THE WOMAN IN THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE: A REFLECTIVE APPROACH TO USING SELF-STUDY TO UNDERSTAND THE SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF TWO URBAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIPS

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DEDICATION

It Takes a Village to Raise a Champion

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother and my village—my family—that raised me.

My grandmother, Delores Benice Brown, provided me with a profound sense of love, comfort, adoration, and faith. Through her eyes, she motivated me to be my best and in times of despair and darkness she lent me her words and loaned me her spirit of calm and peace. She was interested in every little thing I did, from rearranging my bedroom to trying new recipes. She wanted to know. I thank her for giving me an unwavering commitment to being true and honest in my intentions and actions. Her life and selfless ways nurtured me to be wise and kind. Her perseverance and strength, even in the face of death, taught me to believe I have the strength and courage to move mountains. She continues to inspire me and helps me grow in my patience when I want to give up and not believe that something is possible and will happen. Through her spiritual guidance she proves me wrong every time I doubt the power of my ancestry and those that watch over me. Grandma, I thank you for investing your wisdom, your faith, and all of your goodness in me. From the time I was born, you manifested my greatness. Your legacy is the foundation for my leadership in action.

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girl you knew. There is no price tag to describe the impact you had on my academic confidence as a young girl.

To my uncles, aunts, and cousins: Thank you for all of the great times we’ve had over the years. You’ve read to me, fed me, celebrated successes with me, called, texted or hugged me when I needed it, and driven miles and miles to spend time with me. You’ve all been my cheer squad, whether near or far, and you’ve harnessed a collective energy of absolute family magic that has kept me motivated and able to see the finish line, even when it was distant. For it is all of your cheers, memories, good times, and contributions to my life’s journey that make me who I am. The sum of it all makes me whole. To all of you I am eternally grateful and thankful for all of the memories we have shared and had. Thank you for being my village and my respite of joy when I needed it.

To my nieces and nephews: You give me hope of a bright future for our children. It is for your faces and potential that I work tirelessly to teach and guide children in my own work. I love you and have enjoyed watching you grow over the years.

I am from a family built on an immeasurable amount of strength, courage, wisdom, and perseverance. I am from great and mighty stock. It is from this strength that I lead, and I hope to inspire and encourage others. I draw strength from my village in order to strengthen others.

My village has made me who I am. My village raised a champion.
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heart to. I am living proof of what, with faith, is possible. I am grateful for the infinite wisdom and guidance you both continued to provide to me over the years. Thank you for showing me that I am filled with strength, courage, wisdom, possibility, and promise.
ABSTRACT

THE WOMAN IN THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE: A REFLECTIVE APPROACH TO USING SELF-STUDY TO UNDERSTAND THE SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF TWO URBAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIPS

Sundai M. Riggins

Frances O’Connell Rust

This study is focused on exploring decision-making and leadership in two urban principalships. It includes reflections from a former principalship in Baltimore City and the shares experiences that influence my leadership and decision-making in my present principalship in a District of Columbia Public School. The goal of this study is to acquire a greater understanding of decision-making and leadership actions within an urban school principalship in order to inform current practice. Bryk’s (2010) postulation that leadership as the driver of change is an essential component of school success has piqued my interest in reflecting on and understanding my leadership practices. Study of reflections on my leadership as a tool for further developing skill and practice could be a valuable resource for other school leaders within the field.
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“There are no neat recipes for reforming the institution of schooling. Fundamental change simply doesn’t happen that way” (Newman, 1988, p. 288).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In December 2010, I was offered my first principalship as head of a brand new charter school. At the time, I was in my second year as an assistant principal of a K–8 school in the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) system and my school was exploring a new curriculum model: Expeditionary Learning (EL). I was the lead on gathering information and engaging teachers in the buy-in process. Through my work of learning about the EL model, I met the Mid-Atlantic Regional Director and worked with her to plan for the implementation of the model at my school. This led to her recommendation that I interview for the principalship of a new charter school in Baltimore. I accepted the position, my first principalship, with excitement, hope, and a vision for building an amazing school in Baltimore City. I was excited by the prospect of building a school from the ground up. Setting high expectations, developing strong connections with my teachers and students, and engaging parents in authentic ways were essential parts of the EL model and were in total alignment with my beliefs about the characteristics of an ideal school culture. It was an offer I couldn’t refuse.

Prior to my first principalship, I knew all too well the effects of an entrenched school culture. In my assistant principalship, every day seemed to be filled with union complaints and grievances, red tape that prevented the removal of low-performing staff for years upon years, and an overall “administrators versus teachers” mentality that fostered drama and miscommunication. The opportunity to move away from this culture
and build my own school in which I could influence and change some of the cultural dysfunctions I had experienced as an assistant principal made me feel elated.

I left DCPS with a vision for building a positive school culture and a successful school. I did not have a tangible plan in hand but I knew that I would hold myself and my staff to high standard, we would engage students in hands-on learning experiences, and we would have regular celebrations of students’ progress and learning. I did not have a clear formula for success other than the vision I hoped to articulate to my new teachers, staff, students, and school community. I felt confident about my ability to lead and to support my teachers with the implementation of the EL model because the practices resonated with my own beliefs about how educational experiences should impact students and schools.

At the end of my first year as principal, my school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in its first year, with Maryland State Assessment (MSA) proficiency rates at 71% in reading and 75% in mathematics. We had 100% special education compliance and a waitlist with 700 students to start the following school year. As the school grew, we continued to have a hefty waitlist for admission and we outperformed Baltimore City Public Schools every year. In our first year, we developed student-led parent conferences. During my last year as a principal, we were able to increase our student-led parent conference attendance from 50% in the fall to 90% in the spring by coupling the conference days with fun and engaging activities for students and parents.

Although I had many accolades and achievements that enabled me to consider myself a successful principal, leading an urban school was extremely challenging for a variety of reasons. Establishing the vision and mission of a new school filled with people
from all over the city was a challenge in itself. Recruiting students, preparing and selecting curriculum, determining staffing without a student body, and onboarding an entire school of staff members was no easy feat. However, because I was able to hand pick and hire my own staff, I did not have as difficult a time as another first-time principal might have had. I was able to recruit some experienced teachers who had not been satisfied with the state of traditional public schools within Baltimore City. As well, I chose some new teachers who had some experience with urban school students.

During our first three years, we grew by adding 330 students every year and we moved three times before landing in a permanent school building—changes resulted from the decisions made by the charter management organization (CMO), which always seemed to make decisions that impacted the school without taking time to talk with school administration and staff. This last-minute decision-making on the part of the CMO created a stressful environment for me and for my staff. I recall the stress of moving into our permanent building and within two days preparing for 990 students. We received occupancy for the building on a Friday night and school opened on Monday.

I attempted to shield and protect my staff from the pressures and stress of the changes and challenges but it was nearly impossible. Over the years, the stress took a toll on me as well as on my staff. When I look back I think we made it because we all believed in each other and we had an opportunity to be connected through our instructional model and our core beliefs. These helped us through some great challenges.

During my last year as a principal at the school, there was a pending decision to be made by the CMO regarding a charter bill that would cut funding to the school and would separate it from its collective bargaining agreement. That seemed to be the last
straw for many of my staff members. Through every school challenge, I had been able to assure my staff that we would weather the storm and we would make it. This time, I was uncertain and could not assure them. Teachers did not want to be separated from the collective bargaining agreement under the District. Suddenly, the school we had spent years building felt financially unstable and shaky. As a result, several of the teachers began to seek other teaching positions. I took this instability as a sign that it was time for me to leave and move on to another endeavor.

I had watched the stress of change and uncertainty transform my school’s culture into one of worry and great uncertainty about the future. I saw our positive school culture take a turn for the worse and it was difficult for me to lead through these changes. I decided to resign from my position because I felt that holding the school together was beyond my control. The hope I felt in myself to lead through those obstacles and changes was lost, and I felt it would be best for me to take on a new challenge in a different setting with a more stable school management structure.

In moving on I knew I would not have a problem finding a new principalship. Based on my success and urban school experiences, I felt that I could be of service to a new school community and would also get an opportunity to learn something new. As a leader with a reputation for success, I was being watched by headhunters and district leaders from other school systems. I was recruited by a charter school in DC, and I turned that position down based on some of the issues I uncovered through the interview process. I had also been recruited by DCPS during the 2014–15 school year but I was not ready to leave my school then. However, when DCPS called a second time, I decided to go through the interview process.
During the interview process I told the chancellor I wanted to lead an elementary school and I wanted to work in Ward 7 or 8. Wards 7 and 8 in the District have served the most economically disadvantaged communities, and students in these wards traditionally underperform when compared to students in other wards. Throughout the interview process, I marveled at the success of my first principalship and wondered how we had been able to accomplish so much in four years. How did we do it? Was my vision of high expectations, hands-on experiences, and celebrating students’ learning enough? Were they the reasons or was there something else? I thought about the benefits of building a school from the ground up and wondered if I could enact change and make the same types of gains in an already existing, historically low-performing elementary school.

I decided that I wanted a school that would allow me the opportunity to see if my leadership skills, vision, and focus on building a positive school culture would yield results in a traditional low-performing public elementary school. I believe that strong leadership can significantly impact a school’s performance trajectory, but I had only been a principal in one setting. I did not have the opportunity to lead as a principal in a traditional public school. I wanted to come back to the district I started in and see, with a few years of experience under my belt, if my leadership skills were transferrable to a new setting. I was confident that I could take on a challenging traditional public school and meet success just as I had in my first principalship. On July 1, 2015, I became the new principal of Hendley Elementary School, located in Ward 8 of Southeast Washington, DC. The school serves 481 students in grades PS–5. It is the second-largest elementary school in Ward 8 and is the second lowest performing elementary school in the district. The proficiency levels on the 2015 PARCC assessment were 2% in reading and 2% in
mathematics. My new leadership appointment has pushed my thinking regarding what led to successful school changes in my prior school setting. I am interested in learning from my past in order to inform my decision-making and leadership actions within my current school setting.

Background of My Study: First Principalship

When I think back on my leadership experiences, I think about my decision-making and how I handled serious challenges. I sometimes think about my past experiences and consider what I could or would have done differently and how my decisions impacted how I approach my current challenges. In reflecting on my current practice and challenges in my new school environment, I wish I had more action plans and reflections that detailed how I approached my leadership challenges. By being so immersed in the hustle and bustle of the day-to-day of the principalship, I did not reflect on my experiences in a way that allowed for me to slow down and really think about my practice for my own personal learning and growth.

My experiences as a principal over a five-and-a-half–year period is the focus of this study; I faced numerous challenges as a founding principal of an urban K–8 charter school as we grew and expanded, as we developed a curriculum, as the number of teachers expanded exponentially to accommodate the student population, as we built school structures and systems, and as we engaged families and community stakeholders. In 2013, I became a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania and my newfound role as a practitioner in the field and a student pushed my thinking about theory, practice, and my own leadership. However, my reflection over the duration of my doctoral studies
has been based on assigned tasks and readings based on course descriptions and predetermined coursework. Coursework is limited in its capacity to fully support my self-reflection because it is limited in scope and bounded by the confines of a course of study. In many instances, being a principal in the school setting requires quick thinking and decision-making that rarely allow for much self-reflection.

The day-to-day grind of the principalship is so fast-paced that opportunities to stop and reflect are few; however, without awareness of the need to reflect it is easy to continue to operate day-to-day without knowing what is working and what is not. Leitch and Day (2000) noted that the term “reflective practitioner” originated from Schon’s (1983) work and the idea of “reflective thinking” in two forms: “reflection-on-action” and “reflection-in-action” (p. 180). In my daily work, I am constantly in a state of reflection-in-action as it is characterized as “thinking which accompanies doing,” and I am always in a mindset of reflection and thinking about my practice in the moment. My reflection on my experiences as a principal is an example of “reflection-on-action,” which is the process of “thoughtful consideration and retrospective analysis of performance in order to gain knowledge from experience” (Leitch & Day, 2000, p. 180).

The use of my past leadership setting will provide me with an opportunity to retrospectively reflect on my leadership as a means of influencing my current practice. Osterman (1990) asserted that reflective practice is beneficial to professional practice:

Reflective practice enhances professional practice in several ways. It leads to greater self-awareness, to the development of new knowledge about professional practice, and to a broader understanding of the problems which confront practitioners. Because it enhances professional growth, and thereby responds to the needs of individual practitioners, it also influences the environment of the workplace in ways that support organizational change and effectiveness. (p.134)
My in-depth study of this topic as a way to self-reflect and examine my practice allows me to learn for my own personal and professional growth as well as contribute to the research on self-study and auto-ethnography relative to leadership (specifically, the principalship).

**Research Questions**

School leadership is a lonely terrain. There are urban school principals across the nation learning as they lead without thought partners and opportunities to research and study their actions. This isolation in combination with high-stakes accountability makes for a revolving door of leadership for urban school leaders of our nation’s neediest schools.

I have spent the past 18 years in schools as a teacher, teacher leader, assistant principal, and now a principal. I firmly believe that being a well-rounded educator is a combination of what you learn in theory, what you can learn in practice, and a personal commitment to respond to unexpected situations with a sense of understanding and a commitment to learn. I believe that the urban principalship is one of the most difficult leadership positions to undertake in today’s schools because there is no one guaranteed formula for success. As a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program for Educational Leadership, I have read a plethora of research and this has greatly influenced and pushed my thinking regarding my practice. The opportunity to commiserate and collaborate with colleagues is a truly valuable part of a cohort learning experience. I am fortunate that I have been immersed in this on-the-ground learning and that I have been able to merge it into my day-to-day work as a
school leader. However, many school leaders today do not have such an opportunity to be engaged within a learning community.

My own reflection process of learning, thinking, and relearning has motivated my interest in studying my practice. I have a unique span of experiences as an educator in both private and public school settings that has provided me with a kaleidoscopic lens through which I can look at my different experiences as either a teacher or school leader. I am able to make connections, comparisons, and contrasts that affirm my beliefs about the complexity of urban school leadership.

This study drawing on the reflective methods implicit in self-study and auto-ethnography will shape and inform my thinking and practice as an experienced principal entering a low-performing school in a high-poverty and high-crime ward within the DCPS. It will provide me with the opportunity to simultaneously learn and reflect on my past and current practice and so could work to guide me in my efforts to lead change within my school. In this study I will explore the following questions:

1. How can a principal reflecting on her past practice use her experience to inform and influence her leadership actions and decision-making in a new context?
   a. How has my past experience shaped my understanding of my current school?
   b. How does my past experience influence my current decision-making and leadership practice as a principal?

2. What does my experience in two different urban schools teach me about what it takes to lead a school?
   a. What are the realities and stakeholder influences that contribute to the successes and challenges of a principalship?
How does the use of a framework for successful schools help me to further develop my understanding of my leadership?

Reflecting on artifacts within my own school setting resonates deeply with me as a way to use real-time and relevant resources to directly and strategically influence my professional practice.

I anticipate that this connection between unique school contexts, stakeholder influences, and my personal leadership will help inform my practice. My reflections will also help me consider how to improve my practice individually while simultaneously moving the needle of progress within my school.

My quest is to understand the “why” of my leadership actions and the influences that may impact my thinking and decision-making. A desire to make sense of what I have learned and am still processing regarding leadership informs my desire to pursue an understanding of the research questions above.

I know that in shaping this study using self-study and auto-ethnographic methods, the artifacts available for research are likely to emerge from my personal records. Thus, I plan to use thematic analysis to examine a variety of data sources such as a formal evaluation feedback, emails, newsletters, and district-level correspondence to answer my research question. As well, I may turn to colleagues with whom I have worked to help me interpret these data. The results of this inquiry will surely be helpful to me in my current work but may also enable other new principals and researchers to better understand the complex work of the principalship in hard-to-staff urban schools serving children in poverty.
Rationale and Significance

When I think about my actions as a leader of a brand new school, I consider the things I believe I can replicate within my new school setting. I wonder about my context and whether my leadership efforts and actions in my first principalship are transferrable to my current principalship. With all that I have learned about my school over the past year, I have a greater and more comprehensive understanding of my school’s context and the magnitude of some of the challenges ahead in enacting change. In reflections on my own leadership, I am acutely aware of the differences between my first principalship in Baltimore in comparison to my current position in DC. However, I believe that significant change for the better is possible. Although there are vast differences, I am curious about the ways in which these differences may shape how I enact change within my current setting.

My commitment to studying my leadership in two settings calls to mind Bryk’s (2010) study of two schools in Chicago. In comparing the successes and challenges of the two schools in relation to his framework, Bryk (2010) asserted that there are sometimes facts, sometimes brutal facts. Not all school communities start out in the same place and confront the same problems. Unless we recognize this, unless we understand more deeply the dynamics of school stagnation, especially in our most neglected communities, we seem bound to repeat the failures of the past. (p. 30)

Although I am an experienced principal, it is important that I use this opportunity to learn as I lead. I need to be able to recognize and examine my leadership practice as I lead in order to process my school’s unique context. An in-depth study of my own practice as a leader and within my context will assist me in further understanding my school’s progress and how best to lead to maximize and support continued improvement.
Bryk’s (2010) idea that “we must seek to do more than just tell the facts. We must seek to understand, and we must also ask why” (p. 30) has inspired my inquiry. To simply think that because I was a principal in an urban district with similar student demographics and challenges guarantees that my leadership actions and vision will be transferrable would be a gross underestimation of my new school setting and its unique context. I need to understand in what ways my leadership was working in the previous school and, using these lessons, determine what I can draw on and what I must develop for this new setting.

Bryk’s (2010) stance on this notion of school improvement resonates with me and the work that I do as a principal of a low-performing elementary school within the District of Columbia, and the ways in which I must seek understanding of my school, its climate and culture, and myself as I lead and make efforts to forward progress. I feel a sense of urgency to seek a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind the historic underperformance of my school. I want to determine what will support the change process. As well, I desire to seek a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of what lies beneath the surface. This study will provide me with the opportunity to reflect on my practice in my current context.

According to PARCC performance there is a far too large majority of students in my school as well as in urban districts across the nation who are deemed not on track to be “college and career ready.” I seek to understand this phenomenon of underperformance so that I can enact change in my own setting as well as reflect and consider how my actions, though tailored to my school, yet could be helpful to other leaders in other school communities. I also feel a responsibility to monitor my progress.
and to use data within my school to provide me with small bits of hope that sometimes, in the midst of chaos and the change management process, may go unseen. This was a practice that I did not utilize in my first principalship.

Small signs of progress are important to school leaders because they provide inspiration as well as something like a GPS to guide us toward further improvement. As a leader, I must be reflective in order to see beyond the challenges and the chaos so as to order my steps and envision how to move the school forward in the future. As Forrest (2008) suggested, reflection moves practice “beyond the standard ‘bag of tricks’ of our professional education, by developing the confidence to challenge core beliefs and assumptions. In this way we can empower ourselves with a greater understanding and knowledge of the skills required” (p. 230). Osterman (1990) held that a greater sense of one’s awareness “creates opportunities for continued professional growth” and that “professionals are often unaware of the many ways in which their own behavior is self-defeating. At the same time, they are often unaware of the many ways in which their actions are highly effective” (p. 137).

I seek to explore my own actions as a leader and how I influence change in order to enhance and improve my own practice to ultimately improve my school for my students. My heightened sense of self-awareness will help me continue to fine-tune my professional practice while simultaneously enacting change toward improving my school. I am acutely aware of my students’ “school dependency” and how important my school’s educational experience is in teaching them “whatever they need to know to be successful” (Delpit, 2012, p. 72). The implications and consequences of not enacting change at a pace that impacts student outcomes could be grave for my students. Their
education is their ticket to a brighter future. As Deal and Patterson (1999) pointed out, “in education, the risk of not doing things right is even higher. A poor quality product or service can be recycled, but a young person who does not learn or who drops out is hard to salvage—a lost treasure” (p. 11). The importance of enacting change within my school environment is paramount, and the lives of students depend on my actions as a leader toward the improvement of student outcomes.

In addition to my responsibility to my school community, I have an equal responsibility toward my colleagues in this profession. An intimate and transparent look at my principalship within my school setting could provide insights to aspiring urban school leaders who endeavor to take on challenging schools. It can also provide a source of affirmation for current school leaders who may have shared similar experiences.

Although there is a plethora of research in theory that provides useful practices, systems, and processes for urban school leaders to consider in understanding how to lead their schools, more intimate sources of guidance and inspiration that reveal day-to-day challenges, reflections on practice, and ways a leader would enact change are scarce in actual practice. Lortie (2009) suggested that an in depth study of the principalship could be beneficial to the field. He asserted that “what we learn from and about principals can deepen our understanding, and in turn, can provide a more reliable base for efforts to improve the schools” (p. 3). Anderson, Herr, and Nilhen (2007) affirmed the importance of the self-study “in action research for deep reflection that leads to individual professional growth” (Location No. 818).

The use of Bryk’s (2010) five essentials for school improvement: a coherent instructional guidance system, professional capacity, strong parent–community–school
ties, a student-centered learning climate, and leadership that drives change, will provide me with a research-based framework in which to organize the data from my first principalship in order to identify themes and patterns connected to my current leadership practice. My goal in this study is to merge theory and practice within my own context and to provide an authentic voice that may relate to and resonate with urban school leaders or leaders at the helms of underperforming schools.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of research on urban public schooling. It begins with a discussion of what Comer (1999) described as a “major educational crisis” (p. 327) and what Nieto (2003), almost 20 years later, described as “a complex and conflicted picture of extraordinary opportunities for some and restricted access for others” (p. 94). The chapter continues with research that suggests the possibilities for change drawing largely from the 15-year study by Bryk et al. (2010) regarding school reform in the Chicago Public Schools. The chapter concludes with a discussion of leadership as a driver of change in high poverty urban settings.

The Struggle of Urban Schools

In 1999, Comer wrote, “only now are we beginning to acknowledge the major educational crisis in urban schools” (p. 327). Almost 20 years later, the crisis persists: the extremely low performance statistics of many urban schools should provide every educator and every citizen in America with a sense of urgency about figuring out ways to reform and improve our nation’s schools. According to Schmoker (2006), 38% of all fourth-graders in the United States—almost 4 out of 10—read at the “below basic” level on the highly regarded National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In addition, by the eighth grade, 43% of poor children are reading at the “below basic” level. For mathematics the numbers are even higher: 61% for poor African-American students and 53% for poor Latino students (Schmoker, 2006, p. 20). Furthermore, a mere 7% of poor students will graduate from college and about half of those who enter college only finish their first year (Schmoker, 2006, p. 20). This is important, for, as Tough (2016)
asserted, “unless children from poor families get a college degree, their economic mobility is severely restricted: Young people who grow up in families in the lowest income quintile (with household income below about $21,500) and don’t obtain a B.A. now have just a one in two chance of escaping that bottom economic bracket as adults” (p. 2).

Aldridge and Goldman (2002) found that children “concentrated” in urban schools bear the brunt of the impact of underfunded school environments (p. 21), and that these significantly contribute to their underperformance. They claim that “nearly five decades after the Brown versus Board of Education decision, too many minority children still do not have equal opportunity to succeed in school and their future careers” (Aldridge & Goldman, 2002, p. 21). Urban school improvement continues to remain a challenge for many districts and the students impacted are the most vulnerable and underserved (Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz, & Slate, 2000, p. 339).

The lack of equity and access in urban schools contributes to the widening of an already vast achievement gap for poor African-American and Latino students (Comer, 1999, p. 327). Ladson-Billings (2009) noted that “poor educational statistics for African-American students correlate with some harsh social and economic realities. Nearly one out of two African American children is poor” (p. 2). In addition, Ladson-Billings asserted that, without a quality education, the life trajectory outcomes for African-American students are dismal. She wrote:

African American children are five times as likely as white children to be dependent on welfare and to become pregnant as teens; they are four times as likely to live with neither parent, three times as likely to live in a female-headed household, and twice as likely to live in substandard housing. More young
African-American men are under the control of the criminal justice system than in college. (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 2)

The stakes are high for African-American children in such adverse circumstances; for them, “these poor economic and social conditions have traditionally prompted African-Americans to look to education, in the form of the integrated public school, as the most likely escape route to the American Dream” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 2). Sadly, public schools have yet to demonstrate a sustained effort to provide quality education for African-Americans. Despite modest gains in standardized test scores, the performance of African-Americans in public schools, even those from relatively high-income stable families, remains behind that of whites from similar homes. (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 4)

Equity in today’s urban schools is an ongoing yet growing issue as many urban schools are heavily concentrated in high-needs, poverty stricken neighborhoods, underqualified teachers are recruited to serve in the most challenging schools, and staff and leadership attrition does not allow for significant student achievement or school culture and climate progress. Ladson-Billings (2009) noted:

Any number of poor students of color find themselves in a classroom with teachers who are unqualified or underqualified to teach. More striking is that some of these children find themselves in classrooms where there is no regularly assigned teacher. Instead, the students spend entire school years with a series of substitute teachers who have no responsibility for supporting their academic success. (p. 165)

Nieto (2003) described schools in impoverished neighborhoods as dilapidated, segregated, and increasingly staffed by inexperienced teachers who know little about their students – these are the schools of our nation’s most vulnerable children, children who also know too well the meaning of disrupted families, homelessness, violence, poor health and nutrition, and other social ills brought on by poverty and hopelessness. (p. 5)

The students who need the most support are being victimized by a system that supports their underachievement as the norm. Howard (2006) wrote:
It is no mere coincidence that the children of certain racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic groups - those who have for centuries been marginalized by the force of Western White domination - are the same students who are now failing or underachieving at disproportionate rates in our nation's schools. The race-based achievement gap in public education today is the demographic embodiment of our history of White social, political, and economic dominance. (p. 118)

The achievement gap continues to contribute to students becoming statistics and victims of their circumstances (Brookover, Schweitzer, Schneider, Beady, Flood, & Wisenbaker, 1978, pp. 301–318). Many underperforming schools act as holding spaces in which students are expected to meet expectations rather than exceed them. This undermines the critical roles schools can play in supporting students’ academic and social-emotional growth and well-being.

**School Dependency and the Importance of Good Teachers**

Comer (1999) argued that “low-income and marginalized children are more school dependent for their development and academic learning than children who come from families where parents are well prepared to be the first and continuing supplementary teachers” (p. 341–342). The issue of school dependency highlights the vast difference between the learning needs of students living in poverty when compared with others in more affluent school communities.

As Delpit (2012) noted:

While children from more privileged backgrounds can manage to perform well in school and on high-stakes tests in spite of poor teachers, children who are not a part of the mainstream are dependent upon schools to teach them whatever they need to know to be successful. (p. 72)
School dependency of students emphasizes the critical role that urban schools play in shaping students' life trajectories. Jackson and McDermott (2012) defined school dependency as follows:

By school-dependent, we mean students who, through no fault of their own, rely heavily on school personnel to ensure that they have the advantages they need to reach their potential, including an environment that acknowledges their merit and the richness of their experiences. School dependent students are those whose parents are working two or three low-wage jobs and have neither the energy nor time to help their children with homework. School-dependent students are those whose immigrant parents do not understand the U.S. school system and who themselves have little formal education. School-dependent students are those who suffer from the ongoing racism that unfairly burdens them with the baggage of identity threats and the fear of confirming negative stereotypes. (p. 48)

School dependency is largely a challenge that urban schools face and it is a major factor contributing to the complexity of the resource and management issues of urban schools.

