also include how principals perceive professional development in other school systems.
References


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Appendix A

Principal Interview Protocol
Day 1 Interview
Instructional Leadership
1. Tell me about yourself as a school leader - what would you say are your greatest strengths?
2. Take me through a “day in the life” of your current principal job.
3. In terms of curriculum and instruction, what would you want your teachers to focus on this year?
4. How do you ensure that that occurs?
5. Approximately how much time each day do you spend ensuring that it does occur?

School Autonomy
1. What types of leader autonomy are you afforded - for example in terms of staffing, budgeting, teacher professional development, or professional learning communities?
2. Describe a time when you were able to use autonomy to make instructional leadership decisions.
3. If you were given increased autonomy to make school-level decisions, what would you say would be your greatest challenge?
4. What would you do with increased autonomy? Why?

Organizational Culture and Structure
1. Describe the district directives that directly impact your instructional leadership practices.
2. How would you describe the role of director of elementary ed / secondary education or supervisor of elementary education/ middle school education/ secondary education in this school system?
3. How would you describe the district’s decision-making process?
4. Who was / were the district’s principal (s) of the year? What makes them “exceptional”?
5. How are principals chosen to serve on committees?
6. Tell me about the longest serving principal in the district. Why do you think this person has remained in his/her role?

Day 2 Interview
Professional Development
1. As a first-year principal, what were your greatest strengths? Greatest challenges?
2. How do principal supervisors grow you, as a leader, in instructional leadership practices?
3. What types of professional development does your district offer to school leaders?
4. What is the focus of this professional development? How are the topics decided?
5. In your opinion, to what extent do state directives or mandates influence the topics presented during professional development?
6. Are you aware of what other district’s offer in terms of principal professional development? If yes, do you see any similarities between what is offered here vs. other districts?
7. How often would you say the district provides principals with professional development that is based on emerging trends - like Compass and Common Core in 2012?
8. How is the information gained in these meetings implemented in your practices?
9. How often do you receive feedback from your principal supervisor?
10. Describe an experience you’ve had in which your current (or former) supervisor interacted with you in a one-on-one setting concerning your instructional leadership practices.
11. What was the outcome of that interaction? Why?
12. Any instance in which you received feedback from a supervisor that you have not implemented?

Principal Supervisor Interview Protocol
Day 1 Interview
Instructional Leadership
1. Take me through a “day in the life” of a principal supervisor.
2. As a district leader and principal supervisor, what are your greatest strengths? Greatest challenges?
3. What are the district’s expectations for principals regarding instructional leadership practices?
4. In terms of curriculum and instruction, what would you want your schools to focus on this year? How do you ensure that that occurs?
5. Based on your observations and conversations with the principals you supervise, how would you rate their current instructional leadership practices? Why?
6. How do you, as a principal supervisor, support principals in their instructional leadership practices?
7. How do district leaders build leader capacity?

Organizational Culture and Structure
1. Describe the district directives for a principal's instructional leadership practices.
2. How would you describe the role of district leaders in this school system?
3. How would you describe the district’s decision-making process?
4. Describe the district’s principal(s) of the year? What makes them “exceptional”?
5. How are principals chosen to serve on committees?
6. Tell me about the longest serving principal in the district. Why do you think this person has remained in their role?
7. I would ask you to think about your most successful principal report - tell me about him/her.
8. Consider the principal, in your opinion, who you consider faces considerable challenges in leadership - tell me about him/her.

Day 2 Interview
Professional Development
1. How important is principal professional development to you as a principal supervisor? Why?
2. What types of professional development does the district offer to school leaders?
3. What is the focus? How are the topics determined?
4. What do you consider when planning for principal professional development?
5. How do state mandates affect how you plan for professional development?
6. Are you aware of what other district’s offer in terms of professional development? If so, does this influence principal professional development offered here?
7. How do you keep up with the emerging trends in education? How often do you deliver this information to principals?
8. How is the information gained in these meetings implemented in the schools that you supervise?
9. Describe an interaction you’ve had with a school principal in a one-on-one setting concerning his or her instructional leadership practices. What was the expected outcome of that interaction? What was the actual outcome of that interaction?
Vita

The author was born in Houma, Louisiana. She obtained her bachelor’s degree in speech communication from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in 1997. After working in the public sector for several years, she earned her K-12 teaching certification in 2003 from the University of New Orleans and eventually completed her master’s degree in curriculum and instruction in 2005. She returned to the university in 2018 to complete her Ph.D. in educational administration. She currently works as a central office supervisor in the K-12 public school system.