As well, it highlights a dire need for effective solutions and supports that will lead to school improvement. Nieto (2003) found:

Poor urban children have every right to expect more from a public school system that for many generations has proudly proclaimed itself to be “the great equalizer.” For many students today, however, this is a hollow promise, because raising standards, the means by which most schools are articulating the mantra that “all students can learn,” by itself is ineffective unless all students have an equal opportunity to do so. (p. 5)

The issue of school dependency has yielded many challenges with few solutions towards closing the achievement gap. School dependency among students is a major factor that presents barriers to school improvement. As Jackson and McDermott (2012) wrote:

To date, solutions to address the myriad ways in which certain students are school-dependent and are made to feel school-dependent have proven elusive. Even among those who profess to care about the many U.S. students who do not reach their potential, the impulse is to run from the problem, claiming that the contributing factors are too broad to be handled by school personnel, or to throw
up their hands in defeat, claiming that students and their families are to blame. (p. 49)

Currently there is a dearth of long-term strategies in play for breaking down barriers for urban schools with high concentrations of school dependent students. Jackson and McDermott (2012) have found that “there are no shortcuts around the impediments urban schools face and their effect on students and teachers” (p. 81).

Teachers and school staff members’ roles as educators extend way beyond the realm of teaching and learning. Nieto (2013) wrote that educators need different words to speak about what we do. Standards. Rubrics. Benchmarks. Ninth grader. Important words, yes. But… These words do not tell the complete stories of our kids; they do not tell the complete stories of what we do. We change lives forever. (p. 118)

For children in poverty, good—really good—teaching is essential:

For children of poverty, good teachers and powerful instruction are imperative. While it is certainly true that inequity, family issues, poverty, crime, and so forth all affect poor children’s learning opportunities…the quality of teaching has six to ten times as much impact on achievement as all other factors combined. (Delpit, 2012, p. 73)

Ladson-Billings (2008) noted that to place great emphasis on what is done with students rather than on the way we think about students is a great misstep in how we approach educating students of color (p. 163). We are mistaken, she wrote, in “believing that successful teaching for poor students of color is primarily about “what to do” (Ladson-Billings, 2008, p. 163). She argues that the way that teachers imagine their students is largely influential in whether practices will be grounded in oppression or in more liberating school experiences):

Teachers think about their students. But how they think about their students is a central concern of successful teaching. I regularly see prospective teachers who approach teaching with romantic notions about students. They believe that the
goodwill and energy they bring to the classroom will be rewarded by enthusiastic, appreciative students, who will comply with their requests and return the love they purport to give their students. Unfortunately, real life rarely matches that ideal. Poor students of color, like all children, live complex lives that challenge teachers’ best intentions. Whether teachers think of their students as needy and deficient or capable and resilient can spell the difference between pedagogy grounded in compensatory perspectives and those grounded in critical and liberatory ones. (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 165).

Friere (2000) asserted that “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (p. 47). For some students, today’s urban schools serve as the only equalizer that could possibly change their life trajectories and impact their academic, social, and emotional growth, away from the cycles of poverty and oppression and toward enlightenment in a hopeful future.

**Changing the Narrative About Urban Schools**

There is a familiar litany that most people seem to understand regarding factors that contribute to the failure and challenges within urban schools. Nieto (2003) described it thus:

Most of us have been trained to think of drooping our, or of failing to learn to read, or of poor learning in general, as simply personal problems cause by the shortcomings of individual students, or as indications of a particular family’s poor habits, laziness, or lack of interest in education. It was a great awakening for me to recognize something that I had in some ways always sensed: These problems do not develop out of the blue, but are at least partly a result of the social, political, and economic context in which schools are rooted. (p. 19)

Poverty in itself is a socio-economic context in which many urban schools fit and, within this context, the pockets of poverty in urban cities have been shown to largely contribute to the challenges and underperformance of many urban students living within them. As
Ladson-Billings (2009) argued, urban students face many challenges that significantly impact their lives outside of the school’s walls:

According to the Children’s Defense Fund, life outside of school is often precarious for city kids. Every twenty seconds a child is arrested. Every twenty-two seconds a baby is born to an unmarried mother. Every thirty-five seconds a baby is born to a mother who is not a high school graduate. Every thirty-six seconds a baby is born without health insurance. Every minute a baby is born to a teen mother. Every two minutes a baby is born at low birth weight. Every four minutes a child is arrested for drug abuse. Every eight minutes a child is arrested for violent crimes. (p. 230)

According to Dyson (2009),

in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, only one in twelve adults has a college degree, most children are reared in single-parent families, and four in ten working age adults, many of whom are disabled, have no jobs. Nearly every major American city has several neighborhoods that are desperately poor and severely segregated. (pp. 245–246)

According to Jackson and McDermott (2012),

nearly one-quarter of all children ages 0–17 live in poverty, and these rates are three times higher for African-American and Hispanic Children than for white children. Forty percent of children living in chronic poverty show “deficiencies in at least two areas of functioning (such as language and emotional responsiveness) at age 3.” (p. 48)

The challenges that these children face outside of school are difficult and often far beyond the scope of what they should be exposed to and what they can handle at such a young age:

for many urban youths, life is hard. Their life narratives include intimate experiences with homelessness, violence, racism, inequality, poverty, and crime. They worry about child labor, abuse, and recruitment into street gangs. They are saddled with thorny concerns and mired in experiences that should have no part in their young lives. (Jackson & McDermott, 2012, pp. 50–51)

The effects of these challenges and stressors can have long-term repercussions. Jackson and McDermott (2012) noted:
Those of us who have devoted our lives to public education in the United States’ most challenged communities are acutely aware of the realities of students’ lives outside of school, the resources they have been denied inside school, and the fury that can erupt after years of being treated as expendable, unworthy, and nothing more than a problem. (p. 48)

Although many educators, policy-makers, and others in the education field have good intentions toward urban school improvement, the success stories are isolated and not in the majority. Tough (2016) wrote:

Educators across the country are intimately familiar with the struggles of children experiencing adversity, as are social workers, mentors, pediatricians, and parents. If you work with kids who are growing up in poverty or other adverse circumstances, you know that they can be difficult for teachers and other professionals to reach, hard to motivate, hard to calm down, hard to connect with. Many educators have been able to overcome these barriers (with some of their students, at least). But I’ve spoken with hundreds more in recent years who feel burned out by, even desperate over, the frustrations of their work. (p. 3)

Too many urban schools are failing and good intentions are simply not enough. Coates (2015) noted, “It does not matter that the ‘intentions’ of individual educators were noble. Forget about intentions. What any institution, or its agents, ‘intend’ for you is secondary” (p. 33). The idea that failure, although not intended, is the reality for many schools should be a motivator for more questions and for greater urgency around better understanding the crisis at hand and the nation’s responsibility toward the improvement of urban schools. As Nieto (2003) pointed out:

If schools can no longer serve the children who most need an excellent and equitable public education, how can we claim that education is the best way to alleviate poverty and despair? And what does it mean for our democracy if our public schools fail? Given the current climate in education, I have become convinced that we need to forge a more generous vision of the role of public schools, and we need to do so now. (p. 20)

The challenge of school improvement requires a level of urgency and a focus on considering school dependency, poverty, and sustainable long-term efforts toward better
supporting our most challenging schools. Although “no one directly proclaimed that schools were designed to sanctify failure and destruction” (Coates, 2015, p. 33), by failing to act with a level of urgency towards school improvement for our most needy students,

our education system will continue to drive a permanent wedge between the haves and have-nots. Such a system is destined to implode—and the nation will implode with it. It is in our collective self-interest, then, to acknowledge this situation and modify our actions accordingly. (Jackson & McDermott, 2012, p. 49)

**Schools and Social Change**

Schools function as environments in which students formulate their identity, explore newfound interests, and mold them for their futures beyond the classroom. Staiger (2006) argued that schools are institutions that are significantly influential in contributing to student development. She noted:

> Schools are sites where adolescents undergo a formative period of their identity formation and socialization. The institution lays the foundations—or a scholar of social reproduction say, lays the tracks—for their future social and professional lives. Schools are also sites where the state, through such means as curriculum design, obligatory attendance, testing and issuing credentials, exerts a direct influence on young people and their parents. (Staiger, 2006, p. 6)

The influential nature of schools provides an opportunity for schools to make a significantly positive impact on its students. The difficulty for many urban schools lies in creating and sustaining efforts to improve in ways that move them to become places in which teachers and staff advocate for the academic, social, and emotional well-being of their students.

Staiger (2006) found that schools can serve as communities in which social justice advocacy can occur. She described the power of schools as places that work
to provide equal access to education for everyone. . . . Schools are a prime instrument for democracy and social progress. They are often described as great “social equalizers” and are one of the few institutions with the potential to bring people from different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds into intimate and sustained contact with each other although since the mid-1980s a trend toward segregation has returned (Staiger, 2006, pp. 6–7)

Access to quality education in low-income urban communities is still a persistently perplexing issue that there is no panacea to eradicate.

From legislative to curricular changes, we as a nation continue to be perplexed by our lowest-performing schools and how to develop sustainable efforts for their improvement. Over the past two decades, many efforts have been made to figure out how to improve schools through increased accountability and high-stakes testing; however, we still have not come within reach of closing the achievement gap for low performing urban schools. In *The Death and Life of the American School System*, Diane Ravitch (2010) described her perspectives on school reform and the ebb and flow of the legislation, policies, and mandates that have greatly contributed to the public school landscape and the current state of today’s schools. Ravitch (2010) asserted:

> We as a society cannot extricate ourselves from fads and nostrums unless we carefully look at how we got entangled in them. We will continue to chase rainbows unless we recognize that they are rainbows and there is no pot of gold at the end of them. We certainly cannot address our problems unless we are willing to examine the evidence about proposed solutions, without fear, favor, or preconceptions. (p. 13)

A better approach to figuring out how to improve schools must be taken through conscious efforts to understand schools given their unique characteristics. As Ravitch (2010) highlighted, there is no “pot of gold.” Solutions must come from a place of authenticity and truth. In her analysis of the impact of NCLB, Ravitch found that low-performing schools have not been turned around by provisions in federal and state laws:
To date, there is no substantial body of evidence that demonstrates that low performing schools can be turned around by any of the remedies prescribed in the law. Converting a “failing” school to a charter school or handing it over to private management offers no certainty that the school will be transformed into a successful school. Numerous districts have hired “turnaround specialists” but most of their efforts have been unavailing. In 2008, the federal government’s education research division issued a report with four recommendations for “turning around chronically low-performing schools,” but the report acknowledged that every one of its recommendations had “low” evidence to support it. (p. 105)

In the NCLB era, schools went through steps of reform that mandated strict practices and policies to follow that did not show improvement in overall school performance and student outcomes. Changing schools from public to charter and relinquishing governing authority to outside and private entities has not yielded results.

Drawing on studies of reform mandates based on NCLB and designed for low-performing schools, Ravitch (2010) claimed that these efforts “have very rarely helped schools improve student achievement enough to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) or exit restructuring” (p. 105). Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) claimed that urban schools have been bombarded by accountability measures that make educators and the public believe that the schools are doing a poor job and should learn about leadership from business practices (p. 5). Noddings (2007) strongly asserted that the current interest in schools is motivated by their being a lucrative market for entrepreneurs and business owners: “We need to not impugn the motives of today’s reformers to acknowledge that many entrepreneur types see schooling as a huge, relatively untapped market” (p. 19).

**Charter Schools**

In the efforts to develop solutions toward school improvement, additional options for public education have emerged. Boggs (2009) noted:
Instead of rethinking the purposes and methods of education in a postindustrial society, school boards and administrators have come up with all sorts of palliatives. Magnet schools, charter schools, and vouchers have been created, skimming off the students most likely to succeed in the existing system. (p. 238)

In many areas where there are a number of low-performing schools, charter schools have popped up and “become beacons of hope, demonstrating the enormous potential to improve student achievement” (Fryer, 2012, 7). As “incubators of innovation” (Fryer, 2012, 3), charter schools are painted as saviors of education. Fryer (2012) described five characteristics: (a) focus on human capital, (b) use of student data to drive instruction, (c) provision of high-dosage tutoring, (d) extended time on task, and (e) establishing a culture of high expectations. According to Fryer (2012), these “innovative” action steps are critical to operating a successful school, and, though often described in research as solid best practices, these characteristics are seen by Fryer and others as innovative and unique to charter environments. Not mentioned in this research is the fact that these same characteristics can be applied to many high-performing public schools.

In a variety of important ways beyond funding, many urban charter schools are different from most public schools. Although many charter schools are required to have lotteries to attract a diverse student population, they are often, according to Fryer (2012), “exempt from most other statutory requirements of traditional public schools, including mandates around spending, human capital management, parental involvement in the educational process, curriculum and instructional practices, and even governance and management structures” (p. 6). As well, he added that “the public can hold charters accountable for student outcomes in ways that we cannot hold traditional public schools”
(Fryer, 2012, p. 6). Clinchy (2007) asserted that the privatization and selectivity of some schools leads to traditional schools becoming “schools for only—or at least primarily—those poor and minority children” (p. 75).

This idea of “accountability” has been interpreted in a number of charter school contexts in a highly authoritarian approach that focuses on student behavior as explicitly connected to student achievement. One of the more popular charter schools models is described as the “no excuses” model, which Goodman (2013) described as “the proposition that students’ academic success, always the primary goal, is dependent on erecting a highly rule-ordered and regulated environment” (p. 89). While many studies of the model state that the efforts of this school model type breeds and yields successful outcomes, the origin of this model is not necessarily rooted in best practices that meet the lifelong skill-building and long-term needs of urban students.

Scott (2009) claimed that the prevalence of this and similar models reflects “a long history of wealthy, mostly White philanthropists funding and shaping the education of African-Americans and other communities of color in the United States—sometimes in ways that opened their access to education and often in ways that restricted it” (p. 110). Golann (2015) argued that while many studies have been conducted regarding the success of charter schools, there is a dearth of more ethnographic studies of the students and teachers within these schools and how the no excuses model impacts their daily school experiences. Golann (2015) argued that this model for low-income students presents a stark contrast to those practices deemed appropriate for middle-class children with the result that “the meticulous practices adopted . . . to ensure academic achievement have
the paradoxical effect of producing worker-learners—students who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority—rather than lifelong learners” (p. 108).

In addition to creating a playground for those with non-educational backgrounds to enter the education field and implement business-like practices in school settings, the transition of the public school market into one that includes charter schools has exacerbated the concentration of poor struggling students in traditional school settings leaving the issue of school reform very much in the forefront of the thinking of policy-makers and educational researchers.

**How School Change Works**

There is a plethora of educational research that supports theories for improving schools, and there are many examples of low-performing schools that, drawing on these theoretical approaches, have made significant gains toward improving student outcomes (Elmore, 2003; Fullan, 1996; Joyce, 1986; Schmoker, 2006). Over a 15-year period, Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, and Easton (2010) studied schools in Chicago to understand improvements in low-performing schools and concluded with “five essential supports for school improvement”: a coherent instructional guidance system, professional capacity, strong parent–community–school ties, a student-centered learning climate, and leadership that drives change (pp. 24–25). (See Figure 2.1)
Professional Capacity

Professional capacity is described as “the quality of the faculty, the professional development that supports their learning, and the faculty’s capacity to work together to improve instruction” and “a school’s ability to recruit and retain capable staff, the efficacy of performance feedback and professional development, and the social resources within a staff to work together to solve local problems” (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 24).

Darling-Hammond (2010) claimed that investing in teacher support is critical to improving student outcomes. She noted, “To improve education through the use of standards and assessments, it is critically important to invest not only in well-designed assessments, but also in teacher expertise. . . .” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 73). Nieto (2003) held that teachers are the most important deciding factor in improving outcomes for students (p. 19). She asserted,

Teachers are not mere sponges, absorbing the dominant ideologies and expectations floating around in the atmosphere. They are also active agents whose words
and deeds, for better or worse, change lives and mold futures. Teachers can and do exert a great deal of power and influence in the lives of their students. (Nieto, 2003, p. 19)

The capacity of staff to work collaboratively toward school improvement is a critical component of the framework.

**Strong Parent–Community–School Ties**

Bernhardt (2009) asserted that partnerships with school stakeholders “assists schools in understanding the purposes of, approaches to, and planning for educational partnerships with business and community groups, parents, other educational professionals, and students” (p. 22). Authentic connections to parents, families, and community stakeholders are a resource that is frequently untapped within schools (Bryk et al., 2010). Bryk et al. (2010) noted that the “disconnect between local school professionals and the parents and community that a school is intended to serve is a persistent concern in many urban contexts” (p. 24). The strength or weakness of these ties can contribute to varying levels of students’ connections to the purpose and value of school.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

A student-centered learning environment is characterized as one that provides students with the opportunity to “think of themselves as learners” within a “safe and orderly environment—the most basic prerequisite for learning” (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 25). Bernhardt (2009) asserted that a student-centered climate “emphasizes the prevention of problems—such a student failure” and “builds systems that support students in seeing themselves as able to learn” (p. 22). Berger, Rugen, and Woodfin (2014) noted that developing students’ growth mindset about their ability to perform in school is critical to
their success and claim that there is a strong connection between “student perseverance, grit, and self-discipline” and “academic success” (p. 6). They wrote, “If students don’t care, they are not going to work hard” (Berger et al., p. 6).

**Instructional Guidance**

Instructional Guidance is described as systems that describe the “what and how of instruction” (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 24), as well as the tasks students complete, the assessments made, and the instructional routines within a school. Saphier, Haley-Specia, and Gower (2008) noted that “a good curriculum provides the intellectual superstructure from which teachers take guidelines for the direction and content of their lessons” (p. 355). DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) emphasized the importance of student assessment as a “powerful catalyst for improved learning on the part of both the students and the adults within a school” (p. 21). In addition, assessments are used as a means of “identify[ing] students who need additional support and inform[ing] teacher practice” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. 21). City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Tietel (2009) asserted:

> There are only three ways to improve student learning at scale. The first is to increase the level of knowledge and skill that the teacher brings to the instructional process. The second is to increase the level and complexity of the content that students are asked to learn. And the third is to change the role of the student in the instructional process. That’s it. If you are not doing one of these three things, you are not improving instruction and learning. Everything else is instrumental. That is, everything that’s not in the instructional core can only affect student learning and performance by somehow influencing what goes on inside the core. (p. 24)

Instructional guidance is at the center of positively impacting student learning within a school.
Although Bryk’s et al.’s (2010) work clearly highlighted five key criteria for success in improving schools, the study acknowledged that schools are “complex organizations consisting of multiple interacting subsystems” and that “personal and social considerations that mix deeply in the day-to-day workings of a school” (pp. 25–26). Furthermore, a key insight from the study affirms several other educational researchers’ perspectives on this issue and builds a case for why school improvement is increasingly complex and challenging to change in practice, although easily defined and outlined in theory (Elmore, 2003; Glickman, 1993; Joyce, 1986; Noddings, 2007; Reardon, 2013). Bryk et al. (2010) found that a key barrier to school improvement is the expectation that schools can solve all their problems:

On balance, schools are principally about teaching and learning, not solving all of the social problems of a community. However, when palpable personal and social needs walk through doors every day, school staff can’t be expected to ignore those needs. Our evidence suggests that when the proportion of these needs remains high and pressing, the capacity of a school staff to sustain attention to developing the five essential supports falls by the wayside. A few schools managed to succeed under these circumstances but most did not. In sum, a nettlesome problem came into focus on improving student learning to truly disadvantaged communities where social capital is scarce and human needs sometimes overwhelming. These schools face a “three-strike” problem. Not only are the schools highly stressed organizations, but they exist in challenged communities and confront an extraordinary density of human needs every day. (p. 29)

The variability and uniqueness of each individual school community contributes to its success or stagnation with regard to school improvement and reform efforts.

More than 30 years ago, West (1985) claimed that there are few success stories for schools “that are saturated with underprivileged students”: “While some observers have noted the existence of a few urban schools that have achieved success in teaching
basic skills, these schools are unusual” (p. 453). His analysis still holds. Noddings (2007) wrote:

The problems experienced by many minority children are not confined to schooling. Children who live in sub-standard housing, have no health insurance, live with an overworked single parent, have a parent in prison, and may be periodically homeless or in state custody can hardly be expected to do well in school. (p. 17)

Glickman (1993) found that schools serving children of poverty are in great peril and that “there are increasing numbers of ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-cared for children, whose constant condition in life is grim and hopeless poverty,” and that a lack of ownership of these issues from federal, local, and state governments has “led to the increase in poverty among children” (p. 4). Reardon (2013) claimed that it is “unrealistic to think that school-based strategies alone will eliminate today’s stark disparities in academic success” and affirmed the complexity of school reform efforts (p. 14).

As Bryk et al. (2010) studied schools, they “became haunted by the question, ‘Why?’ What made reform so much more difficult to advance in some school communities?” (p. 28). There are no easy, quick answers. Rather, as Bryk et al. wrote, “unless we understand more deeply the dynamics of school stagnation, especially in our most neglected communities, we seem bound to repeat the failures of the past” (p. 30). The inconsistency in the “why” of the difference in the success for some schools and the struggle of others places attention on the art of leadership as an element directly connected to urban school improvement and reform.
Leadership as a Driver for Change

Kotter (2011) argued that “good leaders motivate people in a variety of ways. First, they always articulate the organization’s vision in a manner that stresses the values of the audience they are addressing. This makes the work important to those individuals” (p. 49). Bryk et al. (2010) claimed that “leadership drives change” (p. 26), and situated it as the critical element in the five organizational supports that they describe as essential for school improvement (see Figure 2.1). For Bryk et al., school leaders are at the heart of school improvement because they are responsible for “influencing local activity around core instructional programs, supplemental academic and social supports, and the hiring and development of staff. They establish strategic priorities for using resources and buffer externalities that might distract from coherent reform” (p. 25).

Struggle and Progress: Can Leadership “Fix” Schools?

Bernheardt (2009) noted that it is important to establish an environment “that encourages everyone to contribute to making the school have a cumulative, purposeful effect on all student learning” (p. 22), but leadership is ultimately the catalyst for action and the inspirer of change. Clark, Lotto, and McCarthy (1980), Bryk et al. (2010), and others have asserted that leadership is critical to a school’s success. Clark et al. (1980) affirmed that “leaders are important because they influence the behavior of subordinates and other school participants. They initiate programs, set policy, and obtain material and fiscal resources. They are frequently the motivation and support for school improvement” (p. 468). McEwan (2003) noted:

Researchers have long been fascinated with the differences between effective and ineffective schools. The possibility of fixing broken schools or improving
mediocre one by manipulating key variables in the school environment is a tantalizing one for educational reformers. And while each researcher has generated a slightly different set of descriptors that characterize effective or excellent schools, one variable always emerges as critically important: the leadership abilities of the building principal. (p. 2)

The success of a school’s overall improvement lies within the leadership of the school principal (McEwan, 2003). However, although there are many researchers that highlight the complexity of urban school leadership and assert that leadership is essential to school improvement, there is a dearth of research that illustrates the “how” of school leadership in real-time practice.

As Bolman and Deal (2013) asserted:

> Though leadership is universally understood as a cure all for all organizational ills, it is also widely misunderstood. Many views of leadership fail to recognize its relational and contextual nature and its distinction from power and position. Shallow ideas about leadership mislead managers. A multi-frame view provides a more comprehensive map of a complex and wide terrain. (p. 369)

In addition, there is no roadmap or timetable for the wide variety of challenges and complex problems a leader will face during his or her school leadership tenure. Like many who write about leadership, Bolman and Deal (2013) affirmed that “all good leaders must have the right stuff—qualities like vision, strength, and commitment. The other holds that good leadership is situational; what works in one setting will not work in another “(p. 347). However, they and many researchers, such as Elmore (2003), Schmoker (2006), and Frontier and Rickabaugh (2014), have emphasized the dearth in the literature on how to improve schools.

Elmore (2003) asserted that the findings from A Nation at Risk were “clearer on diagnosis than on prescription,” and that “while the report is quite critical of the performance of schools in general, it is quite vague in its diagnosis of what has produced
this problem” (p. 25). Both Elmore (2003) and Schmoker (2006) argued that little research clarifies those actions that correspond to true educational leadership in schools and the leadership actions of those that are successful in leading schools. Bolman and Deal (2013) held that “effective leadership research tells us something about what leaders are like, but not much about what they do. A laundry list of leadership traits may be of some help in selecting leaders, but it provides limited guidance for how to lead” (p. 347). Frontier and Rickabaugh (2014) pointed out that educational leadership is complex and in many cases does not reflect real actionable and well-thought-out solutions. “Education,” they claimed, “is littered with well-intended transactional solutions to problems that, in reality, require transformational changes in practice,” and that “lever changes that were implemented resulted in neither improved organizational capacity nor improved student learning” (Rickabaugh, 2014).

Bryk et al. (2010) and Frontier and Rickabaugh (2014) claimed that leadership makes the difference in the organization’s success. Frontier and Rickabaugh (2014) asserted that “leadership practices associated with change include the specific things that leaders do to help organization balance the need or appropriate levels of challenge, so they can move beyond their current state, while supporting the development of the new knowledge and skills required for success” (p. 12). How leaders lead is an important part of the equation and the formula for understanding urban school reform (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Glickman, 1993; Knowles, 2003). According to Deal and Peterson (1999) “effective school leaders are always alert to the deeper issues . . . they read between the lines to decipher complex cultural codes and struggle to figure out what’s really going on . . . and ponder over whether and how to try to shape or reshape existing realities” (p. 85).
School leaders are constantly in a state of assessing issues, problem-solving, and devising plans and solutions (Buchen, 2004; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Knowles, 2003).

**The Principal as Leader: Driver of Success?**

Lortie (2009) asserted that studying the principalship is a vantage point from which to learn about improving schools. He wrote, “What we learn from and about principals can deepen our understanding of how American schools and school districts function; that understanding, in turn, can provide a more reliable base for efforts to improve the schools” (p. 3). In addition to insights related to school reform, Lortie (2009) positioned the principalship as the “focal point in the life of the school” because principals are at the heart of engagement with various stakeholders to include “teachers, students, parents, and central officials” (p. 3).

Knowles (2003) highlighted the challenges of public school leadership as “tremendous and complex,” and acknowledged that “school leaders [must] learn to reinvent their schools, many of them must also reinvent themselves” (p. 40). Joyce (1986) found that reflection is the key to fixing the “health of the schools,” and asserted that “we have to build a way that leading teachers and administrators can study the developing edge of research and learn to use it” (p. 15).

Because leadership requires change and evolution, leaders must learn how to buffer and weather the storm of change and be adaptable and flexible (Knowles, 2003). Buchen (2004) conjured the image of the principal as a chameleon to describe the myriad roles and responsibilities a principal has on his or her plate. Knowles (2003) wrote that this complexity accounts for the
gaps in research that leave principals who are intent on becoming instructional leaders on their own to a great extent. Some strategies they deploy may have roots in research, but general principals must rely on intuition, common sense, and their own experience. In essence there is not nearly as much firm empirical ground on which to gain purchase as the amount of writing on school leadership might suggest. (p. 42)

Buchen (2004) suggested that the principalship itself is not the issue; rather, it is the “viability of the principalship” that makes the idea of principal growth and expansion of knowledge a serious challenge: “the work of principals grows in complexity, and demands multiplicity” (p. 81). The demands principals face in simultaneously leading schools and constantly learning are complex and taxing.

Balancing the urgent and important is an essential challenge that principals face in leading today’s urban schools. Lortie (2009) described the unpredictable and constantly changing nature of the principal’s role in schools as

serv[ing] as backup for teachers who need assistance in maintaining control and who refer individual students for final decisions. There are also occasions when the principal acts as the immediate supervisor of students, such as in the lunchroom or halls and play areas, which may not be supervised by teachers…principal work is marked by such unpredictable urgencies. (p. 123)

In facing challenges, one should consider researching best practices to pursue solutions as a research-based way to address some of the problems leaders face.

However, Knowles (2003) suggested that processing such research-based knowledge in theory does not easily translate to effective practice. He pointed out that

even if a principal has time to read and do research the principal still faces the massive challenge of figuring out how and where these ideas apply in the daily life of the schoolhouse. Ironically, new ideas, even in the hands of clever and energetic principals, do not have good landing pads in schools. (Knowles, 2003, pp. 42–43)
George, Sims, McClean, and Mayer (2011) affirmed that over the course of five decades of research, there is no one definition or prototype of a successful leader (p. 163). They posited that “leadership has many voices. You need to be who you are, not try to emulate somebody else” (George et al., p. 163). They defined leadership as an evolving practice of self-reflection and self-awareness. George et al. asserted that “leadership requires a commitment to developing yourself” (p. 165). In their studies of leadership, they noted:

We believe that we understand why more than 1,000 studies have not produced a profile of an ideal leader. Analyzing 3,000 pages of transcripts, our team was startled to see that these people did not identify any universal characteristics, traits, skills, or styles that led to their success. Rather, their leadership emerged from life stories. Consciously and subconsciously, they were constantly testing themselves through real-world experiences and reframing their life stories to understand who they were at their core. In doing so, they discovered the purpose of their leadership and learned that being authentic made them more effective. (George et al., 2011, p. 164)

George et al. (2011) highlighted that leaders are “self-taught” and should “not expect the company to hand [them] a development plan. [They] need to take responsibility for developing [themselves]” (p. 165). Thus self-reflection and refinement of practice supports leadership development, although identifying a set of finite characteristics of a successful leader is still a work in progress.

The principal’s ability to enact change within an environment is not an indicator of how successful he or she will be in leading school reform (Elmore, 2003). Additionally, while there are many identified characteristics of successful leadership in schools, there is no clear formula of principal characteristics, attributes, or traits that will lead to success. There is research to support both the success factors and the obstacles embedded in school leadership (Bryk et. al, 2010; Elmore, 2003; Frontier & Rickabaugh,
Jackson and McDermott (2012) described the challenge as one simple mission:

How do we support principals to become pathfinder principals—principals who amass a team capable of cutting through negative and destructive forces; who place affirmations, inspiration, and mediation as the centerpiece of their belief and operating systems; and who use their strengths as architects, soul friends, muses, and ministers to cultivate the environment that enables their schools to flourish. (p. 9)

The more important question is: How do we accomplish this? There is no secret recipe to success, which leaves us all just as perplexed about how to improve and reform struggling urban schools, through examining the principalship, as we were decades ago (McLaughlin & Hyle, 2001); however, examining the principalship in two high-poverty settings, as I intend to do in this study, may help discern some important understandings about the ways in which theory and practice meet to influence the work of school improvement.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Through my design of this study, I am taking on the role of researcher and learner (Osterman, 1990). In my pursuit of developing a better understanding of my past and current leadership practices as a means of informing my daily work as a school leader, I have decided to use the methods of self-study and auto-ethnography to explore my research questions.

LaBoskey (2004) defined self-study as a methodology characterized by five criteria: it is (a) self-initiated and focused, (b) aimed at improving practice, (c) collaboratively interactive in challenging assumptions and reframing interpretations, (d) primarily qualitative using multiple means, and (d) made publicly explicit as a professional research practice. Developing a narrative of my two principalships has provided me with the opportunity to explore and reflect on all of the above criteria for self-study.

Self-study is a qualitative research method that is grounded in the nuances of the relationship between self and practice (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argued:

There is always a tension between those two elements, self and the arena of practice, between self in relation to practice and the others who share the practice setting. Each self-study researcher must negotiate that balance, but it must be a balance—tipping too far forward the self-side produces solipsism or a confessional, and tipping too far toward the other way turns self-study into more traditional research. (p. 15)

Some critics of self-study as a valid research method, such as Manke (2004), have claimed that self-study is much too heavily focused on self, and as Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) suggested, “too far forward on the self-side” (p. 15).
Auto-ethnography is described as a “systematic and intentional approach to the socio-cultural understanding of self” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010, p. 2). This definition sets auto-ethnography apart from other self-narrative writings such as *memoir* and *autobiography* (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 2) and makes it seem to me much more in synchrony with self-study than most other qualitative methods. Auto-ethnography according to Denzin (1997) is characterized as “the turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while mandating the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur” (p. 227). Auto-ethnography as defined by Reed-Danahay (1997) could vary in use, emphasizing one or all of its components: auto (self), ethos (culture), and graphy (the research process). A major component of auto-ethnography is self-reflectivity (Shields, 2000, p. 393). Auto-ethnographies are generally constructed in first-person narrative form and are stories that reflect emotion, self-awareness, and dialogue affected by culture, history, and social structure (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Holt (2003) asserted that there are researchers who do not support auto-ethnography as a scientific research method and have reservations about its level of rigor (p. 8). However, there are some scholars in the field who have suggested that the criteria for judging the validity of auto-ethnographical studies should not be the same as the criteria for evaluating other qualitative research studies (Sparkes, 2000). By contrast, Tierney (1998) asserted that auto-ethnographies can be “powerful research tools” (p. 52), and Ellis (1997) characterized auto-ethnography as “scholarship” to “understand self and others” (p. 4). Ellis noted that auto-ethnography can be a legitimate approach if it
provides the reader with an “authentic, believable, and possible” experience (p. 4).

Ngunjiri et al. (2010) held:

Although the blurred distinction between the researcher–participant relationship has become the source of criticism challenging the scientific credibility of the methodology . . . access to sensitive issues and inner-most thoughts makes this research method a powerful and unique tool for individual and social understanding. (p. 6)

Auto-ethnography is “distinctive in three ways: it is qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 2).

Self-study has been used extensively by teachers and teacher-educators over the past 15 years as an important method for getting into and understanding the complexity of teaching itself. However, less research exists in the field focused on the study of the urban school principalship. Wolcott (2003) extensively studied the principalship as an observer stance—an ethnography—rather than from a practitioner lens—an auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography, as a method of study of the principalship, can provide insight into the role from a different perspective not widely available in the research. This method can be used to gain a firsthand account of the lived experiences of the principal.

Although auto-ethnography does not have a similarly long history in the field, the added emphasis that auto-ethnographic methods give to “gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 2) suggests that drawing on these methods could substantially enhance my ability to “get at” the complexity of my effort to provide leadership in two under-resourced urban schools.

Both of these research methods are in synchrony with research practices that situate reflection by the researcher at the core of inquiry and analysis. Bruner (1996) noted that “if narrative is to be made an instrument of mind on behalf of meaning
making, it requires work on our part—reading it, making it, analyzing it, understanding its craft, sensing its uses, discussing it” (p. 41). Osterman (1990) asserted:

By increasing self-awareness, the reflective process creates opportunities for continued professional growth. Reflective practice also contributes to professional growth in another way . . . professionals are often unaware of the many ways in which their own behavior is self-defeating. At the same time, they are often unaware of the many ways in which their actions are highly effective. A good educator—teacher or administrator—is a skilled craftsman, but that knowledge is not always at a conscious level. Effective practices become as deeply engrained in behavior as ineffective practices. (p. 137)

My two main research questions and four sub-questions all fit the criteria for the use of self-study and auto-ethnographic methods.

1. How can a principal reflecting on her past practice use her experience to inform and influence her leadership actions and decision-making in a new context?
   c. How has my past experience shaped my understanding of my current school?
   d. How does my past experience influence my current decision-making and leadership practice as a principal?

2. What does my experience in two different urban schools teach me about what it takes to lead a school?
   b. What are the realities and stakeholder influences that contribute to the successes and challenges of a principalship?
   c. How does the use of a framework for successful schools help me to further develop my understanding of my leadership?

The two main research questions are focused on my practice in terms of LaBoskey’s (2004) definition of self-study, as the questions focus on my leadership and decision-making. My sub questions focus on various aspects of my leadership practice centered around understanding my experiences and making sense of my experiences. By definition these questions fit LaBoskey’s criteria as well as those of Ngunjiri et al. (2010), as they
are constructed to be self-initiated, focused, and aimed at improving practice, as well as to challenge assumptions and reframe interpretations. The dearth of knowledge in understanding the challenges school leaders face from the lens of a school leader immersed within his or her own environment is at the nexus of my study’s dual design: scholarly yet practical in its approach (Lighthall & Lighthall, 2007). This quest suggests to me that as I reflect on my past and present leadership experiences that constitute my work as a school leader, both the self-study and auto-ethnography methods seem appropriate to my inquiry.

Another method that will be employed in this research is case study. Creswell (2013) described case study as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material and documents and reports). (p. 97)

Yin (2014) asserted that “the distinctive need for case study research arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief a case study allows investigators to focus on a “case” and retain a holistic and real-world perspective” (p. 4). Case study is an effective method of organizing the data for my study because I am trying to develop a deep understanding of my leadership actions and decision-making through a case (Creswell, 2013). To Yin (2014), “the essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (p. 15).

Although case study analysis can consist of some level of qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2013), my study is unique in that my role as a practitioner in two different
principalships and my vantage point of self-reflection provides a unique avenue for exploring leadership challenges, decision-making, and school improvement through the eyes of a practitioner immersed in the work on the ground level. The two cases I have planned to focus on for my research constitute a “multi-site study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 97) that is intended to capture both the similarities and differences around the principalship that are embedded within two different case sites.

**Site Descriptions**

There are two sites for this study. The primary site is a charter school in Baltimore City that was the setting for my first principalship. The case covers each of the four years of my principalship in what was then a brand new school—from February 22, 2011, when I began working to recruit students, through June 30, 2015, when I resigned. I was the first person hired to lead the school, recruited all of the staff and students, and grew the school from the ground up to become the largest K–8 charter school in the district. The school served 990 students in grades K–8, had a 99% African-American student body, and was a Title I school with 85% of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. This period of time is the primary source of my reflection on practice because it is during this period that I developed my “theories of action” (Osterman, 1990) that very likely impact my practice as a principal in my current setting. As Osterman (1990) stated, “reflective practice seeks not only to expand knowledge, but to achieve meaning (former school setting) and to use that meaning to transform action (current school setting) . . . and calls for the learner to be actively involved in the learning process” (p. 144). The case is broken up into each of the four years of my principalship.
The second site for my study is my current principalship in the District of Columbia at the second-lowest–performing elementary school in the system. The school serves 481 students in grades PS–5, has a 100% African-American student body, and is a Title I school where 100% of the students qualify for free or reduce-price meals. I am in my second year as a principal of the school; I was recruited to be a change agent to lead the school toward making significant progress in student outcomes and family–community relationships. The case focuses on the period from July 1, 2015, when I was appointed leader of the DC public school, to December 22, 2016, the last day of school before winter break.

Yin (2014) asserted:

> The boundary between a case and its context may not be sharp because real-world affairs do not readily fall into clear-cut categories. The ability to appreciate any such blurring as part of a case study is considered a strength of case study research. The contextual conditions even can lead to an entirely new understanding of a case—an understanding that was not necessarily appreciated at the outset of the case study. (p. 214)

Carefully examining each of these sites as cases through the lenses provided by self-study and auto-ethnography is important to my work as a leader who wants to develop new understandings that can strengthen my practice so as to lead more effectively.

**Purpose of the Study**

As the source and focus of study, I am wearing many hats: I am the subject immersed in both my past and present leadership experiences. My former school and current school are the two sites for my study that focuses on my leadership. I seek to discover both similarities and differences between the sites that influence my actions. One school site is a public charter school and one is a traditional public school. Both school sites are in low-
income, high-poverty, and economically disadvantaged communities. The study of my work in both of these sites will help me to make sense of my two principalships in three ways: (a) by considering past experiences and influences on current practice; (b) by enabling me to gather some semblance of sense-making and understanding regarding my leadership challenges; and (c) by giving me insight into ways in which I can learn, reimagine, and rethink leadership in these settings.

I selected self-study and auto-ethnographic methods as the means of exploring my leadership because there is a dearth of information about the ways in which many principals in under-resourced urban schools think about and cope with the complex challenges that they face daily. These tools, commonly used for study within teacher research, have rarely been used in leadership research (Turner & Marvin, 2008). As Turner and Marvin (2008) pointed out, the various emotions, feelings, and introspective processes a leader experiences are seldom highlighted in leadership research. Similarly, Gardner (2005) posited that leaders being and remaining firm in their own efficacy, belief system, and self-truths has never been more challenging than in leading today’s schools. George et al. (2011) agreed that “leadership principles are values translated into action. Having a solid base of values and testing them under fire enables you to develop the principles you will use in leading” (p. 170).

Avolio and Gardner (2005) asserted that existing leadership processes and models are inadequate for supporting the development of leaders. My hope is to contribute to a deeper understanding of my own leadership, the challenges that helped to shape my leadership decision-making, and how my lived experiences contribute to my leadership actions in a new setting.
In order for school leadership to be effective, administrators must learn new “theories of action” rather than learning new skills (Osterman, 1990, p. 133). Brown (2000) noted:

The vast majority of educational leaders, both practitioners and professors, remain wedded to technical drifting—a commitment to emphasize and act upon the technical, rational, instrumental components of one’s work above the moral. Technical drifters fail to validate the cultural, intellectual, and emotional identities of people from underrepresented groups, they avoid situations where their values, leadership styles, and professional goals can be challenged and dismantled, and they use their positions of power to formally and informally reaffirm their own professional choices . . . we need to see the crisis in education as not primarily problems of technique, organization, and funding but as a reflection of the crisis in meaning. (p. 351)

Today’s challenges in leadership require different ways of thinking about challenges and problems, and reflection is at the heart of seeking understanding. In sense-making and generating meaning, I seek to develop new theories of action to influence my practice. Osterman (1990) asserted that “skilled practitioners are reflective practitioners; they utilize their experience as a basis for asserting and revising existing theories of action to develop more effective action strategies” (p. 133).

**Research Design**

The design of this study is based on the concept that self-reflection can serve as an essential means to inform practice. George et al. (2011) posited that “leadership begins with understanding the story of your life. Your life story provides the context for your experiences, and through it, you can find the inspiration to make an impact in the world” (p. 165). Reflection in analyzing one’s story is an inquiry lens into leadership. Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, and Senge (2011) agreed that “only when leaders come to see themselves as incomplete—as having both strengths and weaknesses—will they be able
to make up for their missing skills” (p. 179). An opportunity for a leader to identify his or her own strengths and weaknesses is important to reflective practice and growth in leadership practice. Osterman (1990) affirmed that “reflective practice enhances professional practice in several ways. It leads to greater self-awareness, to the development of new knowledge about professional practice, and to a broader understanding of the problems which confront practitioners” (p. 134). The use of self-reflection as a means to understand one’s leadership is at the core of my research and methods for this study.

I also seek to gather a better understanding of the uniqueness of each of my principalships. My learning within each of my experiences is a way to inform future practice and to contribute to the existing body of research on leading school improvement efforts in urban schools. My goal is to contribute to the research focused on the principalship by using a vantage point and lens of self-reflection that is underrepresented in the realm of research on leadership (Anderson & Jones, 2000).

Examining two urban schools sites provides me with the opportunity to demonstrate the reality that schools are unique environments: they can be demographically similar but drastically different in a variety of ways. My self-study is also unique because of the length of my time spent leading urban schools, and I have had the opportunity to be a principal in both a charter and a traditional public school.

This study also aimed to give an authentic and comprehensive view of the urban school principalship. I used Bryk’s (2010) five essentials for school improvement as a means to organize my narrative, yet I provided a variety of experiences and situations that aimed to highlight the complexity of the principalship in two different settings.
Data Collection

To shape the two case studies that are the focus of this research, I will draw on the framework of five essential supports for school improvement developed by Bryk et al. (2010). These are: leadership that drives change; a coherent instructional guidance system; professional capacity; a student-centered learning climate; and strong parent–community–school ties. Drawing on this framework for school improvement will allow me to describe my schools and my actions using indicators related to school success. It will also allow me to examine my leadership and practice within that context as well as make connections to my current context and decision-making. In creating these cases, I will draw on data that represent a combination of school-based documents from both my first and current principalships. These include emails, memos, school improvement plans, formal performance evaluations, data trends over time, and other documents that relate to leadership toward school improvement in each setting.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is the method that will be used to code and analyze the data. Thematic analysis is described as “a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon . . . thorough careful reading and re-reading of the data. It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). Thematic analysis is characterized as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Vaismoradi, 2013, p. 400). It “focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behavior” (Aronson, 1995, p. 1). This is a valuable method of qualitative
investigation based on “not only the knowledge that can originate from it but also because it is a vehicle for presenting and treating research methods as living entities that resist simple classification, and can result in establishing meaning and solid findings” (Vaismoradi, 2013, p. 399). The six components of the thematic analysis process are as follow:

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<th>Familiarizing with Data</th>
<th>Transcribing data, reading and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generating Initial Codes</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data systemically across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for Themes</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential themes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewing Themes</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic map.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining and Naming Themes</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis for refining the specifics of each theme and the overall story that the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing the Report</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research questions and literature, producing a report of the analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1: Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87; Vaismoradi, 2013, p. 402)

First, Bryk’s (2010) framework for school improvement was used to shape my narrative for each year of my principalship. After the narrative was developed, I identified reoccurring themes from my research questions. I coded my narrative by “reviewing of themes and achieving the aim of identifying coherent but distinctive themes”
(Vaismoradi, 2013, p. 403) in order to enable me to construct a narrative that will directly relate back to my research questions.

In this process, I developed codes that relate to the language embedded within my research questions by examining what I identified in the narrative as “successes,” “challenges,” “decision-making,” and “examples of leadership” over my five-and-a-half-year narrative. The coding I used was generated directly from my research questions and includes codes “that capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon. Encoding the information organizes the data to identify and develop themes from them” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). As the iterative process of sorting data relative to initial codes developed, my codes led to further insights into my leadership practice.

**Issues of Researcher Validity**

The issues of researcher validity embedded in this study are attributed to my own positionality as both a practitioner and a researcher. My role as researcher and participant presents the issue of personal bias in my selection of artifacts as well as my development of my leadership narrative. This is a widely known criticism of auto-ethnography and the validity of the method as a form of sound research. However, I have made efforts to triangulate my data through the use of emails and letters written by others that I had access to, and to use emails generated by others regarding my leadership practice or a critical situation I highlighted in my narrative. The purpose of my study is to share insight into the lived experiences of the principal as a way to understand the complexity of urban school leadership. All data sources used to triangulate the data in my narrative are
reflective and inclusive of my leadership journey and my lived experiences as an urban
school principal.

The use of school-level data, improvement plans, emails, historical documents,
and my journals is an attempt to keep me honest in my assessment of my leadership,
decision-making, and the real challenges I have faced in my work. My vulnerability in
being able to see and see again, consider and reconsider, learn and relearn, is a process
that is important to me professionally in improving my practice.

From an ethical standpoint, I am studying myself, so I must be open to exploring
new insights and different ways to reimagine what I think I already may know. This
opportunity for learning and research is twofold in that I am able to learn from myself in
practice and also contribute to the body of research literature that highlights school
leadership challenges, obstacles, and successes.

In order to consider myself an effective leader who can positively lead my school
to success, it is critical for me to be able to be reflective and introspective in examining
my own practice. Such self-awareness will help me to be aware of what Osterman (1990)
described as both “effective and ineffective” practices within my daily work. Going back
to Bryk’s (2010) assertion regarding the need to seek understanding, I seek to understand
through my own lens and experiences. Perhaps the insights from the ground-level
practitioner can be a way to further investigate and examine urban education reform and
leadership practice.

In my experience as a school leader, I have come to understand through my day-
to-day work how complex and challenging it is to lead an organization. Understanding
my various experiences and leadership actions informs my work in building my capacity
to effectively lead my school. Examining my own practice has allowed me the opportunity to re-examine my past and current experiences in a way that can allow for new learning and further understanding of my successes and challenges.

The realization that strengthening one’s ability to reflect on practice is a key lever in improving one’s leadership actions resonates with me as a critical component of effective leadership practice. As Heifetz and Laurie (2011) affirmed, I through my leadership experiences have encountered numerous challenges “with no ready answers” (p. 58). This is a natural part of any leader’s journey that should be embraced as an opportunity to learn and grow as a practitioner. Urban school leaders are fighting to manage “systemic problems” on a daily basis (Heifetz & Laurie, 2011, p. 58) without much support to think through resolutions and ways to navigate such perplexing challenges. It is through my own experiences that I have aimed to strengthen my practice and to tackle many challenges. It is my hope that such learning processes can be considered a natural way for leaders to learn and make sense of their work.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on educational research by providing an analysis of a case unique in design but universal in context, as the two contexts will, overall, be familiar to the many urban principals who are facing similar challenges in leading schools. Hence, this study provides an authentic voice representative of the many urban school principals who are so immersed in their work that they do not have many opportunities to reflect on their practice. Although many principals have similarities and differences in their school-specific context, the use of reflection as an opportunity to solve problems along one’s leadership journey is a universally beneficial practice.
Making sense and meaning of one’s unique journey starts with the woman (or man) in the principal’s office.

**CHAPTER 4: A LEADER’S JOURNEY**

**Year 1: Newton Academy**

*Founding Principal*
*330 Students*
*The Child Guardian Headquarters Building*
*East Baltimore, MD*

The following leadership narrative provides a first-person account of my experiences as a principal of two urban schools, the first in Baltimore, MD, and the second and current in Washington, DC, over a five-and-a-half-year period from 2011 to 2016. This narrative contains personal artifacts and authentic excerpts from letters, emails, and my performance evaluations sent during my leadership tenure. This narrative is the source of my inquiry lens into urban school leadership. All names included in this narrative, with the exception of my own, are pseudonyms.

**Leadership as the Driver of Change**

*Stepping into the principalship: New leader, new world.* Although I was selected to lead Newton Academy at the end of December 2010, I did not start until February 2011. I was still working in the District of Columbia Public Schools system as an assistant principal during the day. As soon as I learned about Newton Academy’s enrollment goal of 330 students in our first year, I knew it was critical for me to take on recruitment duties as soon as possible. From January to June of 2012, I traveled to Baltimore on evenings to host open houses to meet prospective students and families,
review resumes, and prepare for my first lottery while working in DC during the day. I easily worked 12- to 14-hour days as I was usually in DC by 7:30 a.m. and arriving home after teacher interviewing and open house / recruitment events well after 11 p.m. on most nights.

A week after I was hired, I was told by the CEO, Dr. Foss, of my charter management organization that he had already selected my assistant principal and I would meet her soon. I finally met her in April. I was told that she had applied to become a principal but because she had not been an assistant principal before they felt she should start there first. She was born and raised in Baltimore City and had spent her entire career in education in Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS). She was working as an International Baccalaureate (IB) coordinator prior to her appointment as assistant principal at Newton Academy.

Having had only two years as an assistant principal in the DCPS under my belt, I was relatively new to working in public schools. However, my private school experience really benefitted me in being the leader of a brand new charter school. My personal touch of greeting and welcoming families warmly was in alignment with the charter’s tag line of “a private school education at a public school price,” and I felt confident in my ability to deliver what was expected.

We held our first lottery in March 2011. I pulled the names of 330 students that I began to meet and interact with in the spring of 2011. I spent my spring and summer months meeting families and preparing for the start of the new school year. Every Thursday throughout the summer, I held weekly “popsicles with the principal” sessions with students and their families until school opened. Seeing the faces of students and
families made the names that I’d pulled in the lottery real, and it reminded me that school would be opening at the end of August.

Ms. Lane helped with some of the information and registration sessions but I did almost every session. It was important to me. I wanted to build relationships with families so that they felt they had made the right choice in selecting our school. As we continued to pass on information to parents, we decided to create a Monarch Facebook page. We thought it was important to have a Facebook page because we needed a way for families to stay connected with the school and to continue to engage families with our progress as a school before our doors opened.

One of our biggest hurdles was planning for the school in conjunction with our charter management organization. Our CMO, The Child Guardian, traditionally operated non-public special education schools, group homes, and therapeutic foster care programs. They were very new to the charter management world and completely new to the expectations, constraints, and requirements of operating a charter school in Baltimore City. As an organization they decided to branch out into the charter school world and they opened their first charter school in Anne Arundel County in 2009. They saw growing success with the Anne Arundel County charter school. Charter schools are limited in number in Anne Arundel County and the school continued to have high demand from its inception. In addition to being the founders and developers of the school’s model, they also decided that the school’s budget should pay the CMO a management fee every year, thus enabling the CMO to operate the school and draw revenue from it.
The CMO openly stated that their mission was to continue to rapidly grow and open charter schools in the surrounding counties in Maryland and to also open a school in Washington, DC. Due to their plans to rapidly expand, they decided to hire a Chief Operating Officer (COO) who would oversee both the Anne Arundel County school and also the new Baltimore City charter school, my school, opening in the fall. Ms. Greta Grady became the COO of the charter schools in August right before our doors opened for the first time. Ms. Grady’s duty was to manage the charter management organization’s responsibilities toward the school. As COO, she was responsible for providing the facilities maintenance and fiscal management support for the schools; however, in the management framework set up by the CMO, the president/CEO still holds a strong influence over the schools in the network.

Figure 4.1: Leadership Team Composition – Year 1

In the president/CEO’s experience with the non-public schools, people were hired and fired based on the CMO’s own rules. The COO was a member of this team and was
required to share out challenges the school faced. The team would give her advice on how to move forward. One of the challenges in this style of management was that many of the executives were not familiar with the rules of schools and did not always provide sound advice regarding how the school should move forward. In addition, it was difficult for the COO to actually supervise the schools without input or influence from members of the executive team.

Our school shared occupancy in the CMO headquarters building. Every week the president/CEO ran a weekly meeting with his executive team. His philosophy is that the meeting “ends when we are done,” which means that some meetings took hours upon hours. During the meetings they would talk about everything under the sun. All the programs, all the schools, and what they felt middle management (principals, directors, etc.) needed to do in order to meet the organization’s standards. Problems or challenges in every entity of the organization would be the topic of discussion at these meetings and would be discussed with the various members of the executive team.

**Beginning.** In the summer of 2011 two critical issues surfaced that significantly impacted the start of the school year. The first issue was related to staff: teachers’ and administrators’ salaries. In the state of Maryland, each county has a different pay scale for employees. Charter schools in the state of Maryland are under the Local Education Agency (LEA) of the county/city area. All salaries are different and vary based on the pay scale developed by the LEA human resources department. Baltimore City teacher salaries were significantly higher than the salaries of Anne Arundel County public school teachers. For example, Anne Arundel County paid teaching assistants $10 per hour
without benefits—much lower than what teachers in similar positions in Baltimore were paid.

The CMO developed a budget for the school based on the Anne Arundel County salaries. This resulted in budget modifications before the school even opened, and these resulted in staffing cuts in my organizational plan. The initial plan was for each classroom to have a teaching assistant. There were to be four kindergarten classes with four aides, three classes on each grade level (1–3), and two fourth-grade classes. In total the initial plan was to hire 11 teaching assistants—one per classroom. As a result of the mismanagement of the budget we had to downsize the support staff to one teaching assistant per grade level. This change reduced the amount of support staff to assist with small group instruction and behavior management efforts from the teacher, and resulted in an overall reduction of the student–adult ratio within the classroom. The four kindergarten classes had to share two aides. I had to rescind tentative hiring offers and restructure the schedule I spent the summer developing in order to account for the decrease in staffing during morning arrival, student lunch periods, and dismissal.

The second critical issue was transportation. As a part of the school’s recruitment strategy to attract a diverse group of students from all over the city, every student living outside of a mile away from school was able to sign up for transportation services. This was one of the school’s marketed selling points that attracted students and families from all over the city. The CEO Dr. Foss’s rationale for such a decision was that he did not want to limit access to a great school based on where students lived within the city. I, too, supported this vision and appreciated the idea of tapping into the diversity of the city. It
was one of the most attractive things about the school and resonated with my beliefs related to eliminating barriers to a quality education for all students.

In order to support this transportation plan, the CMO purchased two yellow school buses and had planned to run different routes to pick up and drop off students on mornings and afternoons. The busing offer had an overwhelming response and there were about 200 students who had transportation service requests. Organizing the transportation services was a logistical nightmare. The CMO wanted to use two buses and do three runs of students back and forth throughout the city. I knew this would not work and offered up some questions and feedback that I hoped they would consider. Some of the questions I presented were: If you drop students off and go to pick up others, who will watch them before hours as we wait for teachers to arrive? Who will monitor students while they are waiting for their bus to pick them up? What happens if a bus gets into an accident and breaks down? How will the routes run? Who will drive the buses? Will this be a dedicated staff person? I asked many questions. I asked what I knew would be a problem and I did not hold back. Unfortunately, the most important question was not a part of the conversation—What are Baltimore City’s requirements for offering city school students transportation services? I thought for sure that, in developing their plan, the CMO had researched and investigated Baltimore City’s requirements for transporting students.

Two things were revealed that significantly impacted our planning as well as our stress levels right before school opened. Baltimore City Public Schools informed the CEO and COO that the buses they purchased were too old and did not meet Baltimore City’s regulations for providing bus services to students. They were also informed that they would need to contract a bus service provider that met these regulations. This
notification was sent to the operator at the end of the first week in August, and students were expected to return within the next two weeks of school. To say that the planning and preparation was stressful is an understatement. Families had to be contacted to change their bus routes and to reorganize the bus groups. This work was not done by the CMO but by the principal (me), the assistant principal (Ms. Lane), and the Dean of Student and Family Life (Mr. Williams). We organized new bus groups based on the contracted company’s bus routes. We worked on this for weeks as we created a system for taking attendance on the bus to ensure that we would be able to account for every student.

Despite the pressure and stress of the situation, we made the best of it. We worked on transportation plans and student seating on buses, procedures, documents for parents to sign and review, as well as student training on how to safely ride the bus. We added “Welcome Nights” as a pre–back-to-school night structure to support a smooth opening day. We worked with the bus company and helped with training and orientation for students and families about where students would be seated and how they should ride the bus, and we also collected paperwork from families regarding route preferences, emergency contact information, and authorized pick-up persons at selected sites. We thought we had it all covered. We covered as much ground as we could anticipate. We thought we were ready.

Our first day of school was absolutely perfect. We met our enrollment and exceeded it by fifteen students. Our school year started at 345 students and there were families contacting us on a daily basis during the first month of school inquiring about how to get their students into the school. We had strong systems in place and all of our teachers were excited, and parents were pleased with what they saw. All of my anxiety
about being a first-year principal was calmed and I felt affirmed. I felt that I had worked with my team to ensure that we had accounted for every possible thing that could happen to prepare for an awesome first day of school. Our hard work paid off. Until dismissal time came.

We had a master list of students that rode the bus in the morning and during dismissal we checked off the students as they left the school to head home. One of the requirements we provided to the bus company was that they ensure that every student was handed off to a parent. This was to safeguard from the possibility of a parent not being at a stop to pick up a child and the child was left alone. In the event that a parent was not at a stop, the bus company was instructed to bring the student back to school after running the entire route. The parent would be responsible for picking the student up from the school. Although a burden for the bus driver, it was the best way we could think of to ensure that an elementary school student would be safe. Unfortunately for us, the bus driver did not follow our directions.

On the first day of school, a kindergarten student was dropped off at a stop without a parent. All of the stops were BCPS school sites, and as the kindergarten boy was wandering around the lot, someone at the school saw him and called his mother using emergency contact information left in his book bag. When the mother got the call she also called the police and Fox 5 news, and then she called the school. She was cursing and screaming at us, stating that we had left her son out in a lot by himself and that we were negligent and irresponsible. Later that night, our school’s name was on the news tagged with the picture of a little boy let out of a bus without an adult in sight.
only did our school make the news, but the boy’s mother posted the news story on our school’s Facebook page. The great first day felt as if it went down the drain.

That day I learned that the principal is always ultimately responsible for every aspect of a school’s operation. Although we had a CMO and transportation was under their contract and purview, I was blamed. We had done nothing wrong, but I was to blame. That same day my executive director for the cluster network called me and told me not to answer the phone when the chief of staff called. He said he would take care of it. I was so nervous. Here was my school, brand new and opening on the first day with such bad press. However, I learned it was not the end of the world and I would not be fired.

Although, the members of the CMO seemed somewhat sympathetic, as they knew it was not our fault, they also insisted on reviewing our system to see if there was indeed a flaw that we had not caught and they would be able to uncover. Some of the CMO executives started to micromanage us. Parents became increasingly concerned about the bus safety, although the situation that occurred was due to the negligence of the bus driver letting the student out without being delivered to a pick-up person. Over the next few weeks of school, we did a double count of every student, advised the driver and aides on a daily basis, and stayed with students that were not picked up at their stops to make sure they were safe.

It was hard to be responsible for something I knew I had not “done,” but I learned that it came with the nature of the job. My job was to learn from mistakes, stay humble, and move on and learn from the pitfalls. It worked, and by the end of the school year we were able to select students who would run the dismissal system themselves with little
assistance from adults. The transportation issue was just one of many examples in which the CMO did not anticipate or plan through challenges in a proactive way, ultimately requiring the school to figure it out and pick up the pieces.

**Instructional Guidance Systems**

**A model of instructional success: Expeditionary Learning.** Expeditionary Learning (EL) was the school’s instructional model during our first and second years of operation. It was different from the norm of a boxed curriculum, and was one of the most exciting aspects of our school’s overall program. It was one of the things that attracted me to become the leader of the school. My COO was formerly the mid-Atlantic regional director of Expeditionary Learning, and I met her when I was an assistant principal in DC. At my former school, we were exploring the possibility of becoming an EL school and I was the lead in learning about the model to bring the information back to my school community. The possibility of leading a project-based learning school resonated with me as a leader. I felt that being able to authentically engage students was a way that I had met success as a middle and high school teacher.

Expeditionary Learning was a collaborative project between Outward Bound, USA, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It started as the Outward Bound project in 1987 and evolved in 1993 to ten demonstration schools and has continued to grow. The model is guided by ten design principles:

1. The Primacy of Self-Discovery
2. The Having of Wonderful Ideas
3. The Responsibility for Learning
4. Empathy and Caring
5. Success and Failure
6. Collaboration and Competition
7. Diversity and Inclusion
8. The Natural World
9. Solitude and Reflection
10. Service and Compassion

These principles form the program’s core values and beliefs about learning. The model also included five core practices, which are characterized as the “key dimensions of school life”: Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, Culture and Character, and Leadership.

All EL schools begin with analyzing data and setting goals by developing a school “Work Plan” that guides the work of the school designer, leadership team, and the principal throughout the school year. The work plan also includes EL network workshops and professional development sessions for staff members, national conferences, and other learning opportunities for teachers to improve their practice and learn from others within the EL network. Although the EL practices are engaging for students, they are also rigorous for teachers and require a ton of collaboration. The collaboration and development of quality expeditions (in-depth studies of topics with guiding questions for students) depend on the collaborative efforts of teachers and their willingness to develop thoughtful plans for students as they engage and learn through an inquiry-based approach to the topic. This is a difficult model for brand-new teachers to take on because it requires skill, collaboration with colleagues, and teachers’ knowledge of their students. It is also
risky for teachers. A boxed curriculum is much easier for most teachers, especially new teachers, to manage and follow depending on the teacher’s skill level and philosophical beliefs about pedagogy and what they see as the best way for students to learn.

**Professional Capacity**

**Teacher capacity: Staffing matters.** Our enrollment goal of 330 students was projected with a model of three teachers at every grade level from kindergarten to fourth grade. However, our lottery pool of applicants did not have many fourth-grade students to pull for a third class. Our kindergarten cohort had an excess of applicants (about 300) for only 60 seats. Dr. Foss decided that we could have four kindergarten classes to account for the shortfall in the fourth-grade numbers. We were required to enroll 330 students, so the staffing model had to accommodate the change.

| Kindergarten – 4 Teachers | All experienced  
|                          | One from a lab school  
|                          | Two from traditional boxed-curriculum schools  
|                          | One substitute teacher from a traditional background  
| First Grade – 3 Teachers | Two experienced teachers—transfers from traditional BCPS schools, both low performing schools in the district  
|                          | One brand new teacher  
| Second Grade – 3 Teachers | Three experienced teachers—transfers from BCPS schools: one from a charter school, one from an IB school, one from a traditional BCPS school  
| Third Grade – 3 Teachers | Two experienced teachers—one from a Catholic school, one from a traditional school  
|                          | One brand new teacher  
| Fourth Grade – 2 Teachers | Two experienced teachers—one from a BCPS IB school, one from a traditional school  

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The shortfall in fourth-grade applicants provided us with the opportunity to increase our kindergarten numbers and to hire a teacher for kindergarten instead of fourth grade. I was excited to have an additional kindergarten class so that I could grow students at the earliest level.

One of the strengths of the school’s first year was the experience level of the majority of teachers. All of the teachers we attracted were looking for something different from what they had experienced in their former settings. The newcomers wanted more of an opportunity to customize learning to make it more engaging and to meet the needs of students.

Overall the majority of teachers were experienced and had worked with Baltimore City students. Many of the teachers understood some of the challenges working with urban youth and were able to build strong relationships with students and their families. However, there were some struggles.

During the first week, the new first-grade teacher had a difficult time developing an effective classroom management system, struggled with making initial connections to students and their families, and did not get along with the other two teachers on her team. At the end of the first week of school, the teacher came to my office to let me know she was quitting effective immediately, and that she could not emotionally and mentally
handle the toll the students were taking on her. With no notice, I had no other option but to split the students between the two remaining first-grade classes, moving the optimal class size of 20 to a too-big size of 30 in each class. The two experienced teachers welcomed the students and I sent out a letter to families to inform them of the change. At the time I also decided to pull one of the teaching assistants to each of those classrooms to bring the student–adult ratio down to 15 to 1. Parents were happy because both first-grade teachers were well respected and parents were pleased with their demeanor, work ethic, and efforts to build relationships with students.

Collaboration was a highlight and success of our school. Our efforts to collaborate included sessions for teachers to work on their expedition plans and get feedback and then to brainstorm additional ways for students to experience the content in meaningful and engaging ways. Art projects were a culmination of students’ studies for their expeditions, and the art teacher created an art gallery based on students’ works within their various classes. She met with the teachers to plan for cross-curricular activities that would reinforce the concepts students had already learned within their homeroom classes. Communication with teachers was fluid, as I communicated with teachers by sending them a weekly email. We met to work through issues at any time because I had an open-door policy. It was one of the reasons why I felt we did not need to have a union rep at the school. Teachers communicated concerns or challenges in a way to elicit feedback and we worked together to correct the things that were challenging and did not work.
Student-Centered Learning Climate

Celebrating student learning: A climate and culture builder for success.

Traditionally, urban schools in struggling school districts see low parent engagement numbers, and can face difficulty getting parents to come out and support after-school activities and events. Generally speaking, parent–teacher conferences can be a struggle and may see low turnout numbers, which can be frustrating for teachers and students.

Two ways we fostered a positive student-centered learning climate were through our school-wide community meetings and also through our celebrations of learning.

The school-wide community meetings were held on a monthly basis in our school’s gym/auditorium. Students hosted the meeting and lead the school in saying the Pledge of Allegiance and the school’s five promises, and then two student hosts went through the meeting. Each grade level had the opportunity to share some aspect of their learning, and we also rewarded students who had high attendance and uniform compliance rates with certificates, or announced the winners of any incentives we promoted for that month. The meetings included music and dancers from different classes based on which students the teacher selected. Community meetings would feature student demonstrations, cup stacking contests, and even science experiments. Students were responsible for setting up, organizing, and running the meetings after the principal spent time laying the foundation and teaching students how to host the meetings. Parents were also invited to attend meetings and frequently expressed their excitement about the energy and excitement of the students.

The translation of the energy from the community meetings began to take form during our Celebrations of Learning (COL). Our first COL was held in the spring of
2012, when we had about 50% of our family/parent population attend. Students created invitations, we sent our frequent reminders to parents, and we even sold special uniform t-shirts to be worn on the day of the event as a sign of school spirit and solidarity for the event. Many parents attended and spoke highly of what they saw during the celebration of learning and were pleased with the way that their children were able to speak about what they had learned. They were impressed by the way students could walk visitors through their learning, its purpose, and the next steps to be taken to address the issue/problem. The COL created a unique buzz around the school focused on student presentations, producing, displaying, and explaining high-quality work, and providing every student with an opportunity to be recognized for their personal best work. It was a memorable and valued opportunity for parents to celebrate their students’ accomplishments. At the end of the year, we had a parent budget meeting, a school-wide community meeting to kick off our celebration of learning, and a host of other activities to welcome families into the learning world.

**Strong Parent–Community–School Ties**

**Considering families: An element of relational trust.** Through the connections we built with families, they were proud of and committed to our school. Our school building was in the perfect location in a cul-de-sac in the middle of three major streets secluded from the housing complex and everything in the neighborhood. There was a playground, a grassy field, and ample room for parent parking and also pulling up for pickup and drop off. Despite the perfect building location, we were told that if we expanded, we could not stay. The building was owned by the Archdiocese of Baltimore,
and they did not want our school to expand. They feared that our expansion would cause them to lose enrollment numbers at a nearby Catholic school.

Dr. Foss had assured the Archdiocese of Baltimore that Newton Academy would only stay in The Child Guardian’s headquarters for one year. At the beginning of the school year, I was told that we would eventually move to another school building, a renovated historic building, when the repair of the building was complete. I did not have a timeline for when that would occur, but when it was mentioned it was vaguely stated so I figured it would happen sometime down the line. I did not know about the promise to the Archdiocese and that we would need to move so suddenly and abruptly after only one year of operation in the building. After meeting with Dr. Foss, I learned that the decision to expand the school was based on funding, the CMOs projection to be paid a higher management fee, and generating revenue to continue the renovation of our permanent school location.

In March 2012, we began to have meetings with families about our potential move to a West Baltimore school building as a temporary school site until the renovation of our permanent building was completed. Some parents were hopeful but many of them were dismayed and outraged at moving to such a dilapidated building in an unsafe neighborhood. Parents complained that they were promised we would be in our new building in the fall, and now we had to move again. Many questioned why we could not just stay and only take in kindergarten. I asked the same question. They asked the Archdiocese of Baltimore and they said we could stay with that plan. Dr. Foss decided that growth needed to happen in order for the budget to work out as planned.
After the decision was made I facilitated meetings ensuring parents that we would have security and structures in place to support our students during the transition. I tried my best to assure families that we would be ok. Many families did stay but many decided to leave. They could not fathom the idea of children being in such a drastically different building than the one they were in now and being in such a dangerous and drug-ridden neighborhood. I tried to be honest with my families about the possibility of challenges and not to be dishonest at the same time. I wondered to myself: What will West Baltimore bring? Will my students be safe? How will we all fit in such a seemingly small building? Although I had many questions and reservations, I assured my school community that the quality of education we provided to our students would not change. I did have control over that. I could not control the other elements, so I decided to control what I could. I continued to reassure my families that although we were moving to a high-crime area, we would still continue to have the same types of programming and activities for our students. The upcoming move was a move toward chaos, and it disrupted the relationships and connections that had been built with the families that supported my school. However, I felt confident that I would be able to provide that level of support to my school community despite all of the various changes and unexpected challenges I knew I would face.

**Leadership Assessment: A Job Well Done?**

At the end of my first year as principal, I had all the makings of a great school. We worked through all of our transportation challenges, welcomed 330 students and families,
and maintained a positive school culture. I was excited about the future but proud of how far my school had come.

Ms. Grady met with Mr. Jeff Berry, Executive Director of the Charter School Network, to discuss my performance and final ratings. He was responsible for working with charter schools to complete principal evaluations. Although he had 32 charter schools to manage, I could always reach out to him with BCPS-specific questions and challenges. He was an advocate on the BCPS side and he had blocked me from the wrath of the chief of staff during the bus transportation debacle at the beginning of the year. He was a former BCPS principal at a high-needs school, so he was always supportive and encouraging.

Based on the accountability plan for the charter application, the expected performance goals for Newton Academy were as follow:

- Ninety percent of the students will be proficient or higher in Reading by 2014–15
- Eighty percent of the students will be proficient or higher in Math by 2014–15
- The school will maintain a 95% attendance rate

Mr. Berry modified my goals based on the goals (above) from the accountability plan. He came up with the following goals at the start of the year. For the 2011–12 school year, 70% of students should be proficient in Reading and 70% in Math. He projected these goals based on the accountability plan goals so that there would be time to grow by 10% each year to meet the goals. I thought his backwards planning for proficiency benchmarks made sense.

At the end of the school year, we met our performance goals. Our students performed at 71% in Reading and 75% in Math. We had a 94% attendance rate. We were
so excited and I was so proud. We met Adequate Yearly Progress as determined by the State of Maryland. As a result of meeting my goals and for my performance, Mr. Berry submitted feedback for an “effective” rating for the 2011–12 school year. He told me that he was amazed at how well my school had progressed from the start of the school year and noted that most charter schools had rough first years. He commended me for my work and told me that he would help me work through the challenges associated with the move to the temporary building location in the fall.
Leadership as the Driver of Change

The courage to lead: Change is constant. My second year as a principal was one of my most challenging experiences in leadership. I did not realize how successful my first year had been until I entered my second. Although I tried to assure families that we would all do our best to keep the quality of our programming, not being in the same neighborhood was a major obstacle.

We moved to the temporary building in July of 2012. It was gray, water-stained, and had a limited number of windows. It looked like a little jailhouse. The campus and play space was expansive. There was a fairly new, bright and colorful playground that sat on a soft pad not too far away from the back doors of the building. We were surrounded by four streets. One side of the street had a row of abandoned homes. There would be people coming out of the buildings on occasion and some sat on the steps outside of the building. One corner had a busy liquor store that was frequently visited by the police; that street also had a row of dilapidated homes. One side of the street had tenants with homes and the other side had a church that held night programs and drew pretty big crowds on the weekends.

During that summer we spent our time monitoring our enrollment. As a part of our charter’s growth plan we were expected to increase our enrollment from 330 students to 660 students that summer. We could not retain the original 330 students because of the
location of the temporary school. Parents drove through the neighborhood to visit the school and after seeing abandoned homes, people hanging out outside, and drug paraphernalia and trash all over the streets, many parents withdrew their children from my school. By the middle of the summer we had lost about 100 students. We were down to 230 students and we would now need an additional 430 students in order to meet our enrollment goal.

That was a stressful summer. While trying to figure out classroom spaces, how we would transition students from lunch to recess, and developing an overall plan for school operations, we were stressed by the CMO regarding enrollment. They told us that if we didn’t get to our targeted enrollment I would need to fire teachers, and we would lose a significant amount of money. My assistant principal and I continued to brainstorm ideas for recruiting new students and so we decided to plan a community block party as well as visits to the few local businesses to spread the word that we were the new school in the neighborhood.

I did not get as much heat about enrollment as my Dean of Student and Family Life, Mr. Wilson, did. Mr. Wilson was my right-hand person and would assist with a variety of issues including student behavior, late pickups of students, photography and videography for school events to add to our marketing, and many other things that I cannot even remember. He is the type of person that would do whatever was needed and he was such a valuable member of my team.

Both Dr. Foss and his CFO expressed their concerns about our efforts to enroll students, asking us, “So what are you doing about enrollment?” on a regular basis and calling Mr. Wilson frequently for updates. He was organized and provided them with
regular and detailed updates on our progress. They felt it was not enough. One afternoon that summer the president called and asked us about the waiting list for the school. He asked if we had scrubbed the list to see if there were any additional students who were interested in enrolling. Mr. Wilson stated that he did inquire and he did contact all of the people on the waiting list and had been working 12-hour days. The president told Mr. Wilson that it did not matter that he worked 12 hours because he did not have the results, and that maybe he should consider working later and calling those numbers around 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. Mr. Wilson was upset and told the president that maybe he should contact his union because he was already working over the hours he should be working to increase the enrollment. This outraged the president and he stated that everyone was supposed to “work for the organization” and that “the job gets done when it gets done and time is not important.” After his conversation with Mr. Wilson, he contacted the COO, my boss, and told her to tell me that “Mr. Wilson MUST go and he doesn’t have the right mindset.” I told her that Mr. Wilson had every right to tell him that he had been working long hours and that I would not be firing Mr. Wilson for speaking his mind. She told me, “You know this will impact his opinion of you as the leader,” and I said that I understood.

Later that day I was upset, and although I felt uncomfortable about the conversation, I knew I needed to stand firm. I could not let them intimidate me, otherwise it would impact my staff and students. I was not going to fire Mr. Wilson, and I planned to continue to support his work. I spoke with my Baltimore City supervisor and he told me he would keep monitoring the situation and he would support me as he needed to. I spoke with Mr. Wilson about the situation and told him he should just let it go because
fighting with him was not necessary. Although I thought I had eased his mind, he sent me a letter the next day.

September 6, 2012

Dear Ms. Riggins,

I am writing as a follow up to my conversation with you on Tuesday afternoon regarding my perception of how I am and have been treated by Dr. Foss and Greta Grady. It is my firm conviction that a hostile work environment has and is being created by Dr. Foss and Greta Grady towards me. What I mean by definition of a hostile work is that I feel and am experiencing what I believe to be workplace harassment where fear exists in my going to work because of the offensive, intimidating and oppressive atmosphere generated by both Dr. Foss and Greta Grady. Their actions often times seem to imply that they want me to quit and that is the last thing that I want to do. I enjoy my job and have been more than 150% committed to my job, the organization, staff, students, parents and community from the very first day I came on board. I have never been fired from a job in over forty years nor has any employer ever treated me in the way that I believe that I am currently being treated.

It has been a tough and challenging 30 days and I have been active during the day, evenings, and weekends and even through the break to help ensure that our school building opened on time. I’ve stood in when no staffing was provided by the Child Guardian, our management company, to let in roofers, inspectors and others into the building. I’ve labeled the keys when they were all simply left in the doors. I’ve been out in the community to meet the local organizations and develop contacts. I’ve asked maintenance several times to not leave doors cocked open for safety concerns for students and staff. I’ve worked with local community leaders to help in recruiting students from the immediate community. I’ve shot and edited video and have donated hundreds of hours of my time to the school. I’ve been here to help because I have always felt a strong conviction for the mission and vision of Newton Academy and the dedication of both you and Ms. Lane as we have endured and worked as a team.

On or about August 21, 2012 Dr. Foss demanded a copy of the spreadsheet I was using to track incoming students and demanded that I increase the enrollment of students and justify to him why students were transferring out and/or refusing to enroll. When I responded to him what reasons I was hearing for transfers out of the school he stated that it was not true and that there must be other reasons. I reiterated that many did not think the community was safe and that they did not appreciate the appearance of the building. All of a sudden work was rushed, trashed was picked up, new furniture arrived and more was done in one day than
was done in 30 days. August 22, 2012 Dr. Foss came into my office and demanded that I explain to him what I was doing to increase the enrollment. He demanded to know how many hours a day I work and why couldn’t I work through the evenings making calls to enroll students. When I told him that I have worked everyday and on weekends tirelessly he demanded that I needed to do more. He told me that I was not a team player and that I needed to be willing to work as long as it takes to get the job done. I told him that I did not agree and that I was a Baltimore City Public School employee under contract with City Schools. He told me that if I were a salaried employee I was required to do what he demanded. I told him that it was not my job and that he needed to talk with Ms. Riggins, as she was my direct supervisor. He disagreed and demanded that he was in charge. I told him that he needed to go back to take a look at the Baltimore Teachers/Paraprofessional Agreement and that if he had problems with what I was doing to discuss it with my immediate supervisor.

Immediately after he left my office, I felt hurt and notified you. I believe Mr. Jeff Berry was in your office at that time. You told me that I worked for BCPS and that he could not walk into my office and do what he did and that he needed to work with you. On August 22, 2012 Dr. Foss and Sam Goodwin, Executive VP of Support Services/Chief Financial Officer walked into my office and shut the door. I asked them to take a seat as I was just completing a message to the bus company because Greta Grady, Chief Operating Officer of Charter Schools had just given us the authority to order our tenth bus to transport students. This was based upon Dr. Foss’ statement that transportation would be provided to any student who needed it. They attempted to intimidate by demanding to know where I was on the numbers for enrollment and what was I doing. I told them once again that while this was not my job that there was significant activity taking place. I thought this was extremely out of place and wondered and asked you if it was sexist or racist at that time. You explained that you did not think it was either and I accepted your explanation and respected that you would be the leader I trusted and the person I was accountable to.

A couple days ago I walked into my office and found a yellow posted note on my desk stating verbatim, “Ethan, find space in your office for me. I will be there for about 2 weeks. A computer will be set up – Greta.” I realize that we are all sharing space, however, I could have been approached and even asked my thoughts about this. I meet with parents and students in my office especially since I no longer have the luxury of the space I had on McClean Boulevard. Ms. Grady walks around as if she is on patrol and doesn’t appear to lend a hand where it is needed. She seems to serve in an observer/evaluator role. I observed her watch children fighting in line boarding the bus a couple days ago and she didn’t say anything to them. She no longer speaks when she walks by and the bottom line is that I am still required to get the same job done with fewer resources. The last couple days they have sent someone to help but they have arrived at or about 2:00-2:30 to ask where they could pitch in. This is not necessarily help.
Last year, in addition to my job as Dean of Student and Family Life, Volunteer Coordinator and so much more I also managed the bus transportation system. This is the same system that was set up by the Child Guardian’s leadership that had us on Fox News our first night. During that period approximately 150-170 students rode the bus each day on six buses. Today 375-390 students and still counting are riding to and from school daily.

On the first day of school I received over 130 calls due to bus company problems. I am taking the blame for issues beyond my control. Ms. Grady told me that I will get help, and that she would respond to BCPS to address transportation concerns, etc. I have yet to see any additional help beyond extra staff who arrive at dismissal to handle the Child Guardian’s buses and students going to the aftercare program. I’ve even been asked why a student who does not attend our campus missed the bus. These problems continue to take place with one bus in particular and I still don’t have the signage we need regarding “No Parking – Bus Zone” as promised.

I feel as if I am being set up to fail. More is being required of me with no additional resources. In our sister school additional staffing was provided in the student support center. I can only do so much and certainly do not need the pressure to walk on eggshells because the President of the Child Guardian does not appreciate that I did not agree with him that I should work as a slave to his time schedule when I am under contract and a member of the Baltimore Teachers Union. I know that the Guardian had to accept the Union Agreement as a part of its ability to receive the charter. Article VI defines what my hours should be and what should be done to account for hours beyond that. I have never demanded or requested overtime or any special favors. I have willingly donated my time to the development of the school as a part of my commitment to the school and to you and Ms. Lane’s strong leadership. In accordance with Article VII, I am writing to you to place my concerns on the record. I don’t feel that this situation is just going to go away. I simply request to be treated with dignity and respect by Ms. Grady, Dr. Foss and other Guardian staff as I do my job. I simply request adequate resources from the founding organization to do what is required of me.

I am not complaining about the amount of work that I do or what I have to do. According to Article X–Section E. Salary Guidelines, 1- One (1) incremental step credit for each year of in-service qualifying previous experience in area of employment within a ten (10) month period is provided. I should have received an increase in pay. My 10-month salary agreed to on August 1, 2011 was $47,099. I have yet to see any increase and in actuality my checks are less than last year.

My concern first and foremost is for fair and equitable treatment and respect in the workplace that is not intimidating and oppressive; where I don’t feel that I have to walk in fear of everything that I do subject to making a mistake that I am written up for. I mentioned to you that it has begun to affect my sleep where I
wake up thinking about children on the bus or what might I do wrong. I want to thank you for being the dedicated leader and supervisor and ask for any assistance you can provide in this matter as it will allow me to more effectively do my job. I have always had the utmost respect for you and the manner in which you carry yourself and inspire others.

Sincerely,

Ethan Wilson
Dean, Student & Family Life

After I received his letter, I reassured him that I was his immediate supervisor and I would be his evaluator. I assured him that I would not let their pressure impact his record and performance. I felt better about my discussion with him and I planned to try my best to block the blows of the CMO. My strategy was to focus on what I could manage and to just keep recruiting kids to increase our enrollment numbers. It was my hope that the closer we got to moving our enrollment numbers the less pressure we would get from the CMO. I hoped that I was right.

In early August 2012, the CMO decided to run radio ads and send out flyers and marketing materials to people all over Baltimore City. In the advertisements, they promoted “free transportation” for everyone, although the promise of transportation services for everyone would increase our operating costs and decrease our funding for academic resources. Mr. Wilson continued to provide daily numbers to the CFO and president and the numbers grew incrementally. We even made a deal with two neighborhood staples within the community, affectionately known by the nicknames Squirrel and Rabbit, that if they would help us spread the word about our school and recruit students we would return the favor. Squirrel was a DJ and we promised to use his services for school activities in turn for his support. Rabbit had two grandchildren and we
admitted her two little ones in turn for her support to get others to attend our school. We scrambled and scrambled and our numbers continued to inch up. The numbers grew, but unfortunately not fast enough for my CMO. The school year started with fewer than 660 students.

The doomsday for enrollment numbers was notoriously known as “count day,” September 30. This was the day that the school district would lock in the numbers and school budgets would be based on the number of students enrolled. When the school year started we were at 645 students. We needed 15 more students by September 30 and we were getting a lot of pressure from the president and the CFO. During one of our back-to-school nights in September, the president and CFO showed up unannounced to meet with Mr. Wilson about enrollment. He did not know they were coming. They came into his office and closed the door. When I walked into the main office, I saw them standing in the window of his office door. I opened the door and came in to the discussion at the “What are you doing to increase enrollment?” part of the conversation. I could tell by the look on Mr. Wilson’s face that he was frustrated and the tone of his voice changed from explanatory to irate and defensive. I interjected and added all of the things we had done to impact the enrollment, including the neighborhood canvassing, block party, community connections, and early childhood centers we had visited. As I rattled off the list of things we had done, Mr. Wilson chimed in and continued to add more details. We launched a verbal assault on the both of them that they were not prepared for. We gave them so much detail about our efforts that we did not let them get a word in to ask an additional question. By the time we came up for air and stopped speaking, they nodded
their heads, and the CMO said, “It sounds like you all are doing a great job,” and they abruptly left.

After they left, Mr. Wilson and I shared a hi-five and talked about how they barged in without any information, and how we were successful in shutting them down. For me, it was a good moment but a bad one at the same time. They had some nerve busting into my school to address one of my staff members! How could they think that was ok? The visit was unannounced, so although I was able to spring into action, I was annoyed that they felt it was ok to just pop up at my school and confront one of my staff members. It was inappropriate and disrespectful. I did not appreciate that I was not being respected as a leader and the person who should communicate concerns to my staff. That was not their responsibility. I felt firm in my belief but unsure of what next steps to take to communicate this in a way that did not seem confrontational or inappropriate. One part of me did not care about appropriateness and the other part of me did. I could not get myself in a space to feel confident about how to address my feelings. I decided to just wait until I had a better understanding of how to approach the situation.

Mr. Wilson was also the point of contact for transportation services. As a result of the marketing and increase in the student enrollment, we had to add additional buses to our fleet. Due to the last-minute nature of the additional buses, we had to contract with different companies. We had a total of nine buses and Mr. Wilson worked with six different bus service providers. He scrambled to get students signed up and on the bus routes that would be best for them. He had to coordinate the bus schedules for almost 400 students. We did not have much space for buses to pull up to the school and we had to also worry about the carpool traffic to and from school on mornings and afternoons. Mr.
Wilson met with all of the bus companies and scheduled all of the students for busing. There were many hiccups even after all that we learned during the first year.

Managing five different bus companies was challenging. Due to our rapid expansion, Baltimore City Public Schools did not have any contracts with bus companies that owned enough buses to service our busing needs. As a result, we were forced to contract with different companies to meet our high need and demand for service. Buses were frequently late and did not pick up students at certain bus stops, some bus aides were unprofessional, and one of the bus drivers got into a feud with a group of parents that had to be resolved by school administration and police. As a result of these challenges, which we somewhat did anticipate due to the volume of students riding the bus and the lack of accountability on the part of the bus companies, Mr. Wilson became the person of blame. Dr. Foss did not feel that Mr. Wilson handled the bus challenges appropriately, and he wanted me to give him some feedback on his work. Parents complained about Mr. Wilson but their complaints were centered around his control of the bus companies. We sent many emails to complain about bus service and many fell on deaf ears. It was a difficult situation. My COO, Ms. Grady, and CMO president, Dr. Foss, planned a meeting with Mr. Wilson and me to discuss his performance. Ms. Grady told me that she and Dr. Foss felt that I was not giving Mr. Wilson the much-needed feedback they had been sharing with me, so they decided to do it on their own. I should have called his union and mine and stopped the meeting, but I did not. I thought that going to the meeting would allow them to say whatever they wanted and it would not matter because I was his formal evaluator.
The meeting was really short. The meeting started with “Your performance is unsatisfactory” and ended with Mr. Wilson walking out. The president did not give him a chance to talk and told him that working at the school meant that he was to work long hours and not complain, and that the success of the organization came first before anything else. Mr. Wilson got up from the table and walked out and said he was getting his things. He asked me if he could leave for the day. I told him he could leave and reassured him that I was the leader of the school and his evaluator. He packed up his stuff and left.

The next day I received a write-up letter from the president, and later that day I received a resignation from Mr. Wilson.

October 4, 2012

Ms. Riggins,

It is with extreme thought, consideration, reluctances, and sorrow that I formally tender my resignation to leave the position of Dean of Student and Family Life at Newton Academy Baltimore. I have enjoyed working with you, Ms. Lane and Ms. Ball as part of the school’s leadership team and believe that we have accomplished a tremendous amount of work with the students and family members. The job I was originally hired to do provided me with a plethora of opportunities to assist students, family, and staff in meaningful ways and afforded me with creative ways to help explore, create, contribute and maintain and build the school culture. Since this school year has started I have been harassed by the Child Guardian staff (I submitted my complaint to Ms. Grady regarding Dr. Foss), watched the Guild neglect the provision of adequate resources to maintain and manage a safe school environment, and providing, in my opinion, a false sense of help while only focusing on the aftercare program. I have experienced decisions made by people who have no clue and work that is questioned and micro-managed; along with actions that have been taken without consideration for what’s happening at Newton Academy Baltimore. An individual was sent to Newton under the impression of helping to build upon and re-strengthen the school’s culture and helping to acculturate the new students. Instead, he simply walked around, took notes, replicated work and left me wondering why these resources were wasted when help was much-needed elsewhere.
While it may seem harsh, given the number of organizations I have worked with nationally and internationally; I have a general sense that our management company is not fully interested in the safety, well being or education of the students; but in what it can gain through them. It seems to make sense to me to ensure that the schools that are opened are stable, well staffed and operating according to mission prior to opening another Newton Academy school. I’ve watched donors parade around to generate more funding and yet, no additional staff have been provided to support the influx of over 200 students riding the bus.

My job has turned away from a position that afforded me the opportunity to work with students around the developmental challenges and conflicts they experience each day; to one of navigating buses, bus companies, parents who want to complain, and students who won’t obey the rules on the bus and enough has simply become enough. I’ve been cursed out, wrongly blamed for circumstances beyond my control, nagged, and many times unable to leave beyond work hours because of a child left behind. The job simply is no longer fun anymore and my heart is torn because it is not there.

I am committed to ensuring that clear information systems are available for the school prior to my departure with regard to the bus system, student bus listings, communications systems, and any particular information that may be helpful with the operation and communication to and from parents and the bus companies.

I will also ensure that a volunteer base has been set up and a meeting has been scheduled where these volunteers receive a proper orientation and assignments given that they get fingerprinted and a background check through the Baltimore City Public School System. If the future provides the opportunity to work with some of the students in a different capacity, I will consider working with you. My last day will be November 2, 2012. This will allow 30 days to help assist a replacement and allow ample time to ensure that everything listed above is in place. Please let me know if you have any questions and if this date is acceptable or if you want me to leave sooner.

Sincerely,

Ethan N. Wilson

He gave us four weeks and planned to leave in November. I was devastated. It was one of the first times during my principalship when I felt that I did not have any control and that I could not support my staff. My right-hand person who did anything and everything I asked to support our school would be leaving. I worried less about his responsibilities and
more about the broken trust and my inability to shield him from my operator. I felt really bad about the situation and did not know what else to do to fix it. It shook me because I did not feel I knew what to do to control the situation. I was not sure of how else to lead my staff without having some issue that they felt was pressing, and decided to approach my staff about it rather than waiting for them to come to me as they should have.

This situation was a reality-jolting experience for me. I had built trust with this staff member and had been working with him since the school’s inception, and there was nothing I could do to stop him from leaving. I wondered if it was my fault and if there was anything I could have done differently. Should I have contacted the union for support? Should I have told my BCPS supervisor to attend the meeting? Should I have refused the meeting? I second-guessed my actions numerous times and could not find a sense of peace. Mr. Wilson resigned and left as scheduled. The CMO decided to hire a temporary person, Mr. Craig, to support my school in the interim until we found another person.

The new dean, Mr. Craig, came in two weeks after Mr. Wilson left. He was awkward and not knowledgeable about how to support a school. He had trouble managing the buses and had a breakdown after the second week he was in Mr. Wilson’s position. One day, he even came to me and told me he did not know how to “manage these kids,” and that he needed help. He called Dr. Foss and asked if he could hire an assistant for him. Dr. Foss agreed and hired another two people to assist. One person was verbally berated by an irate parent over a transportation issue. He quit a week later. The other person put a student on the wrong bus and the parent called the police. After the pressure of potentially having a missing student, she did not come back that next day.
Three people had been hired to do the job of one person. Mr. Craig notified the president and told him that the stress of the position was taking a toll on him and that he would not be back after January.

At the end of January, we hired Mr. Henry as our new dean. Mr. Henry had experience working with adults and young juveniles in a therapeutic setting and was excited to join our team. Although I still felt the effects of Mr. Wilson’s departure and felt he was irreplaceable, I was excited about Mr. Henry joining us. Initially Mr. Henry seemed to quickly adjust to the demands of the position. Parents liked him and told us that he was supportive and helpful. He had a lot to learn about systems and accountability as well as how to manage all of the various bus companies. He did a satisfactory job considering all of the different things he had to handle and that he joined us in the middle of the school year. He dropped a few balls that my assistant principal and I had to address, but we understood it as a part of his learning curve as a new member of our team. Some irate parents he did not call back, and various loose ends he did not tie up. There was nothing major, but a lot of minor stuff fell back on my plate. I was right. Mr. Wilson was irreplaceable. We had two different people attempt to do his job and neither one of them could handle it with the efficiency, organization, and detail that he did. I missed working with him and I took the brunt of the extra work to fill in the gaps. However, Dr. Foss loved Mr. Henry because he was calm and “professional.” I continued to pick up the slack and tried to support Mr. Henry as I could. Ultimately, I was responsible for all aspects of the school’s operation, so I had to figure out how to support him and coach him just as I had to do with my other staff members. The extra duties I incurred were sometimes overwhelming, but after a few months I was able to schedule
check-ins and other structures to ensure that I was able to minimize the amount of things that fell through the cracks.

That year, Ms. Lane, our assistant principal, had entered an internal principal preparation program for Baltimore City assistant principals to prepare them to lead their own schools. She had always wanted to be a principal and was the first runner up for principal of my school. She came from another school in Baltimore City and she was an IB coordinator—the perfect background for our school, as we are an Expeditionary Learning school. Ms. Lane had worked in BCPS for 15 years before becoming an assistant principal. They told her she was a great candidate but that she needed experience as an assistant principal before becoming a principal. She accepted the position as an assistant principal in preparation to eventually become a principal. They told her that they would be opening other schools and she would have the opportunity to become principal as she worked with the organization.

At the end of that year, Ms. Lane left to lead her own school. She was selected to become the principal of a traditional Baltimore City school and she left at the beginning of June to start because the district moved her earlier than we expected. When she inquired about a position with the CMO, they told her that they were looking at a former board member to become the principal of the new school in Laurel, MD, slated to open that fall. She wanted to become a principal and felt that they were not planning to deliver on what was promised to her when she accepted the position as assistant principal. She took their actions as overlooking her talent and not honoring their commitment to her as a member of the organization who should have the opportunity to lead her own school. She continued to inquire and they did not respond to her. She took a different route, and, after
she decided to leave, they asked her why and promised her they would have a position for her in the near future. She declined the offer to stay and left to lead her own school. By the end of the 2012–13 school year, I was the only founding leader of the school still standing.

**Instructional Guidance Systems**

**Consistent change: Instructional system in motion.** As an Expeditionary Learning school, we entered our second year with a new school designer, Ms. Davey. She was energetic, knowledgeable, and excited to work with us. My COO, Ms. Grady, was the former Mid-Atlantic Regional Director for EL, so she knew Ms. Davey really well.

I spent three days that summer planning with Ms. Davey for the upcoming school year. My assistant principal was on vacation during our planning session so we planned for the upcoming school year together. We wrote our school’s work plan and created goals for the school year focused on instructional systems as well as climate and culture. I knew that we would need to focus on climate and culture for another year considering that two-thirds of our school population was new to our school. We needed to focus on expectations, rules, and norms with students for those first few weeks of school to prepare them. We also decided to add Crew, an advisory-like social-emotional structure, to our schedule. In addition to the development of our work plan we also had to revamp our school schedule to include the expansion of our cultural arts courses. In our first year we had Drama, Physical Education, and Art. To accommodate the increased size of the student population, we added an art teacher and a music teacher to our program. The music teacher did not have any resources to start the school year. When I hired her, I was
very transparent and told her that we had nothing for a music program. We started with ordering recorders, seating, and other basic music supplies to get her started.

Ms. Davey, our school designer, supported instruction and the development of our School Leadership Team (SLT). The SLT consisted of school administrators and the grade-level team leaders. We met on a bi-weekly basis so we would be able to push moving instruction through the team leaders and increase buy-in from teachers on school initiatives and goals. This was a change from our first year, when our school leadership team consisted of myself, our assistant principal, and our dean.

After many sessions to revise our master schedule, we were able to account for the increase in the arts courses, add Crew for our fourth- and fifth-grade students, and plan for lunch and recess transitions. We were able to ensure daily common planning for every team with the exception of kindergarten. Kindergarten had common planning only three days of the week. We used common planning time for grade-level team meetings and expedition planning so that teachers would be able to map out how they would ensure that they were prepared for our bi-annual celebrations of learning. As we considered how to make the planning and preparation better for teachers, we decided to have each teacher submit their expedition plans and supply lists to us for approval. Against the direction of the CMO’s Director of Finance assigned to manage our budget, we purchased gift cards for teachers to use to buy small supplies for experiments and inexpensive things they needed to support classroom instruction. We spent many common planning sessions reviewing data from MAPS testing and planning expeditions. Testing was difficult because we had such a small number of computers in the building,
but we managed to test all of our students. Our school designer supported our work that year, and we were able to continue to have our celebrations of learning.

Our parents, families, and stakeholders support the celebrations of student learning as a normal part of our school’s function and programming. It was an aspect of our programming that made our school feel whole and normal, similar to the feelings we had our first school year. Parents and students were excited and happy to share all that they had learned. We did not have many instructional hiccups that year other than testing issues due to the small amount of computers we had in the school.

The school leadership team led their teams in the analysis of data and the development of expedition plans. As a leader, I read expedition plans and provided teachers with feedback on their plans as a part of the approval process. After plans were approved, each team would receive an order form for bulk purchases such as trade books and units aligned to expeditions. They would also receive a small $300 budget to purchase small supplies that they could buy on their own. All teacher teams were also responsible for planning for experts to come in to support student learning as well as plan meaningful fieldwork experiences outside of the school. One of our goals that year was to support teachers in planning expeditions for a more authentic purpose. Although we appreciated the support of families and stakeholders in visiting the school for celebrations of learning, we wanted more engagement and student buy-in for a more authentic purpose. We wanted students to consider their study in terms of a larger purpose. This was really important for our fourth- and fifth-grade students. In examining student work products, we noticed that many of the products were focused on the “best” products rather than focused on the draft and revision process that was characteristic of EL
schools. We figured out that we needed to support teachers in thinking deeply about the expeditions and also about how to give students meaningful feedback so that they were all able to better support students. We also had to take into account the number of new teachers we had that year and how their experiences impacted their understanding of how to plan expeditions. Even with a school designer’s support, developing curriculum in a school can be challenging. With such a unique and organic learning model, we were bound to have challenges. Some expeditions were not rigorous enough, some were not well planned, and some were amazing learning experiences for students and parents. The quality was based heavily on the experience level of the staff members.

**Professional Capacity**

**Expanding teacher capacity: The challenge in change.** I had to hire about 30 teachers. Although I did not lose many teachers at the end of the first year, I had to hire enough teachers for an additional 330 students. We were scheduled to have four kindergarten classes, six classes on the first-, second-, third-, and fourth-grade levels, and two classes on the fifth-grade level. I had so many new teachers to hire and my hiring committee had to sift through at least 100 resumes. During the first year we recruited a handful of teachers from a traditional Baltimore City public school that were pretty strong hires. The school was an IB school, so many of the hires had experience with planning for engaging student activities and learning experiences. Many of the hires we selected were from references from other staff members, and some hires were strong and could handle the work of planning expeditions. Some of the staff members we hired had
difficulty with high levels of collaboration and planning with colleagues, and this created many challenges as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| Kindergarten – 4 Teachers | All experienced  
One from a lab school  
Two from traditional boxed-curriculum schools  
One substitute teacher from a traditional background |
| 1st Grade – 6 Teachers | Two experienced teachers – transfers from traditional BCPS schools  
One brand new teacher |
| 2nd Grade – 6 Teachers | Three experienced teachers – transfers from BCPS schools: One from a charter school, one from an IB school, one from a traditional BCPS school |
| 3rd Grade – 6 Teachers | Two experienced teachers – one from a Catholic School, one from a traditional school  
One brand new teacher, two teachers new to the district |
| 4th Grade – 5 Teachers | Two experienced teachers – one from an IB BCPS school, one from a traditional school, three teachers new to the district |
| Art - 2, PE, Drama, Music Teacher | Art Teacher – experienced, returning from last year  
PE Teacher – brand new teacher  
Drama Teacher – brand new teacher and after-school program coordinator  
Music – experienced transfer from traditional BCPS school |
| 5th Grade – 3 Teachers | Two experienced teachers, one was at the school the year before and taught first grade, one from another traditional school in BCPS, one brand new teacher from Baltimore City Teaching Residency |

Figure 4.3: Year-2 Staffing at Newton Academy

This year, we had some pretty strong teachers and fortunately were able to keep many of the teachers we had from our first year. Though the new teachers on the team were
strong, many of them were used to working in traditional schools where they operated in silos. One of our biggest challenges was supporting true and effective collaboration between teacher teams to plan expeditions. Our school designer would plan and meet with individual teacher teams in order to support their expedition work and thinking, but there were some personality conflicts and challenges between members of the teams. One of the main challenges was the idea of the “team leader” and the idea of someone being “in charge” of the team. Some teachers appreciated it and others felt that they didn’t want someone telling them what to do. Many teams also struggled with the idea of sharing ideas for expeditions and became upset if the group did not adopt or respond to their choice of activity or idea. Despite this issue, the teams were able to push through and have successful expeditions. During celebrations of learning, parents were excited and always amazed by the amount of planning and preparation the students had invested in showcasing their learning. The celebrations of learning brought back the “old” feeling of our first year at our initial school location. We were pleased with ourselves and our parents were pretty pleased with us as well. Celebrations of learning made me feel as if we were offering the same quality education we had promised we would offer and delivered on the first year. Although some of the projects could have had a stronger purpose and a deeper meaning, that was more of a long-term goal. Our students were engaged, focused on learning, and produced authentic work products. We were proud of the work we had done and had some semblance of our first year’s success even with a more than 50% increase in our student body and also new teaching staff.

Although we were off to a good start and we had some strong teachers, we had some challenges with attrition. One of our teachers from our first year asked to be moved
from third grade to first grade for that year because she felt that she wanted to work with younger students. I thought the move would be good for her because she was a hard worker and very receptive to feedback but struggled with relationship building with third-graders and their families. I thought first grade would be a good fit for her. It seemed to be going well until late October, when she asked to meet with me and told me that she was accepting a job as a professional developer and would not be returning after Thanksgiving. I was partially indifferent to it because I had lost a teacher the previous year. I did not take it personally because I believe that many young professionals make career changes when opportunities present themselves. I personally would not leave a school before the end of a school year, but I cannot judge someone for taking their shot when opportunity knocks. I was anxious about finding another first-grade teacher and I did not have any viable candidates on the horizon.

Just a few weeks earlier, the fifth-grade science teacher resigned. The teacher and I had a pretty charged showdown in regard to her upcoming wedding. She planned a wedding and decided that she wanted to take the entire week after Thanksgiving off. At the time BCPS had a policy that stated before or after major holidays were off-limits for additional leave requests unless there were extenuating circumstances. I told the teacher in July when she came in to submit the leave slip that I could not grant her the leave. My rationale was that I wanted to honor the policy. I strongly feel that prioritizing a wedding for leave and not other leave requests indicates that I am making a values judgment. To the rest of my staff, that would be the message that marriage is more important than other potential reasons for leave. I did not want to send the message to my staff that one person’s life event was more important than someone else’s. The easiest and best way for
me to do this was to be firm in adhering to the policy without deviation from the process. The science teacher did not agree. She gave me an ultimatum and told me that if I did not change my mind she would not be returning. It was a bold move and I figured she probably had another job already, and that this was her way out. I told her I would not be changing my mind would not approve the leave. About two weeks before the end of September, she submitted her resignation letter. It stated that she did not receive enough “support” for her professional goals. By the end of November, I had two vacancies to fill without a prospective teacher in sight.

In December 2012, I was able to connect with a teacher I worked with in 2001, when I first started teaching in a private school. She was available and I asked her to start immediately. It took about a month for her to get paid and I had to harass my CMO to process her through their HR department. She was not certified to teach in BCPS, so I could not hire her as a teacher. It was also a lengthy process to hire her as a substitute. Substitute pay was not attractive because it was only $75 per day. What would be the likelihood of getting a quality substitute who would be able to collaborate with my staff and help plan expeditions? How much can you expect from someone getting paid less than $75 a day to work in a high-needs school? The science teacher was also difficult to replace. It somewhat made me second-guess my decision to stick to my guns. Now my kids did not have a teacher. I continued to look for substitutes and a Mr. Santiago reached out inquiring about substitute positions with my school. He wrote in his email that he was familiar with charters in BCPS and was interested in an immediate position. He came to the school for an interview and was pretty personable and knowledgeable, and was well received by my students. In fact, he was interviewed by a few of my student
ambassadors, and some of them knew him from their last school. They all said he was a great teacher and they wanted him to work at our school. I kept him on as a substitute for about a month and all seemed to be going well. After about six weeks as a substitute, he sent me an email asking to be hired as a BCPS employee. He told me that he was looking at other school opportunities and he would not be able to work for such a small amount of money. I thought back to the first teacher I lost and considered his situation. I did not like him pushing me against a wall and I really wanted to see more of his work before I hired him full-time. I wondered why he was available for a position in the first place. Why was he not teaching at a school already? Why did he really leave his last school? I had no reservations about asking because I wanted to know. He told me his last school had to let him go because of the budget when they downsized their staff. He also said that he felt they were not serving students in the way that they should have. I did not pry any more because I thought that he was respectful in the way he mentioned his former school, and the references he had on his list were no longer at the school when I called to speak with someone. I decided to take the risk and hire him full-time as a teacher. I did not want my kids to miss out on the consistency of having a teacher and I did not want to lose him to any other school. It took weeks for HR to process him as a hire. I was sure it was the normal procrastination that usually took place at central office. I called and spoke to our HR staffing specialist and inquired about why he was not processed. The staffing specialist asked me if I was sure I wanted to hire him and encouraged me to just keep him as a long-term sub. The conversation was weird because I did not know why she was encouraging me to keep him on as a sub, but I figured it was just her way of avoiding the labor of getting him processed. I was wrong.
About a month in, Mr. Santiago started showing movies, calling out saying he had sick children at home, a stalling car, a flat tire, an illness, and a host of other issues. His colleagues on his team were annoyed that spring because he was supposed to be supporting the spring expedition and celebration of learning. The team was upset that he was not pulling his weight. His team leader was upset with his performance and reported to me that he did not attend their weekly team meetings. She was furious and frustrated with his behavior. She took over the expeditions as the other science teacher and emphasized that she did not want the kids to be embarrassed and unprepared for our celebration of learning. I met with Mr. Santiago and he stated that he had some personal issues that he was struggling with. I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt and asked his team members to pick up the slack until he got through his personal challenges. The “challenges” came one after another in such rapid succession that we all wondered if any of what he said was real. His underperformance led me to write him up for showing movies, not following protocols for calling in when he was absent, and overall negligence of his work. No sooner than I began writing him up, he started calling the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU). The BTU union rep told me that I did not follow the protocol for one of his write-ups and that I would need to retract it. I did not even know there was a protocol. I retracted the write-up and figured out the policies so that I could keep up with Mr. Santiago. He knew the union contract back, front, and all around. Everything I called him out on he challenged.

I later found out that he was terminated from his last position at a school for the same behaviors. I found out from a colleague through another colleague that worked with him at his last school. Unfortunately for me, BCPS had a policy that allowed terminated
staff members evaluated out of the system to re-enter the system after two years. Their record was to be kept confidential and they would be eligible for rehire. I found this out too late and remembered the “advice” from the staffing specialist. How could they allow someone to be eligible for rehire that they KNEW did not teach kids? Why did she not tell me to watch out? I was annoyed by the game playing that had to ensue as a result of me not being wise enough to figure out that he was not a good hire. I continued to write him up and because of the policy I had to keep him for an extra year. I put him on a performance improvement plan and he fought that, although it was not against his union agreement. The performance plan stayed in place because I learned the contract quickly and figured out how to maneuver and navigate the union contract just as well as he did.

At the end of that year, our school designer, Ms. Davey, told us it would be her last year with us. She was expecting and planned to take time off as a new mother to her little soon-to-be bundle of joy. I was disappointed by this because Ms. Davey was a wonderful addition to our staff. She helped us to imagine the possibilities for our work in the midst of transition and starting fresh with so many new staff members and students. We were scheduled to meet new potential school designers. I was able to work with Ms. Davey that summer until Ms. Boudre came on board. Ms. Boudre was equally motivated and passionate. She had background in Guided Reading and had worked at an Expeditionary Learning charter school in Baltimore before she started working for EL as a school designer. She was easy to work with and helped us plan for our upcoming transition to another school building, and also our welcoming another 330 students to our school.
Student-Centered Learning Climate

Learning as spectacle: Showcasing student learning success. Our celebrations of learning were the highlight of every semester. Each celebration of learning provided parents with the opportunity to come to school and to see their child as a learner. One of our goals was to make sure that every student had a role and a responsibility to carry out as a part of the class’s goal in educating parents, families, and visitors. One thing we learned from the year before was that some students would not have visitors from their family come to support them. The first year, we did not anticipate the impact of this on the kids, and we had some kids cry because a promise from a parent or family member did not come to fruition. Seeing kids excited to share and having meltdowns from disappointment resonated with me deeply, and I wanted to help buffer some of those feelings. In order to have an audience for all students, we scheduled students to visit other students and also parents, support staff, and other stakeholders to visit students. We thought it was important for every student to have an opportunity to share their learning with someone.

Despite our success with student engagement and hands-on learning experiences, there was a push to collect more data from standardized assessments. We were mandated by the CMO to use the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing as the standard assessment for our students. We required each teacher to record students’ Fountas and Pinnell (1996) reading levels on a quarterly basis, and we monitored students’ progress. It wasn’t enough. The CMO wanted more data and more testing cycles, but we did not have the capacity to test students with the MAP assessment three times a year. We had 60 laptops with which to
test students. We did not have space for a computer lab in such a small school building and I was told that purchasing new computers was “not in the budget.” It took us weeks to test our students and some students had to be retested because we did not have steady Wi-Fi in the building. The internet would go out and students would need to be logged in again and restart their assessment. We knew this had an impact on students’ performance but we tried to just focus on the data we collected from the assessment and to plan accordingly.

There were other changes in our parent population. In our first year many of our parents came from another international charter school that they were not satisfied with. They were excited about our school’s mission and believed in what we planned to do. As we entered that second year and kept our doors open to meet our enrollment numbers, the message changed. It was no longer a message focused on our mission and the notion of being a “private school education at a public school price”; it was about meeting our enrollment numbers. Many of the parents were challenging to work with at times and did not buy in to some of the routines and expectations for our school. There were parents who did not want to adhere to the carpool norms, parents who frequently used foul language when they did not want to follow the rules, and many who also did not attend our school events. The climate of the school changed, too. This seemed to be related to a divide between the parents in East Baltimore versus the ones from West Baltimore. A large majority of the most active parents in the school turned their noses at the parents from West Baltimore. The stereotypes and connotations associated with West Baltimore created a wedge between them and the families from East Baltimore.
Strong Parent–Community–School Ties

East side versus west side: A change in family connectivity. When we moved to West Baltimore, we attracted a large number of students and parents within walking distance of the school. In addition, the CMO opened up other bus routes in the area of traditional neighborhood schools. The bus routes for these areas were expanded to accommodate the demands and the desire to meet the enrollment numbers. Many of the returning parents from the first year spoke negatively of the kids and parents in West Baltimore.

I recall one parent in particular who came to help out at our school beautification day. I greeted and embraced her and she thanked me for allowing her grandchildren to attend the school and she shared some horror stories regarding schools within the neighborhood. At the time, I did not notice that the parent was not wearing a bra and her breasts were sagging in her tank top. I was grateful for her work ethic and support. We had some old bookshelves that we wanted to spruce up and she single-handedly sanded and painted one of the shelves. While she was working, I noticed my executive PTA board members snickering and talking to the side. They continued to stare at her. She kept working and did not notice. I did. One of the PTA members stopped me, shook her head and said she’d be happy when we got out of this horrible neighborhood as she looked over at her. I did not say anything to her. I wish I had spoken up for her. I did not want to stir the pot of judgment, nor did I want to taste what she was trying to serve up. I wish she had paid attention to the fact that that same parent without the bra finished sanding and painting three bookshelves that day.
There was an overrepresentation of East Baltimore parents on the PTA. They were in place from the first year of operation and remained powerful and influential. The great thing about the PTA was that they were 110% supportive of me and my work. Many of them I remembered from open house sessions and I knew all of their children and could recall stories of when I first met them. The personal and family-like nature of our interactions developed a level of respect and support that I truly appreciated. I had these positive interactions with many families and welcomed newcomers to our school, although the getting-to-know-you connection was not exactly the same. In reflecting on my own leadership, I should have scheduled some more collaborative get-to-know-each-other events.

Honestly I do not know if that would have helped because of the historically deep-rooted divide of East and West Baltimore. West Baltimore was typically associated with being crime- and drug-ridden while East Baltimore, though home to some rough neighborhoods, was considered by many to be more suburban and metropolitan. I did not know that there was such a severe divide until I watched it play out in my school.

There were several parents from West Baltimore who wanted to join the PTA but refused, saying that the members of the PTA were “bougie” and “exclusive,” so they avoided them. I recall intervening when two parents were in a heated argument and one parent said, “Just because I’m from West Baltimore you think you can talk to me like that…” That situation emphasized that the divide I saw was also apparent to many others.

Despite some major growing pains and a divide between East and West Baltimore families, there was one pivotal board meeting that showed that the parents were not as
divided as I thought. When we came over to the temporary building, the CMO promised families a host of different things to get them to stay and endure the safety risks of the neighborhood. For starters, they promised that we would have security and the lighting outside of the building would be fixed. The campus was a block long and a block wide. The lighting outside did not work and at night it was pitch black with a faint hint of lighting from the streetlights on the other side of the street. We had a few night events and only the glow of headlights and cars from parents leaving school events added a glow to the school that aided in people feeling safe and being able to fully see their surroundings. It was early November and the lights had not been fixed and we still did not have security. During my monthly parent chats, my families brought up these two issues and I promised them I would bring these two issues to the attention of my operator. I had in fact brought up the issue many times before my families even noticed. My CMO stated that we did not have any more money, and the modifications to the building left us with no money to invest into anything else. I wondered how we could run out of money when promises were given to parents. I thought about the risk that many parents took following us to the school when they had other options throughout the city. I thought about the relational trust we were destroying by not doing what we said we would. It put me in an awkward and unsettling position as a leader. I did not want to be the person to promise something and not deliver on it. For many parents and families our school gave them hope—hope of a high-quality education that they did not have to pay exorbitantly for. Many parents through their actions showed that they supported me, and I felt indebted to them to deliver on what we promised. In this case I was the messenger.
and I did not have control over what they did and did not deliver on. I was in the middle. I wanted to support my CMO but I felt my families and kids were more important.

On this particular day and at this board meeting, I felt a little bit of justice. Two members of the PTA came to me and asked me if they could do anything to support me. I told them I had stated all of their concerns to the CMO and they said they were confident that I had shared the information. They were fed up with the CMO and angry that the promises that were made in the beginning of the year were broken and forgotten about. They wanted justice. I did not know what else to say but to tell them to come to the board meeting to express their concerns. The president of the CMO was a member of the board and he would have the opportunity to hear their concerns. My COO would be there also, and although she was not really to blame for not following through on promises, she did not really push the issue, so I did not get much support from her end.

I did not know the power of my words until I arrived at that meeting. There were about 50 parents in attendance in addition to about 12 staff members. The board members were surprised at the attendance but did not see what was coming. In past board meetings, attendance was always sparse, with the exception of an irate parent who wanted to vent about an issue. I always tried my best to resolve parent situations in a way that did not leave issues lingering. Creating win-win outcomes made families and parents feel empowered and satisfied with the resolution of conflict in difficult situations. More often than not, one or two parents showed up just to listen, and had positive things to say about the school. On many occasions, no one showed up and the board was left to carry on with their agenda with no one signed up to speak. On that day, there were three parents signed up to speak. Generally, parents seldom signed up to speak at board
meetings. One of the board members asked me what was going on and why were there so many parents at the meeting. I played dumb. I admittedly did not give them a heads up. I wanted them to feel the emotions and concerns of the families in the way I did. I was tired of asking them to deliver on promises they made that they did not feel were important enough to pay attention to. I felt a little bad for some of the members because they had no idea what was going on. Many of the board members were friends or acquaintances of the president of the CMO. Two people were his neighbors and one person was also on the board for the CMO’s company. For the most part he handpicked all of the board members. No one on the board had a background in education.

When it was time for public comment, the parents were passionate and well spoken. One parent read her speech from her iPad. They brought up a host of issues—security, lighting, the neighborhood dangers, updates on the progress of the permanent school building, classroom sizes, and more. They told the board that they were irresponsible for putting us in this building with so many problems, such as inadequate air and heating. The parents dropped the mother lode on them. Some board members were shocked and looked nervous. The board chair, Ms. Gardner, made a statement to dismiss the concerns and move on with the agenda. She said something to the effect of, “We will talk through your concerns with the principal.” When she said that, parents became enraged. After all they shared, she dismissed them. One parent told her, “No, this has nothing to do with the principal. It is all of you and what you aren’t doing. This is your problem and you need to fix it!” Parents rolled their eyes, told the board chair that she was dismissive, and the posture of the room changed. Parents were disappointed and angry. Staff members looked annoyed and disappointed. It was a very tense meeting.
After the meeting, the president of the CMO spent his time talking to various board members. One member told me she planned to step down. Another member was bombarded by my parents talking to him about all of the challenges and issues going on as a result of the move. The board chair packed her things up quickly and left the meeting. It was an eye-opening experience for both my families and the board members. Some of them realized they did not really know what was going on and how the move had negatively impacted students and families. The board members did not realize how little support the board provided to the school until they had the experience of being in such a well-attended board meeting. They heard the voices of parents firsthand and appeared startled by their passion and organization as a group of advocates for their children. They wanted their voices heard, and the message was loud and clear.

This experience definitely shook every board member, and it was evident through their facial expressions, lack of comfort speaking with parents after the meeting ended, and haste in leaving the building. On their way out, two board members mentioned resigning. Other board members were intimidated by the challenges and felt uncomfortable about being decision-makers on the board. Although uncomfortable, it worked. By the next week, we had full-time security staff members and someone came from BCPS to fix the lighting outside of the building. The roar of the parents had been heard. Although it was a tough meeting, it was necessary. I could not capture and express the frustration, disappointment, and urgency of the issues in the way that the parents did. They also affirmed that it was not my fault, and that they understood that certain responsibilities belonged to the CMO and were not in my purview.
The board members that came for the cute stories about urban kids completing hands-on projects and making academic and social gains in “their” school were not pleased with their impromptu schooling on the current state of things. It was a rough and difficult time for my school community, but it brought about results.

We made it though that year, and I sometimes wonder how we did it. I think it was the energy and power of the staff and families. We had shown them something different from the norm in Baltimore and they wanted that back. They were willing to wait for it but they were also willing to fight for it. We made it through school lockdowns, police raids of the neighborhood, daily scouring of the playground to remove drug paraphernalia and syringes stuck into the swings, and operating in a dilapidated and old Baltimore City school building. We found a way to continue the hope and inspiration that we started that school with.

I was excited about the move to the new building and the newfound hope it would offer to families. It was what we were all waiting for and wanted to see come to fruition. I had high hopes for what we would be able to do in the 90,000 square-foot building to serve our students. Our families were equally excited about the building until the months passed and they saw little to no progress in the construction of the building. I had another 330 students to recruit, and although we ended on a positive note, the relational trust with the school was on shaky ground. As a result, many of our families transferred to Mt. Lincoln, a prestigious traditional school in Baltimore City, after seeing the seemingly impossible timeline for construction and how close the targeted completion date was to the opening of school. Some parents were tired of the fight and decided to explore other options. We lost about 50 students that summer.
Leadership as Lesson: Other Duties as Assigned

At the end of my second year, I thought that I’d done a pretty decent job. We moved to West Baltimore and despite parents’ concerns with safety and the growth of the school, we had managed to maintain the reputation and uniqueness of our school’s program. The exponential growth and expansion was difficult, and we struggled with maintaining the school culture. By the end of the year, things had settled down and staff, students, and parents were excited and anxious to move to our new school home.

My evaluation conference was short. I was told that I was evaluated based on The Child Guardian’s assessment because the one for Baltimore City was pretty open-ended. I was speaking with Ms. Grady about the process and Mr. Harold joined us. He was responsible for submitting the ratings in the Baltimore City database. When Ms. Grady began to go through my ratings, she noted that I did not, according to Dr. Foss, have the “right mindset,” and that I needed to work on my management of my staff. She began mentioning things such as enforcing staff dress code and also my ability to implement progressive discipline with staff. She also talked about my ability to be flexible and “get the job done by any means” as well as my messaging to staff to ensure that everyone knew that was the organization’s expectation.

I soon realized that my evaluation would not be focused on academics and school culture. Ms. Grady used the evaluation process as a time to hold me accountable for things that happened during the school year. One day, Dr. Foss was upset that he brought visitors to the school and staff members wore jeans that day. It was our dress-down day for the month and all staff were encouraged to wear school apparel. She then emailed me
to tell me that I would need to ask for permission for all future staff dress-down days. I did not comply. I had already built it into my handbook and had a standing day for staff dress-down. I knew I was insubordinate for not adhering to Dr. Foss’s request, but I did not want to disappoint my staff. They knew I did not adhere to his request, so it was added to my evaluation.

I knew that the progressive discipline issue was the result of the departure of Mr. Wilson. Ms. Grady had warned me that if I did not discipline Mr. Wilson that it would come back to haunt me. I expected it, but it happened so early in the school year that I somewhat forgot. She told me that Dr. Foss felt that I was not exercising strong leadership skills and I would need to make improvements in accordance with the organizational standard. I was not in agreement with Ms. Grady and I expressed my concerns.

Before I could mention Mr. Wilson, Mr. Harold told Ms. Grady that she would need to stick to more substantial growth areas based on instruction, school climate and culture, and family engagement. She presented my rating as a 2.0 on a 4.0 scale with a document that is used to rate employees of The Child Guardian. Mr. Harold told Ms. Grady that she needed to use something more aligned to school-based metrics for performance. BCPS allowed charters to rate principals with their own tools. However, Mr. Harold told Ms. Grady that the document was not appropriate because it did not account for the specifics of a school environment. He told Ms. Grady he would reach out and schedule a meeting with her privately to discuss my ratings.

About a week later I met with Mr. Harold. He told me that my rating had been changed from 2.0 to 3.0. He explained that he discussed more school-specific domains
for principal evaluation with Ms. Grady and she agreed on most of them. He said that I should continue to reach out to him and let him know if I needed support with managing the CMO’s expectations for my work. He understood that I was responsible for many “other duties as assigned” related to transportation, school operations, and exponential growth that were unique to my principalship at Newton Academy.
Leadership Drives Change

Leader of the new school: New building, new challenges. I started my third year as a principal packing and labeling boxes for the move to our permanent school building. All the teachers had packed up their classrooms and I had to manage the move to the new building. I had been put in touch with a direct point of contact for the move, Ms. Lewinsky, to ensure that everything was moved and in place for the start of the school year. In addition, there was a project manager, Mr. Jentz, who was responsible for communicating with the contractors and ensuring that we were on target for completion. Our target completion date was August 15. It was not ideal because teachers would come back that week and there would be a lot of needs to meet to prepare for opening day. It was a tight timeline but I was confident that we could get settled and ready to open our doors to our students and families. We had planned to host tours and showcase the building in an open house format. Our families deserved to see our wonderful new home in all of its glory.

Our school always had pictures of students all over, as well as lots of artwork. An enhanced physical environment was one of our CMO’s values. I knew the timeline for completion would be tight and I did not want to welcome students to a bare building, so I had my two art teachers select pieces of student work to frame and pack so that we could hang it when we arrived at our new location. I felt it was important to have some artifacts
from our two campuses. We also brought professional pictures on foam board over with us to hang in the new building. I had tried to do everything I could to prepare for the transition, including considering furniture needs and also how to enhance the look of the facility. With such a tight move-in date, I knew I needed something we would be able to quickly throw on the walls in order to give the school more of a home-like feel.

The new building was not just going to be aesthetically pleasing and welcoming to students, but also named after a philanthropist and long-time resident of the neighborhood. John Maverick grew up in the neighborhood and owned the building we renovated and purchased from him, so our school’s opening was important to him personally. The building was previously inhabited by Comcast, and before that it was a Coca-Cola factory in the early 1970s. The building would be eventually named “the Maverick campus,” as he was a neighborhood resident and the previous owner of the building, and he also supported our CMO through the purchasing process, helping them get historic tax credits to discount the purchase of the property.

In late June 2013, we started getting calls from parents stating that they had driven by the building and did not see much construction going on and they wanted to know what the plan would be if the building was not ready. I did not have any answers. I had not though of the building not being ready. I planned to rely on my operator to ensure that we were in the building as scheduled. Was that not their responsibility and not mine? I did not have any say or control over what was going on at the building. I had been sp focused on the packing, ordering of furniture, and ensuring that we had a timeline for things necessary within the school that I had not inquired and checked on the status of the
building. Parents were withdrawing students left and right because they felt the building would not be ready. I had to go see things for myself.

On the first day of July 2013, I went over to visit the school site. Ironically enough, I had a hard hat in my trunk from the photo session we had in January from our groundbreaking. I had on flat thong sandals that day and knew I should not have entered a construction site without closed shoes. My curiosity led me to put my safety second to figuring out what was going on in my soon-to-be new home. When I pulled up to the school, it did not look as if much activity was going on. There were about five guys sitting outside the school. Two were smoking and the others were talking and laughing. I heard some noise inside the building so I decided to walk around. I saw metal beams, electrical wires hanging in lots of directions, and shells of spaces I could vaguely envision as classrooms. There was still a ton of work to be completed and I became very concerned that the building would not be completed on time for move in. I continued to walk around and I saw most of the workers standing around or on breaks. I asked to speak with Mr. Jentz when I saw the building foreman. The foreman shared that Mr. Jentz had not been on site since March and that he was in Michigan working on another project. I asked the building foreman if he was aware of the date for completion and he said he believed the building would be complete some time in late August or early September. I proceeded to tell him that school started for students on August 23 and that the building needed to be complete one week before that so that teachers could return and set up their classrooms. He then said he did not know about that because he would be on vacation. That threw me over the edge. There was no one who could give me answers
about the timeline. I felt nervous about starting yet another year off with a stressful move and a lot of confusion. I decided to email the CMO to figure out what was going on.

When I got back to my office, I sent a pretty long and scathing email expressing my discontent with the way things were unfolding. Where was the project manager? Why was he not on site to supervise the work and ensure things were on track for the timeline? Why did the building foreman have such a late move-in date? Why did so many of the workers seem so laid back when they should have been working? I had a lot of questions and no real answers. After I emailed the president of the CMO and my COO, they decided to schedule a conference call with me, the president of the CMO, the COO, Mr. Jentz, and Ms. Lewinsky. The call was semi-informative. I found out that the project manager did not plan to be on site most of the time and he did not really know what was going on. I also found out that Ms. Lewinsky was working on three other projects and thought that Mr. Jentz would be visiting the building regularly to check on things in an effort to ensure the timely completion of the project. It was a mess. No one was keeping the communication going so everyone expressed their perspective of someone doing something other than what they were all actually doing. After that meeting we scheduled weekly conference calls. That helped in some ways. The building did not get completed any faster and it did not add a newfound sense of urgency as I had expected. It actually provided an opportunity for more excuse making and communication about delays in the process, which just made me more nervous. Later that evening, I received an email from one of the CMO executives scolding me for wearing thong sandals on the construction site. They warned me of the safety issues and scolded me for being a liability to safety measures on a construction site. My own safety was the last thing on my mind.
In the end, we got occupancy for the building on the Friday before school opened. We had one weekend to get an entire 90,000 square-foot building ready to receive close to 1,000 students, plus their parents and family members, on Monday morning. It was a stressful time crunch of a weekend getting everything in place for the first day of school. Fortunately for me, almost all of my teachers came in that weekend in order to set up their classrooms. They invited husbands, boyfriends, relatives, and family members to help them blitz their classrooms into student-ready learning environments. They did an amazing job. The president of the CMO had other employees throughout the organization deployed to my school to help out. The extra manpower was critical. In addition to getting all of the pictures and student artwork hung, we were able to set up the classrooms of the teachers who were unable to come in. The CMO ordered food for staff as well.

During that crazy weekend, I had a falling out with Ms. Lewinsky. I had met with Ms. Lewinsky and discussed how to divide up the furniture. We had to ensure that every classroom had at least one bookshelf and enough furniture for 24 students. We actually met twice and I gave her a list of where all the furniture should go and which rooms it should be placed in. I personally labeled it all with names on pieces of masking tape and provided her with a copy of a guide so that she would know where each piece of furniture should go. I did not know if it was the crisis of moving into the building within two days or if she just forgot. I should have asked but I did not. I was in the building working on another project and came to the side of the building to see mass chaos. She told the teachers to “get what you need,” and it was feast or famine as teachers tugged and grabbed at things they wanted. Some teachers had three bookshelves for their rooms,
extra tables and chairs, or even other furniture that belonged in the library. It was a complete mess and it was every teacher for his or herself. I was upset with Ms. Lewinsky because she did not let me know that she misplaced the list and thus created unnecessary chaos. She disregarded the system we discussed prior to the move. I had to walk around and tell teachers they could only have one shelf each, check rooms to make sure people did not take extra furniture and other rooms were not short, and console a crying brand new teacher after she thought she would not get a shelf and would not have enough furniture for her room to welcome her new students.

What was so disturbing about moving in two days before school started was the anxious energy it brought to my school. I really do not think we ever recovered from that rushed spirit being unleashed within the school. The scramble of getting ready to open the doors for kids turned our efforts away from synergy, collaboration, and helping teachers to remain calm about the start of the school year. There was an air of excitement but also a feeling of despair and crisis. We were under the gun to get everything ready and settled and it all just was not organized in a way that helped teachers calm down. How could I calm them down when I was not calm either? I stayed at work until 1 a.m. on Friday night into Saturday morning and 2:30 a.m. Saturday night into Sunday morning. I came in that Sunday and left at 8:00 p.m. to rest. I was exhausted but I could not sleep. Just like a kid on Christmas, I was always excited to greet my students and families on the first day of school, so sleep was not on my agenda. The effects of sleep deprivation would not hit me until a few days after the excitement wore down.

Although we had moved into the school building and we had been granted occupancy in August, we continued to have contractors in the building finishing up work
in different areas of the building. They were there from the early hours of the day until later in the evening. On Saturday, at the end of the second week of school, there were contractors working in the building. I do not know exactly what they were doing, but one of them hit something that triggered the sprinkler system in three classrooms. Books, teachers’ posters, and many other things were damaged. Just the week before these teachers had put the finishing touches on their classrooms, and they were now flooded with water and soaked. I was actually in the school that Saturday, but I had left the campus to pick up lunch. When I came back I assessed the damages, called the CMO, and then called the teachers.

In order to dry the rooms out, the classes would need to move to other spaces in the building. We did not have any additional space to house the students. Three of our third-grade classrooms were impacted. We had to move the students while the rooms were dried to ensure that we did not face any potential mildew and mold issues. One teacher set up a classroom in an alcove in the third-grade wing. Two teachers decided to co-teach and as a result had classrooms with 45 students each. The rooms were not big enough to accommodate all of the students and furniture. For about three weeks, both teachers and students had to manage to work within this congested and confined classroom environment, and this led to quite a bit of bickering and discord between peers within each of the two overcrowded classrooms.

The scramble of the move and the flooding of classrooms were minor challenges in comparison the to issues we had with busing. Moving to the new school location included modifying all of the bus routes. Mr. Henry was responsible for coordinating and scheduling the bus service for all students. That first week of school the phones rang
nonstop with bus complaints ranging from buses coming late, buses leaving too early, unprofessional bus drivers and bus aides, and students fighting on the bus. I had hired an additional Dean of Students, Ms. Smett, to support our efforts to positively impact our school’s culture. Even with two deans we still did not get the bus routes and challenging situations under control. I tried the best I could but the bus situation was a never-ending battle. We had numerous bus companies to manage and Mr. Henry did not have relationships with the different companies and drivers, so there was no one in place to hold the bus companies accountable. On occasion I sent emails expressing my dismay and concerns about the quality of the bus service we had been receiving. The responses to remedy the situations were short-sighted and the effects were short-lived. I could not keep up with the demands of managing the various bus companies and all of the other things we had going on as a school. I needed someone that could keep up with the demands of supervising and micromanaging the various bus companies.

Having lost Ms. Lane and Mr. Wilson, I moved into year three as the only person from the original leadership team who had remained at the school. Because of the size of the school, I needed two assistant principals. One of the assistant principals I selected was formerly an instructional coach at another BCPS school that had been an EL school. Ms. Figeroa was very knowledgeable and would be able to support our work in the model. She was brand new to being an assistant principal and would have a lot to learn. Based on her responses in the interview, I was not sure if she would be able to support students with challenging behavior, but I was impressed enough to think she could learn. That summer we attended a conference together and saw that she was energetic and full of ideas, so I thought she would be a great asset to the school.
As the summer progressed, we had trouble finding another assistant principal. I had selected an assistant principal and two weeks later she was offered a position as a principal at a school within her neighborhood. I had run out of options. I did not have many other candidates to interview. By the end of the summer, most of the available people had been offered positions already. At the time, I had been in touch with a math coach I knew of who had worked for Newark Public Schools. Mr. Anderman was interested in becoming an assistant principal, so I decided to give him a chance. I did not have many options left. Both of my assistant principals were eager to learn, and I felt comfortable hiring anyone who seemed coachable.

In addition to new assistant principals, there were some upper management changes. The COO, Ms. Grady, resigned from her position in December. She expressed concern with stress and some of the challenges involved with managing the schools. We did not get the new COO, Dr. Arlington, until late February / early March. He was well known in Anne Arundel county and Prince George’s County for his work with schools. He had been an award-winning principal back in his day in Anne Arundel County. As Ms. Grady’s replacement, he would be responsible for managing all of the existing schools as well as the schools that would be on the horizon under new charter agreements. I was excited that they hired someone who knew about education and had experience as a principal. Ironically, when she resigned from her position, Ms. Grady took a principalship at an EL BCPS charter school. It was her first time in a school leadership role.

On the BCPS end, I also had another supervisor who replaced the interim supervisor, Mr. Harold, who was very supportive and helped me manage some of my
challenges with my CMO. I thought he would have become my immediate supervisor after he had spent a year in the position working in an interim capacity. Instead they hired a Mr. Estien. His past experience was as a principal in the South Bronx and he became the new executive director for the charter school network. He seemed knowledgeable as well. I was not excited about all of the changes but I at least appreciated being surrounded by supervisors who had roles as principals in their past experience. Initially, I did not see any major changes working with either Mr. Harold or Mr. Estien, but it was not long before I started to have different feelings about my work and my tenure as a principal in Baltimore City.

I began feeling run down from all of the managing of different things totally unrelated to instruction that I had to deal with. That spring I had proposed the idea of Mr. Wilson coming back to do some hourly work. I had never recovered from his absence. I needed someone to keep track of our school spending, supplies, and some other things. I also wanted some videos for marketing done; he did that work during our first year on his own just to help out the school. With a new COO and some changes, I figured I might be able to bring him back in. The CMO agreed to it. Mr. Wilson came back and he did all of our marketing videos and balanced our books. He came back for a salary about $10,000 lower than his original salary when he was my dean, but he accepted the salary and stated that he was excited to be working with me again.

The leadership team was very different from my first two years as a principal. I thought that having an additional assistant principal would help us to be able to provide teachers with more informal observations and coaching support. I divided the assistant principals by grade-level bands. One was responsible for K–2 teachers and the other was
responsible for grades 3–6. They were both new to the assistant principal position, but I figured that because they were both coaches prior to this position, they should be able to work with their teacher teams pretty well. I did not realize the huge learning curve they would face and how they would need coaching and support in their new role. With all of the changes and demands I had on my shoulder as a principal in a school of 1,000 students, I do not feel that I offered them enough support. The K–2 assistant principal was great with providing teachers with feedback and coaching, but she had a really difficult time connecting with parents and families. She also struggled with gaining respect from the students and supporting classroom management and behavioral challenges. Her reaction to any challenging situation with a student was suspension. As I noticed the growing number of suspensions she had approved, I decided to have her run all of the proposed suspensions through me for approval. The grades 3–6 assistant principal was the opposite. He was not really able to coach teachers and provide support. His way of addressing behavioral challenges was to talk to the students or not address the situations at all. This created issues with the teachers because Mr. Anderman’s teachers would complain about him not addressing behavior issues and Ms. Figeroa’s teachers would bring small issues to her to suspend students. All of this created division amongst the teachers and created issues with the leadership team.
In addition to the two assistant principals, I also had two teachers on the leadership team who took on a great deal of responsibility. Ms. Gertrude and Ms. Lareef were two veteran teachers who were interested in leadership opportunities to further their professional growth. They both aspired to become principals one day. That year, I had a partnership with Urban Teacher Center and I assigned each of them a resident teacher for them to host and train. They were responsible for providing the teacher with feedback and keeping me abreast of the teachers’ progress. At the end of the school year, we would be able to decide if we wanted to keep the teacher at our school. It was a great program to have a pipeline for bringing new teachers on board while getting them acclimated to the school’s culture. Ms. Gertrude and Ms. Lareef helped with behavior challenges with students, supported teachers, and took on a small caseload of new teachers to mentor as well. They filled in the gaps where the two assistant principals could not. They both worked well together and were eager to receive feedback on their leadership actions.
Instructional Guidance Systems

Instructional remodeling: Brand changes and teacher learning challenges.

We had Ms. Boudre as our school designer for our third year. She was a great resource to our teachers and had also supported many of our efforts to improve operations in such a large school. In the winter she found out she was expecting and became ill. She was unable to continue to travel to our school and also to her school in Delaware that she worked with. She decided that she could no longer manage the commuting to Baltimore and her own personal schedule. She was still able to work with us through video chat and off-campus. We agreed because we needed the support. She continued to work and develop documents and coach teachers through reviewing data and their expedition plans to support them.

With Ms. Boudre’s pending departure we would move into our fourth year with a fourth school designer. We all felt that this was problematic. Some of the teachers who had been at the school since year one complained that they had already done some of the things the school designer planned. It was difficult for anyone to keep up with the learning needs of my teachers and differentiate the EL supports they needed because every year we had a new person. Some teachers started to lose interest in the PD and did not feel that it was meaningful or useful to them. I shared this information with Ms. Boudre and she provided differentiated learning opportunities for teachers, but somehow they tended to miss the mark for my more seasoned teachers. I decided to send the teachers that had the most experience with EL to attend school visits, site seminars, and national conferences so that they would be able to learn things from other high-performing schools and share those practices with colleagues. This actually worked to
support those teachers who wanted more. However, some of the new teachers were struggling with classroom management and student engagement issues that impacted their ability to be open to feedback. We had school-wide strategies they needed to put in place, but when they felt those things did not work, they decided not to stick to it. Most of the support teachers received was for classroom management, and the results were limited and inconsistent.

Without the support of the school designer, we still had robust learning experiences and celebrations of learning, but we all started to question the value of the school designer. Did we really even need Expeditionary Learning? Was it worth the $100,000 out of our budget? Could we do it on our own because we already had such limited support? Dr. Arlington started the conversation and asked me to think about EL and if we really needed it.

We had three different school designers within three years and we needed the money for other things in the budget. The per-pupil allocation for that year was projected to decrease by $100. We had to start thinking about what to cut from the budget. At the time it seemed to be a great idea because we were not getting the funding that we really needed for the size of the school, and we were suffering from the change in school designers every year. Dr. Arlington planned to bring a project-based learning staff developer and a math coach on board. He knew some people from Anne Arundel County with whom he had worked and felt they would be able to supplement the support of the school designer.

At the end of the school year we decided not to renew our contract with Expeditionary Learning. We announced this to staff and many people had mixed feelings.
Some wanted to keep EL and get a new school designer. Others felt we should move on because of the lack of differentiation in support for veteran staff members. The decision was not too difficult because no one had the connection to the EL that they should have, due to the transient nature of the school designer position. We provided the staff with information about PBL and the large majority of staff members felt it was a good move.

Shortly afterwards Ms. Amaryst, the PBL staff developer, came on board. She was able to provide teachers with coaching and support. Although she had worked abroad in PBL schools for quite some time, she had not worked in an urban school throughout her entire career. Some teachers saw her as inexperienced and could not look past her age and lack of urban school experience in order to learn from her. For some other teachers she was effective in helping them to think outside of the box. She also provided teachers with additional resources and supports to complement many of the tools and materials they already had. The downside of her presence in the building is that she reported everything back to the COO, Dr. Arlington. He knew about things that happened in the building before I did. Shortly afterward, he would begin bringing up different issues that I had not brought to his attention, and would ask other staff members about things going on in the school. He had a very indirect approach in learning about my leadership. I soon learned that having an additional “coach” in the building was a means of control and also gathering information about what things were going on in the school.

**Standardized testing as a norm?** In our third year, we had a difficult transition to more standardized testing. We tried to test a large group of students in August so that we would have less students to test at the start of the school year. It really did not work. Some parents brought students in and we had issues with computers shutting down
unexpectedly and wireless connections timing out. Essentially, the overall plan to test over the summer was challenging. Teachers did not support it because they did not like the idea of becoming a school focused on testing. They saw some of the changes as reflective of the move away from EL and our new COO. As a result, many teachers did not support the idea of testing and did not promote it in a positive way to their students and families. Dr. Arlington listened to our concerns about the lack of technology and resources in the school. Meanwhile, the president of the CMO had just signed off on spending half a million dollars on murals and paintings throughout the school from a known Baltimore City artist to continue to beautify our new school. We were struggling with a lack of resources, had cut our instructional model due to budget cuts, and were technologically unequipped to handle standardized testing. It was difficult to see money being spent on things that were not the priorities of the school.

I had a title and a position as principal, but I did not have as much control as people thought I did; however, it was not really about control. It was really about having a voice. Working in a school every day, you see the needs. You see the challenges. I did not have a say in what we spent money on. I thought I did but I really did not. I felt that I was caught between a rock and a hard place leading a school with 1,000 students with little influence on the things we needed to make things better.

**Middle school: A brand new challenge.** In addition to the challenges we faced with testing, we also had a new sixth grade that was unofficially considered middle school. I did not want to treat them like fifth-graders, but I did not have a full middle school program to make it completely different. In order to make students feel that they had a different, more middle school–like experience, we decided to offer students
enrichment classes and also club classes. We changed our Wednesdays into a day for the “club block.” The club block ran from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. every Wednesday, and students had the opportunity to take lessons in dance, swimming, golf, orchestra, band, and a variety of other activities. Students and families really appreciated the variety of options available for students.

That summer, before we officially moved in, my PE teacher and I visited two of our local recreation centers. One was in walking distance from the school. It had an outdoor pool and a small facility. We thought about the possibility of our basketball team practicing there because our building was still under construction, and we did not have basketball hoops yet. They offered us contacts for Zumba classes and also swimming. My PE teacher immediately contacted the rec center with the indoor swimming pool and she single-handedly established the swimming partnership. It was our goal for all of the students to learn how to swim by eighth grade if their parents agreed to it. Our golf partnership came from a neighborhood park that had a golf course. The rec center also offered us access to their dance studio and their basketball court. We were able to develop partnerships and expand programming at no real cost of our own.

In addition to expanding our course offerings for students, we also started a social-emotional structure for our students called crew. Crew is the Expeditionary Learning version of advisory for middle school students. We wanted to start crew because we needed a way to support our middle school students in a more age-appropriate social/emotional way. They were too old for morning meeting and they needed a structure to connect with their peers and teachers in a more intimate way. The crews were divided amongst staff members so that each crew had six to eight students.
The crew leaders were awesome! They planned Friday activities for their students, planned for learning experiences / topics of discussion together, and also facilitated planning for quarterly trips for their crews. It was a wonderful experience for the students. We noticed that our students in the upper grades had fewer behavioral referrals and challenges. It also gave them someone to be a point person for when students needed an additional person in the building to talk to. We saw decreases in suspensions for our students in the fifth and sixth grades, and teachers were also able to express the results they saw in the relationship building with students. In addition, we planned off-campus retreats for the students to support their social-emotional growth. We made these features a part of the curriculum and it also supported us in building a more positive climate and culture in the school. The message that the social curriculum is just as important as the academic curriculum became clear for our students, teachers, and parents and families.

**Professional Capacity**

**Capacity in crisis: Critical staffing challenges.** Despite our best efforts to hire highly qualified teachers, we had some challenges. Our hiring process included demo lessons and a group interview that was completely owned by our hiring committee. The teachers took ownership of the hiring process as they had done in previous years. They were all invested in attracting strong teachers to our school. Every year, we changed interview questions, implemented a pre-planning structure to support brand new teachers, and also assigned the new teachers veteran staff member mentors. Every year we all debated about taking on brand new teachers. Every year, they were hit or miss. Every year, we lost a least one new teacher. Often, they would quit unexpectedly.
We saw warning signs after the first week of school and tried every time to put supports in place for them. Our efforts were futile for every new teacher that decided to quit without notice. The loss of a teacher created a ripple effect on the rest of the school and there was always a level of anxiety for the rest of the staff. Teachers worried about the class being split and the possibility of getting extra students, other teachers being influenced by the loss of a colleague, and the additional changes the absence of a colleague would create.

In this third year, we hired a brand new teacher, Ms. Pelt. She happened to be the daughter of one of the staff members who worked for The Child Guardian, our CMO’s company. We thought she would work extra hard, being connected to the CMO, and we figured she would not quit because her mother worked for the CMO. We were wrong. After the third week of school, she came into my office on a Friday and stated she would not be returning on Monday. I did not have any notice, so I met with all of the third-grade teachers that afternoon to let them know I would split the class until further notice. This put my other five third-grade classes at 28 students per class. I sent out a letter to the families that day to let them know that the class would be split and who their new teacher would be based on the way the class was split. I hated putting the burden on my teachers because I did not want them to have class sizes over 25 students. It was supposed to be a part of our model to have small class sizes. It was my only option because I could not subject those students to staying with a substitute all day. I knew the culture was already not intact and I figured the best thing to do would be to break the students up and allow them to absorb and acclimate to the culture within existing classrooms. It worked, but I
put a great deal of stress on my third-grade teachers, especially for one of them who struggled with classroom management.

The exponential growth of my school to include so many new teachers was challenging to the culture and the instructional model. Some of the teachers worked in traditional schools with boxed curricula and they were used to following a script; some wanted to just do anything they saw on Pinterest, something that would make a good project to hang on the walls; some wanted to follow a boxed curriculum; and others were excited by the creativity and autonomy of the EL model. Even with a school designer, figuring out how to support all of the teachers and differentiate support to meet their needs was nearly impossible. Those that started in year one knew the value of hands-on learning experiences for students. Others felt that because some of the students were reading below grade level, they needed more remedial work to catch up. There were many different philosophical beliefs about students that started to guide teachers’ work rather than the idea that project-based learning was the way to go. I do not think we did the best job communicating the importance of our model as the school grew and expanded. We also increased the number of teachers and did not increase the planning support. We really needed two school designers. We needed someone who had been in place for our school’s journey so that the person could understand where we had been and where we needed to go. It was difficult for me to travel alone as a leader without a critical mass of people who felt and understood the vision. Emphasizing and enacting the vision became more difficult and challenging as we continued to expand our staff without expanding the number of instructional resources to support them.
Later that year, I had to make additional staffing cuts. Initially, in our charter we had extra classroom assistants, para-educators, who would support lunch and recess duty as well as work with small groups of students. Due to the decrease in the per-pupil funding, I had to cut three para-educator positions. My staff members were not too upset, because the staff members I cut did not have the best reputations for truly supporting and helping students. At any given time, these staff members were frequently on their phones, were late to duty posts, did not offer assistance to the teachers, and sometimes had problems with either coming to work or arriving on time. I decided to retain the stronger staff members and to cut the ones with more work performance issues.

One para-educator in particular, Ms. Beasley, was very close to some of the parents in the aftercare program. She told the parents that I had something personal against her and that was the reason why I was letting her go. Of course, this was not true, because although they all had some performance issues, I wrote each of them recommendations highlighting their strengths and supported their transitions to other schools. One of the parents on the PTA decided to reach out to me to express her concerns, and I told her my decisions were based on budget. The gossip about the reasons for the cuts continued, but fortunately my PTA president and others on the executive board trusted my leadership and they spoke to the other parents about the budget cuts on my behalf. I tried to be cautious and sensitive to parents because I know that they build close relationships with staff members, and seeing some of them go was difficult.
Student-Centered Learning Climate

Climate change: Challenges in serving all students. We kept many of our existing structures as we moved to our third school year; but some things just did not work. I would say it was a combination of teacher capacity, lack of professional development, and an increase in challenging students that we just did not have background information on. In our first year of operation we were overenrolled by 15 students. We did not recruit kids into the summer and fall. Due to transitions in facilities and our exponential growth every year, we had a large volume of new students. Bringing new students in every year was challenging because we did not have any background information on the students. Of course, we received their cumulative records, but there was so much that was not included in the file. What is the best contact number for the student’s family? What classroom management strategies worked? What are the student’s triggers that may lead to off-task behavior? There were so many different things we did not know about students that could have helped us address their behavior challenges. What we did not know we had to learn and collect data on to discuss and figure out how to support the students that faced the most challenges.

We had the highest number of behavioral challenges in third grade. Some of it was attributed to the increase in the class sizes. The classrooms just were not big enough to accommodate such a large number of students. Students were on top of each other. Our third-grade classes were self-contained, so they all sat together with their peers all day. I can also attribute the challenges to our under-enrollment in third grade. We were accepting third-graders until late September, and the last five students we accepted right before the deadline for count day were the most challenging. It took us the entire school
year to collect data and also to figure out how to support our most challenging students.
Two of the students qualified for more restrictive environments and moved to other
school placements in March, right around spring break. The others we were able to
support through more intense behavioral supports and collaboration and ongoing
communication with their parents and family members. For some of the students,
changing their classroom setting gave them an opportunity to move forward with teachers
who had no history of being frustrated with them. Some teachers did not have the skills
and learned how to monitor individual behavior charts, implement structures for
incentives, and schedule time for more personalized interactions with the students.
Supporting the students and simultaneously teaching and coaching teachers on how to
support these students was a challenge in itself.

The impact of crew on our older students in grades five and six were tremendous.
We had fewer fights and behavior issues in comparison to our primary grades. We could
not figure out how to better support our third- and fourth-grade students. They had the
highest number of behavior challenges. We tried to do morning meeting but it just did not
work as well as we planned. Students were not buying into it and it did not seem to make
much of a difference in the school culture. We provided teachers facing behavioral
challenges with resources from the Second Step curriculum to support building classroom
culture, but the class size had a significant impact on the culture within the classroom.
Our fourth-grade students were challenging when they were in third grade, and we were
still in the process of figuring out which strategies would work best for encouraging more
positive behavior from a handful of them.
The increase in the behavior challenges was understood by staff, but it was hard to explain to parents. They noticed the differences in the behaviors of students. Now that we had reached our permanent location, we were a melting pot of students from both East and West Baltimore. There was not a clear and noticeable difference between students from East and West Baltimore. Challenging students came from both areas of the city. There were many times I had to facilitate parent meetings and parents would say things such as, “Can’t you kick THOSE students out? I thought this was a charter school!” “Can’t they get expelled for that?” “Why is THAT type of student here?” I had parents who believed that we could put kids out if they did not behave properly. Word on the street was that some schools did put kids out. I knew of colleagues in the system who did. I do not believe in that. I feel that a true testament to the power of a school’s program is in the transformation and growth of any student. If I choose which students to invest in, then I become one of those leaders who filters their students. I think all students can change and grow given the right environment and structures that make the environment conducive to growth. For some students the growth was much faster than others. The rate of that growth for our most challenging students was not fast enough for most parents on the receiving end of some of the disruptions and bad behavior going on in a growing number of our classrooms.

**Strong Parent–Community–School Ties**

**Family perceptions and buy-in: A vision blurred.** As our school grew exponentially over the years, I noticed the differences in the educational philosophy and vision of the parents choosing to send their children to our school. During our first year, I
met at least half of the parents during open houses. I was able to meet families and get to know their students. Open houses did not have a large group of parents, so they were more intimate and allowed for more one-to-one personalized interactions with students and families. As the school grew and we had more commercial means of advertisement, things became less personal. The radio ads advertised “free transportation,” and we heard that when many of the phone calls came in. People heard we had free transportation and were interested in our school. The radio ad did not capture the essence of the school’s mission and the instructional model. We had families signing up to attend the school and we had not met them. Most of those families that had students taking bus transportation to and from school did not come to the school for school events or activities. I suggested to my CMO that when we have school events we should run our bus routes so that parents and students can come over to the school. I asked them, “How can we support them coming if they don’t have transportation?” No one had an answer. They told me it was parents’ responsibility to figure out how to get their children to the school during out-of-school time and we could not afford to support such efforts. I found this highly problematic. How are we as a school supposed to engage distant families? Why is that not our responsibility?

In some ways I felt like I was herding cattle. Bring them in, they told me. Get your enrollment numbers. Come one come all! My question to them was: So what do we do now that they are here? How can we engage and connect with them as members of our school community? There were many parents we never met and they did not come out our school for our events. For some struggling families I often paid for cab and bus fair to assist them in attending school events. Depending on the situation, we even ventured out
to do home visits for those students and parents who were not responsive and with whom we needed to get in touch. This was an ongoing challenge that we did not have answers to or support for. We did our best to do home visits and connect with families when we could fit it in with all of our other efforts to engage families.

In addition to our engagement challenges with families, we also had some community challenges. The school building was surrounded by major streets and was within walking distance of two elementary schools and one high school. Traffic on mornings and afternoons was treacherous. There were many times when parents tried to park or drop off kids wherever and whenever they wanted. They parked on the neighborhood streets and left little to no parking for the residents. There were showdowns between residents and parents that included cursing and threats, and some even threatened staff vehicles. One day in particular, a resident of the neighborhood came to school and threatened to slash the tires of the white Honda Accord of a staff member who she stated kept parking on the street in front of her house. The traffic and parking issues caused a great deal of tension and discord within the community.

On two different occasions when we had after-school events. I had a community member, Mr. Herring, come march into my office and demand to speak with me immediately about parking. He yelled about not having a place to park his car after a hard day of work. I listened and assured him we would do better to minimize the amount of parking issues and challenges. I tried my best. In order to reduce the amount of traffic and parking issues on evenings, I had to have three back-to-school nights. For every school activity, we had to do at least three different time frames for events to minimize parking issues and challenges. We would sometimes schedule parents and students to attend
school events by last name. These efforts were pretty effective in curbing the volume of traffic to the school when we had school plays or events. However, it was tiring for our staff, including myself.

Some weeks we would have three to four shows to accommodate the number of guests and parents interested in attending. As principal I attended every window of every school event. The staggering number of activities usually kept me at school on three or four consecutive nights well after 9 p.m. to ensure that I had time to greet and connect with families as well as make sure the building was evacuated when families would chat and linger. This time does not factor in to my one-way, no-traffic commute of 45 minutes to get home. Keeping the community happy made for some very long nights.

We also paid for security to direct traffic and block off streets to ensure that residents had parking space. With these efforts, we did make progress with the community. They appreciated that we tried but we always had a few outlier parents who decided they would not respect the community members and did not care about the “rules” we tried to create. As we took a few steps forward in making progress with parents, we sometimes took a few back based on how egregious the conflict between a parent and a community member was and how loud they complained about it.

Councilwoman Mary Lou Best was contacted about everything that occurred at the school related to parking issues. On three separate occasions she came up to the school to watch our morning routines and afternoon dismissal. By October, I had created a car rider system in which students were called by number and came out to the car rider line to efficiently move the students along on the main street in front of the school. We had a car rider line and parents picked up students from the car rider line pretty efficiently.
when the system really started to get going. This helped us to minimize the traffic and to make peace with the community. However, we seemed not to please Councilwoman Best, even with our intentional efforts to address traffic concerns. She usually shared negative feedback with us every time she came to the school. One day she mentioned that she thought all of the kids would be bused to the school and that was what she was told. She said the CMO told her that all the students rode the bus to school, so there would be minimal traffic issues. She told my leadership team that if she had known we would cause traffic, she would have never approved of the school moving to the neighborhood. She also told us that we needed to “stop stealing kids” from the two neighboring schools. At the time, we had only had five students from each of those schools, three of whom had been at our school since year one when we were not in the neighborhood.

Through my interactions with Councilwoman Best, I got the impression that her dislike for us was because of an impression she was given by our CMO. I also found out from a parent that some residents were upset that their children could not attend the school. They felt that because we were in the neighborhood, we should accommodate them, and their children should be automatically able to attend. This was problematic for a few reasons. By the time we moved there, we were already at our capacity. It would be difficult to decide who could come and who could not. In addition, we had a lottery process in place. That would mean that the residents would bypass the lottery and existing wait list. We could not do that and jeopardize the integrity of our lottery process. That could get us in trouble with BCPS and potentially impact our charter renewal in the future. If we did take students from the neighborhood, it would impact enrollment at the two neighborhood schools. One school only had 180 students and was rumored to be up
for closure due to low enrollment. The other school had, over the past five years, lost about 275 students and was only at 40% of its building capacity due to years of declining enrollment. Through my conversations with parents and community members, I realized they did not have anything against my staff or me personally. What they were told about our school coming to the neighborhood was different from the reality. We were not prepared for their frustration with us being there and the impact it would have on their impressions of us and the value of our school in the neighborhood. The issue seemed to be more about access and privatization in the neighborhood in which they had purchased homes and agreed to have a school that bused kids in. This reality caused tension and problems. We worked on addressing the problems but the efforts we had to make to resolve the issue were our own. Our CMO did not offer much support other than promising to have staff outside—which they did not provide. For every promise they made, I had to figure out a way to deliver so that my school’s name was not mud and the community did not hate us.

What I resented most was the nonchalant attitude of my CMO and their willingness to create situations in which they promised things and did not deliver. They left us all to flounder around trying to resolve an issue with the community that should not have existed. If they were more upfront and honest about the impact of traffic in the neighborhood, we could have planned accordingly. Instead, we had a meeting with the chief of Baltimore City School Police, the City Police, the president of the neighborhood association, Councilwoman Best, the bus companies, and my CMO about the traffic issues and what demands needed to be placed on the school. I felt my already heavy load
of responsibilities weighing me down with more promises and expectations being placed on me and my school staff.

**Leadership as Advocacy: Unpacking Evaluation Feedback**

During the 2013–14 school year, Baltimore City Public Schools changed their evaluation rubric for school leaders in the district. The School Leader Effectiveness Evaluation (SLEE) “is designed to provide information about principals’ ongoing professional growth in appropriate ways. The evaluation was intentionally designed with multiple components to reflect the complex, multidimensional nature of the work that principals do” (see Appendix C).

The evaluation domain has four indicators—highly effective instruction, talented people, vision and engagement, and strategic leadership—and a rating scale from 1 to 4. The average of the scores determines the final evaluation score. The SLEE was 70% of my final evaluation score. The district also used the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) Survey for principal evaluations. The goal of the VAL-ED component was “to provide a summary of effectiveness of a principal’s learning centered behaviors” as a way to assess their effectiveness based on feedback from their immediate supervisor and teachers.

During the previous school year, my evaluation was different, and it was a combination of Ms. Grady’s feedback about my work supplemented by Mr. Harold’s feedback. I had an effective rating. Mr. Harold had noted that I had many other additional responsibilities as a part of my work as a founding principal. He noted I had high family engagement levels and conferenced with me after my evaluation to discuss ways I could
continue to build my team to take some things off of my plate. Ms. Grady attempted to rate me based on what The Child Guardian’s expectations were, but Mr. Harold did not agree to this, so he changed my final rating. He was aware of all of the other duties I had and ensured that he documented it.

This new evaluation system was a different process with a new rubric. Mr. Harold had been replaced by Mr. Estien. Dr. Arlington was also fairly new to the organization, and he was my primary evaluator. I was worried about how much they both knew about my leadership and hoped that we would spend some time discussing my school’s challenges and some of the obstacles I had faced that year. However, Mr. Estien met with Dr. Arlington to complete the assessment of my leadership, and I was not included in the process.

My final rating for the 2013–14 school year was in the “developing” category. I had not been provided with the opportunity to discuss my performance. An evaluation conference was a part of the process. When I saw my evaluation score’s ratings and realized that the evaluation had been finalized without conference, I decided to reach out to Mr. Estien to request a meeting to discuss my performance.

Good Morning Mr. Estien,

I am writing to follow-up with you on my final evaluation. When I spoke with you this spring about final evaluations for the 2013-14 school year you stated that the process would include me, you, and Dr. Arlington sitting down to discuss the evidence and to review the ratings. You stated that the purpose of the meeting is to ensure that the ratings are evidenced and fair.

I am professionally disappointed that the process was not followed. My evaluation was uploaded and ratings were decided on without the conference that was supposed to be a part of the process. Had I decided to do something of that nature I would be facing a grievance for not
following the process with teachers. I would hope that moving forward I would be provided with the same opportunity and standard as teachers in accordance with the union.

I am not going to file a grievance but I wanted to bring this to your attention. As it stands my rating for this year is a 2.6 which is developing. My question to you is:

- What district supports are available for "developing" principals? When will I be notified of what will be available to me so that I can improve?

- What constitutes an action "plan" / support for a developing principal? Who is responsible for developing that plan? Who will monitor the improvements?

- Can we schedule a time to meet mid-year (well in advance) so that you don't get too busy to meet with me to avoid this in the future so that if I am not on track to move out of the developing category I can make strategic moves mid-year to help me make progress?

I am requesting two things that I can think about to support my own professional learning and growth so that I do not continue in the "developing" category. Last year, Ms. Grady attempted to give me a rating of a 2.0 mid-year last year without any evidence being gathered. She did not create a plan for improvement. I do not want this cycle to continue and I want to be clear on specific actionable deliverables in alignment with the district's new evaluation tool that will help me improve my ratings.

1) A meeting to discuss district supports and to develop a support plan for me so that I can improve.

2) My final evaluation meeting to be conducted in late May/1st week of June so that I am aware of where I stand with the district/my ratings so that I can make informed decisions about my career with BCPS and/or seek professional development options so that I can improve my practice. Not having a meeting and not having my ratings uploaded and finalized until after Title II money and
training opportunities were already planned was a disservice to me in respect to being able to plan ahead.

As someone who has spent my entire career in this field this evaluation process has been the most compliance-driven process I have ever been a part of. My main point in writing to you is to advocate for my own professional growth/learning as well as my reputation and record with BCPS. I am fine with accepting feedback but I need feedback to be evidenced and I also need support in areas in which I need to grow.

Your attention to next steps to support me for the 2014–15 school year is needed and I look forward to your response.

Thank you in advance,

Sundai Riggins

I was upset about my performance rating. I felt that I was not given the opportunity to hear feedback and to develop an action plan. I was more uncomfortable with being evaluated on many things in which I just did not have enough time to invest my attention and effort. I continued to take on facilities management responsibilities. I had tripled the number of students I had in comparison to my first year. I had also moved every consecutive year. This unique context and the challenges that accompanied such change was not documented. I was being held accountable for managing many other school needs, but those other duties were not a part of the evaluation process.

After I sent the email, I went through a series of emails to Mr. Estien and Dr. Arlington about some strategies to improve my ratings. They suggested collaborative meetings, more coaching for my assistant principals, weekly collaborative planning meetings, starting my hiring process in January, and finding better ways to create work–life balance. They made many suggestions that they thought would help me to improve
my practice. I knew that many of my additional duties and responsibilities significantly impacted my time, but when I brought it up during my conference they both told me that I needed to “make it work” and would need to figure out better ways to manage my time. In an effort to be receptive to the feedback, I used those steps to develop an action plan and a daily schedule. Dr. Arlington provided me with four additional next steps to improve my practice.

1. I recommend creating three 30 min periods for checking email. You already have 2 which is great (7-7:30am and 6- 6:30pm) I would add another 30 min period in the middle of the day (somewhere between 12-1). The idea is to sort them, not necessarily address/answer them. You want to clear your inbox every time you check email so that the new email counter is 0. By clear I mean determine if the email is FYI, junk or in need of a response (flag) etc. I use this system but to be honest have worked hard and am still struggling to stick to it. However, when I do stick to it consistently I get MUCH MORE IMPORTANT WORK DONE.

2. Calendar your most important daily events first and protect them like your life depended on it. These should be your arrival and dismissal, classroom visits, and departmental/grade team meetings. These times should be sacred and everyone should be crystal clear that you are not to be disturbed during this time (unless there is a health emergency). Make sure your admin is prepared to tell anyone who asks that you aren't available at these times. KEY: Make sure this time period does not exceed 90 minutes.

3. Build “flex” time into your day. As you know things happen and you get pulled left and right to address issues. This flex time can be used for that strategically. Again, unless someone is bleeding or the building is on fire, it most likely can wait. His flex time can be used for admin support to schedule parent meetings or any meetings for you for that matter. These can also be used to meet with students, walk the halls, answer voicemails etc.

4. Once a week (I use Wednesday and sometimes Sunday) review the previous two weeks and the next two weeks. You want to review how you have been spending your time and see if you need to make any
adjustments. You also can use this exercise to capture highlights from the weeks and plan for upcoming events that require your attention.

I appreciated the feedback about my schedule. I agreed that I was working long days into the night and I needed to figure out better ways to manage my time. However, I was very concerned about all of the other duties that often fell in my lap.

After the continuous email exchange, I finally met with Dr. Arlington on August 29, 2014. It was very late and well out of the timeline for performance conferences, so I decided not to sign the form acknowledging that the evaluation conference was completed. I refused to sign it when Dr. Arlington came to meet with me to review the ratings.

The feedback was not the issue. I felt that I was being pulled in so many different directions due to all of the other duties for which I was responsible. During the previous year, I had a low rating and I was assured that better systems would be put into place. This year was not different from the last. I felt that, at the expense of my evaluation ratings, I was sacrificing my professional reputation and personal growth to carry out mission impossible.
Leadership Drives Change

Home sweet home: A time to build a strong leadership team. Starting my fourth year as a principal was a relief from the woes of transition and uncertainty that I had experienced during my first three years. This would be my first year in a permanent building location. I was excited about not moving over the summer and having the opportunity to really plan and prepare with my team. That summer I took my entire leadership team to a Family Engagement conference at Harvard University and I had a leadership team retreat at the ASCD Leadership Conference in Dallas. We spent the time getting to know each other, reflecting on school data from the past year, and making plans for school improvement. It was a great summer. We welcomed four new members to our leadership team. Ms. Gertrude was accepted to the Baltimore Emerging Leaders program with New Leaders, which is the same principal development pipeline program I completed in Washington, DC. I hired her as my third assistant principal because of her strong classroom management practices and also her eagerness to learn and grow as a future school leader. I also hired two guidance counselors. We had a growing middle school and the 1.5 social workers assigned to us by the district had not been effective in meeting our students and families’ needs. We initially only wanted one guidance counselor but we (myself and the hiring committee) decided to hire both of them because we were all equally impressed with both of them. In addition to the two guidance
counselors and the new assistant principals, we were “gifted” a director of school culture, Dr. Touro, from our operator. We were told by the CMO that Dr. Touro had operated and founded a charter school in DC and had a wealth of knowledge and experience working in brand new schools. After expressing my concerns to Dr. Arlington and my CMO president regarding our school’s growth and the challenges with developing a “new” culture every year, they explained that Dr. Touro would be there to assist and support our planning to develop a more positive school culture. I did not fully trust Dr. Touro because of my experiences with the PBL coach, Ms. Amaryst, but I figured that because she was there I should use her in any capacity that I could. Two extra hands in the building had to be of some benefit to our school community.

Figure 4.5: Leadership Team Composition – Year 4

The expanded leadership team did not come without its challenges. I thought that spending the summer helping the team to bond and get to know each other would make a big difference setting the tone for collaboration and team camaraderie for the school year.
It was not that simple. Ms. Getrude was very concerned with learning the ropes and ensuring that she held staff members to high standards. Mr. Anderman struggled with holding students and staff accountable and wanted to be more friendly and “cool” with staff. Ms. Figeroa aimed to please teachers and, while she held them to high standards, she also was not usually flexible in her thinking and did not usually seek to have all information regarding an issue before making a decision. One of the guidance counselors, Ms. Remillard, was very flexible and wanted to teach lessons and do anything that would help meet the needs of students. Mr. Mays, the other guidance counselor, was the opposite. He complained about everything and always wanted to offer “push back” that reflected his thinking about what supports and structures we should have in place that would be beneficial to as well as convenient for him. He did not want to do character building lessons or morning duties to greet students, and he did not follow his scheduled times to meet with students. He was a knowledgeable resource that we did not have the opportunity to fully utilize based on his inability to deviate from his preferences of working and operating as a guidance counselor.

Our biggest issue was Dr. Touro and her overall inability to deliver on the various things she committed to doing to support the school. Dr. Touro would volunteer to complete schedules and plans for the school related to operations and culture and at the last minute pull the plans out to show that the plans had been done. The efforts would be haphazardly thrown together, and staff would not have been notified until the very minute of implementation. The plans would be incomplete or have missing components, or overall just be not well thought out considering the context of the school. Her attempts to showcase her work were frustrating for the leadership team members as well as the staff.
because people started to see through her words and her attempted efforts. Not only did she drop the ball on various different initiatives and things we needed, but she also reported what was happening at the school back to Dr. Arlington and the CMO. Her perceptions of our progress or lack thereof were then taken by Dr. Arlington as truth. Her informant status at the school created distrust and disdain from members of my leadership team. No one wanted her to do anything because it would be left undone, and no one wanted to say anything because they knew she would take it back to Dr. Arlington. Our meetings became very guarded and perfunctory in nature. Truths or tough conversations were avoided because we did not want our CMO to get involved, because we knew a “spy” was among us.

I later found out that Dr. Touro and Dr. Arlington had a really good relationship. She would report back to him on what was happening at the school from her perspective and he would take it as fact. In board meetings he would share out things that were going on at the school that I knew I had not shared with him. He offered strong opinions and perspectives on what was happening related to various things without asking for my perspective. He used Dr. Touro as his lens into school operations. Earlier in the year my three assistant principals met with him to tell him about how Dr. Touro dropped the ball on various initiatives and responsibilities that would have helped us all as a leadership team to be more productive. They told me Dr. Arlington listened and went back and told Dr. Touro. Dr. Touro then reached out to the team and told everyone if they had something they needed to share or say to her then they needed to say it directly to her. This created hostility and dissent among all the team members. The assistant principals went directly to Dr. Arlington because he was her supervisor, not to speak about her
behind her back. We all learned that she was untouchable and we could not make our
complaints known about her lack of performance. She was there as a reporter and so we
all excepted her role and picked up as many of her duties as we could to avoid more
issues.

**Instructional Guidance Systems**

**Expeditionary learning exits: Project-based learning enters.** By the start of
our fourth year we had completely transitioned out of EL and were now officially a PBL
school. Dr. Arlington had hired the PBL coach and she was scheduled to lead
professional development sessions for our staff on PBL. Ms. Amaryst was friendly and
knowledgeable, but she also reported everything back to Dr. Arlington. Ms. Frye, the
math coach, did the same. There were a couple of teachers who would come complain
about small issues, some of which had not been reported to administration, and they
would report these things back to Dr. Arlington. As I worked with the two of them, my
level of distrust grew whenever they would come to me with teacher concerns that may
have been already resolved, or were in the process of a resolution, or about which I knew
nothing. I felt that they were prying into other things that they did not know about and
that they should be focused on building teacher capacity and pushing instructors on their
planning and instructional practice. My conversations with them were sometimes
awkward, and I often felt that I had to defend myself and my leadership team or provide
justifications for things, mainly because I knew things were being reported right back to
Dr. Arlington.
Although we did transition to PBL, we kept many EL practices. We were still planning and implementing crew and we also continued to have our regularly scheduled celebrations of learning for students and families. The difficulty of PBL implementation was that the PBL coach was split between the other schools and she also was tied to the CMO. Her efforts sometimes deviated from a focus on PBL, and she became involved in other things that had no connection to PBL. Also, some teachers saw her as an extension of the CMO and did not trust her in the way that they did when we were an EL school and we had a school designer assigned to our school to work with our staff. For our spring celebration of learning, I noticed that some of the projects were not as high-quality as they were in the past, especially those of staff members who were new to our school. I wanted to give the PBL coach feedback but I thought about my interaction with Dr. Arlington and Dr. Touro and I did not feel comfortable or confident that the feedback would be received and acted on.

By our fourth year we had pretty much worked out many of our testing challenges. We did not have enough money in the budget to purchase new computers, but we did get a donation of 100 computers that summer from the social security administration, thanks to Ms. Underway, so we were able to create another two computer labs. We set up a full set of computers in our upstairs library and we also transformed a classroom into a computer lab. This reduced the amount of time we needed for standardized testing for students because we were able to decrease the amount of time scheduled for testing on our master calendar. We were able to administer assessments as scheduled to collect data from our students. One of our main challenges was getting our students more invested in standardized testing outcomes to encourage them to do their
best when taking an assessment. We needed to help some of our teachers understand that although we were a PBL school, we still needed the results from standardized assessments in order to know what skills our students needed to work on. This was a heavy lift. We had not started the school with a heavy focus on testing and data, and we had made Adequate Yearly Progress that first year, so teachers did not really see the need for us to focus on standardized testing. It was one of our obstacles ahead—we needed to figure out how to be a data-driven and PBL school.

**Professional Capacity**

*Capacity challenges: A different day, same story.* In my fourth year as a principal I became pretty good at assessing teacher quality. One of my biggest frustrations was the lackadaisical attitude of the folks in the BCPS human capital department. Every year I would collect all of my intent to hire forms and give them to my staffing specialist in either May or June. Every year I tried to move up the timeline of when I submitted the forms, and every year I would have the same issues. BCPS was usually the last or one of the very last Local Education Agencies in the state to hire teachers. I would send prospective teacher candidates an offer letter from our school that would have a statement such as “offer contingent upon successful completion of processing through BCPS human resources department,” and every year I would lose a candidate due to processing issues. Candidates would call to ask, “When will I hear something from BCPS?” “When will I receive an offer letter?” “Do you know what my salary will be? I have a family and I need to know so that I can secure my living arrangements.” I could not answer any of their questions. One year I had submitted
paperwork for my kindergarten teacher in May and she still was not hired for the first day of school. When I contacted HR, they told me to just put a substitute in the classroom until she was processed, and it was illegal for her to be in the classroom with them. Did I break the rules? Yes! I asked my operator to allow her to be fingerprinted and paid through them until BCPS picked her up. Technically we were not supposed to do that. However, I could not let my kindergarteners and their parents be subjected to a substitute for the first day of school. For some families, kindergarten is their child’s first time in school. I wanted that teacher to be able to connect with her students and families from the very start of the school year.

In some instances, I had prospective teachers accept my offer letter and then decline after the summer progressed and they did not hear back from BCPS for processing. They had to take another job offer. Of course I understood. This left me scrambling over the summer to fill the vacancies, and it usually happened in early August. Most of the time, candidates left by the end of the summer are not anyone’s top pick. This year was no exception to the rule. I had submitted all of my hiring paperwork for every staff member, including the intent to hire forms, copies of transcripts, resumes, and teacher certification. I even had my secretary put them in file folders. We kept copies at the school because we more often than not received a follow-up call from HR stating that something was missing and they needed us to get in touch with the candidate. The challenges of getting teachers on board with BCPS were the bane of my summer every year.

We hired two teachers in August after other candidates had declined: Ms. Whiteband and Mr. Schmidt. Ms. Whiteband quit after the first week, stating that she had
some health challenges and the stress of being a teacher would not be good for her health. After about three weeks, Mr. Schmidt quit, too. He called out for a week, so he actually only worked for two weeks. On the Friday of the week he called out, he told us he was not coming back. One day, when I was in the lunchroom eating with some students, I happened to sit at the table with some of his students. The students told me they knew he had planned to leave because they saw him take his pictures of his family down off the wall. I had to put a long-term substitute in that classroom for the rest of the school year. I could not find a decent teacher in the candidate pool and I did not have any leads. I was not able to replace Ms. Whiteband until January.

The transition to PBL was difficult for my teachers. We had a critical mass of teachers who were fairly new to EL from the previous year, and we had switched to PBL. We only had a small amount of staff members who had been there since the school’s inception and had a real understanding of what would be considered a high-quality learning expedition. We had teachers who had planned and worked on decent topics but the quality was not usually solid if they did not have someone on their grade-level team who had been at the school for at least two years. We needed the support from the PBL coach, but her connection to the operator made her more of a liability than an asset to our team.

The growing pains of the school made it unpredictable at times. When I started my fourth year I thought that we were finally in a stable place. We were in our permanent location and we were at our capacity for enrollment. It was this hope that kept me sane throughout all of the changes and challenges. The pending charter bill was like a dark cloud over the future of my school’s stability. The large majority of staff did not trust the
CMO and did not want to be separated from the collective bargaining agreement. This caused some teachers to worry about their stability at the school and to seek employment at other schools. At the end of the year we lost two of our best teachers. One teacher had been with us since the school’s inception and was a pillar of strength in the middle grades. When I met with her she said she could not take the instability and changes every year. She was worried about the stability of the school and possibly being under the CMO. She just could not imagine being under the CMO, and she could not risk this transition at a time when she had two kids in college. I told her I understood and hoped that we would get word on the bill before the end of the school year. We did not, and she left. I also lost a science teacher who had great relationships with students and had been with us since our second year. She told me she loved the school but she just could not pass up an offer from one of the top traditional schools in BCPS. She left at the end of the year as well. It was difficult to see staff members who were great influences for kids, had high expectations, and had a genuine investment in the success of the school. It was difficult to watch my staff members operating in a state of uncertainty. One teacher asked me how I felt about the bill and whether I would be speaking at Annapolis. I told her I would like to remain neutral, and I offered no opinions about the situation. Although I was confident in my decision not to openly support the bill, it put me in an awkward and lonely place. I felt my decline of the offer to speak was in solidarity to my teachers, but I could not really say how I felt about it without my operator seeing my actions as against their efforts. I felt I was always between a rock and a hard place. I felt at peace with my decisions because every decision was in alignment with my personal beliefs, but at the
same time it was challenging to feel that I was more often than not operating in a different direction from my CMO.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

**Climate control: Internal and external change management.** Despite our best efforts to help keep a lid on our community challenges, we continued to face numerous challenges. As we transitioned to becoming a PBL school, we continued to get increasing pressure regarding our data management and analysis systems. Year four was the year when the school was scheduled to complete a School Performance Review, and the results would determine the length of the charter’s renewal. Dr. Arlington wanted to make sure that we had strong data analysis systems and that we also increased our student achievement scores. In our first year, we made Adequate Yearly Progress in both reading and math, which was praised and commended by the CMO. It was the year when we had the lowest student enrollment and we had a core group of experienced teachers. We did not use any sort of standardized assessment for reading or math that year. We used collaborative planning and strong instructional practices to challenge students. We had a core math curriculum, EnVisions, but we did not have a core reading program. Teachers were provided with training on Guided Reading and texts teachers used with students were aligned to their topics of study for their expeditions. We began to put stronger testing systems in place and there was a divide among teachers regarding the purpose and value of standardized testing throughout the school.

Kindergarten teachers were particularly against testing. They expressed concerns regarding development appropriateness of computer-based assessments, and the team
leader even allowed students to speed through the test just to meet compliance standards for test completion. She did not believe in testing and did not see value in standardized testing, and challenged the validity of the data considering that we were successful during our first year of operation. Teachers from more traditional schools welcomed the testing and advocated for a boxed curriculum for all subject areas when they worked with Ms. Amaryst and Ms. Frye. Everyone knew that issues and concerns brought to them would go back to Dr. Arlington, so those advocating for a boxed curriculum shared their challenges openly with them and saw a set curriculum as a solution. Many teachers continued to be challenged by the idea of developing authentic curricular materials to support various topics of study aligned to standards, and just resisted PBL as a model. The message of data and accountability was not in alignment with the PBL model. This all caused great confusion for teachers, and our academic focus shifted to a more data-driven school culture. Teachers who wanted more freedom and autonomy felt that the school was changing for the worse and becoming more traditional. We continued to have conversations to get everyone to a happy medium, but it was difficult with so many conflicting messages coming from our CMO, Dr. Foss, our COO, Dr. Arlington, and both of the coaches.

The instructional model was one of many challenges on my plate. After the dust settled within my first year in this new building, I continued to face logistical challenges with the setup of the building. The building had a weird trapezoidal shape and the floors had the color and pattern of a wedding cake. The main level was massive and included classrooms and a cafeteria in the front-center of the school building. The layout was challenging because in more traditional school models the cafeteria and the playground
are usually connected. The cafeteria was in the middle of the school and students had to walk through the building to get to the playground. The gym was closer to the cafeteria, but the two gym teachers had classes scheduled in the gym during the lunch periods. The excitement of being in the new building wore off in the second year as we became more and more aware that the layout of the building did not support efficient and practical student transitions. The cafeteria was too far from the playground, the front of the building had a bus lane that made the car rider pick-up line challenging because we had to use the same lane as the city bus, and the traffic on the side street was so bad we had to get permission from the city to stop traffic to load our buses with students. The logistical challenges of acclimating such a large number of students to a new campus as well as the neighborhood challenges dampened the joy of being in a brand new building. The CMO designed the building and did not seek any input from me or my staff.

Strong Parent–Community–School Ties

Room for rent: A new neighbor? Our monthly board meetings were sometimes challenging for me. Most of the meetings would be attended by a maximum of about three parents. Parents generally only attended if they had an issue or concern that they felt my team and I did not address. Those occasions were rare, with the exception of the parent who just wanted to be heard by someone else. What made board meetings challenging for me was the sharing of information about the school that I sometimes was not privy to before the meeting. This concerned me not because of my desire to be in the know, but more importantly because of the information being shared and the impact it would have on my relationships with staff and families. When new information would be
provided as updates to the board, it would be assumed that I knew the information already, and sometimes staff attending the meeting would initially look shocked, but would usually look at me for my reaction to see how I responded to the news. Ninety-nine percent of the time I was clueless. I tried to keep a straight face, as I knew the staff and parent attendees would look to me for answers and explanations after the meeting. I would process as much as I could in the moment and try to prepare how I would respond to questions after the meeting. In most instances, the “surprise” information presented during board meetings was harmless and trivial. Of course, there was one exception to this norm.

During a board meeting in early spring of my last year, Dr. Foss brought up the idea of renting out the basement to a health care provider. Now, to be honest, this idea had come up before. There was once talk of a private organization interested in studying students with ADHD and ADD using a portion of our basement for their facility. There was also talk of the organization reaching out to our families in order to recruit subjects for their therapy services. When this idea came up, I immediately expressed concerns regarding the ethics of such an agreement and did not think we should put such a facility in the school. When I realized that no one else discussed the therapy option for rent, I thought they had listened to me. I later found out from someone in the CMO’s office that the deal fell through and that was the reason why it did not happen. I thought it was over and no additional renters would be entertained. We could use the entire basement, as we were running out of classroom space and we desperately needed a library. When the idea of a different renter, Complete Health Collaborative (CHC), came to the table, I did not get wind of it until the board meeting. Dr. Foss explained that CHC would pay $100,000
to rent out a portion of the basement. He also explained that the purpose would be for students to utilize the services so that if parents decided to change their health care providers to CHC, students could receive services right at school. Initially this idea appeared to cater to the student and staff population. It seemed like the opportunity for our school to have additional health services for students and families providing easy access to healthcare support.

About two weeks later, some visitors from CHC came to our school to check out the space. I greeted the group and walked the ground floor of the building with them and then took them to the basement. Somewhere in the conversation, one of the visitors mentioned a door for the public to get into the building. I then asked why they needed a door and they explained that the “clinic” was open to the public. It was the first time I heard that the plan was for us to house an open clinic for adults all over the neighborhood. I became anxious after the meeting and immediately reached out to Dr. Arlington. I asked him about parking, security, and how we could ensure that patients from the clinic would never have access to our students. The door from the basement to the main level was connected, and my primary worry was in regard to the safety of all students. How would we ensure that CHC patients did not have access to the school building? What would the impact of CHC be on parking and traffic, especially during drop-off and dismissal time? When would families be notified of this change? How much space would they use? How would we be able to utilize the basement space and cohabitate with CHC? When Dr. Foss presented the idea, my head was filled with questions. The board all agreed that the rent money would be an additional revenue source for the school and the partnership was worth the try. No one asked me how I felt.
about the school housing a health care clinic, and I left the meeting feeling confused and nervous about taking on another responsibility. I had learned from my past four years with my CMO that decisions are made and the burden of making it work always falls on my shoulders. In an effort to be proactive, I suggested that the board create a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document to be sent home with a letter from the CMO announcing our new neighbor. Within two weeks, the letter was signed and delivered to all of my families and the buzz about the safety of students was sounding all throughout my school building.

In early May, Dr. Foss invited Councilwoman Best and Jack Wellington, president of the neighborhood association and good friend to John Maverick, to attend the board meeting. The meeting agenda had CHC as a component and they wanted to announce the specifics of the plan in their company. I thought perhaps they had a private meeting with Councilwoman Best and Mr. Wellington to address their concerns, because they were the main deliverers of the discontent of neighbors regarding parking. During the meeting, Dr. Foss explained the benefits of CHC in the school building. Dr. Foss was mid-sentence in explaining his vision when Councilwoman Best stood up and interrupted his monologue. She rose from her seat and began to express her frustration with traffic and parking. She stated that the neighborhood could not handle another traffic burden and she would not be in support of such a thing. She stated that if they made any additional plans to bring CHC to the building, she would get our school neighborhood rezoned so that a school would not be permitted in our space. Mr. Wellington stood in support of Councilwoman Best and agreed that the school did not need any additional occupancy due to the traffic congestion and burden on the neighborhood. Within one board
meeting’s time CHC had come and gone. Dr. Foss had not discussed the idea with Councilwoman Best as I expected, and as a result our basement remained our own.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

**Family wins: Exceeding expectations for engagement.** Every year, our Celebrations of Learning were bigger and better that the previous year’s celebrations. We had our building layout, parent tour guides, and program of events ready to go. We knew what worked and what things we still needed to work on. This year, we decided to embark on the journey of integrating student-led conferencing into our school’s model. It was a component of the Expeditionary Learning model that we had not explored yet. Ms. Figeroa was the point person for student-led conferences, and after our first round in the fall we had about 50% of our families attend. We knew transportation was one of the factors that impacted our parent attendance to school events, and student-led conferences were no exception. We brainstormed ideas for increasing attendance and decided on a Fun Day that we would make grade-level specific as a way to close out the school year and provide students with an additional age-appropriate day of fun with their grade-level peers. One of my PE teachers organized the trips, and parents paid $8–$12 per student for trip admission.

It was a hectic endeavor. The Student-Led Conferences (SLC) window closed the day before the trip. We collected money until 8 p.m. the day before the trip. We continued to update and adjust the bus list. That night, my PE teacher and I stayed at school until 10 p.m. making sure everything was set for the trip. We were so busy and delirious from our planning that we did not even consider the amount of parents who
came in for conferences. The next morning, Ms. Figeroa came to my office and proudly announced the total number of parents who had attended our spring SLCs. We had a 90% attendance rate! I was elated and overwhelmed with excitement. In a matter of days we managed to get students so excited about their grade-level trips that they encouraged and pushed their parents to come in. Several parents stopped me as they came in the building to express how proud they were of their children and their ability to share their learning in such a structured way. I attended SLCs of some of my most challenging students and I beamed with joy. The SLC experience is one of my most treasured memories as a principal. To attract over 800 parents and family members into one school in support of their children was just absolutely amazing. For all of the challenges I faced as a principal, it was the victories such as the SLCs that made it worth it.

**Leadership as Self-Preservation: Learning to Let Go**

In early May, I was ill one day and I planned to stay home from work. It was the same day that I was supposed to meet with Dr. Arlington about some of the CMO’s concerns. He shared that the CMO was upset about the condition of the building and how the students were not “taking care” of the building. He noticed that some of the murals that were created had been damaged in high-traffic areas. He wanted me to provide a plan for how we would ensure that the murals stayed intact and were not damaged by the students. I knew this conversation was coming because we had been having it since year three. There were many things they did not consider when they built the school, and as a result we had many challenges in keeping the murals and decorations around the school in good condition. The restrooms had drywall instead of tile by the urinals, and our little boys
would frequently miss their targets and the restrooms sometimes reeked of urine. We suspected that some of the floors and the drywall started to absorb the fluid and of course the odor. The heavy-traffic areas such as the lunchroom lines were not secured with a layer or two of clear washable paint to protect the murals. There were so many structural considerations that should have been made regarding the impact of the volume and traffic of 1,000 students in a school building. These things were not discussed during planning and pre-construction, so the blame for the wear and tear was being placed on the school. I tried my best to get the teachers, students, and parents on board, but my efforts were limited. How could I justify spending $500,000 on decorations and murals throughout the building when we did not have enough technology or support staff? It was difficult to think of ways to get the staff to support and buy in to an expensive feature of the school about whose costs many people expressed concerns, wishing the money to be used for a better purpose.

Dr. Arlington reached out to me via email and asked that I meet with him for lunch in my neighborhood so we could talk. He told me the president of the CMO wanted him to meet with me as soon as possible. I did have a slight headache but I mustered enough energy to meet him at Chevy’s in Greenbelt, right across the street from where I live. It took me two minutes to drive to the restaurant. When the conversation began, he started telling me about Dr. Foss’s concerns about the condition of the murals in the building and the need for a plan to “fix” it. He stated that he did not want the school to appear run down, especially after all of the money they had invested in aesthetic planning and painting the murals. He acknowledged that I had a lot on my plate and I should not be the person responsible for it. He then suggested Dr. Touro as the person to take on
those duties. I told him I did not feel comfortable with Dr. Touro being responsible for it, as she did not complete any of the other tasks that had been assigned to her. He insisted. I finally agreed. In my agreement I had affirmed my plan to resign. I had already been offered a position with DCPS, and through all of the challenges and changes I faced, I really did not want to leave. I loved my students and families. I wanted to see my first eighth-grade class go to high school. I at least wanted to stay for an additional year. I did not want to leave just yet. As a founder, my heart was in my school and I wanted to remain there to see it grow. However, when Dr. Arlington insisted that Dr. Touro take over maintaining the building, it threw me over the edge. I felt that they wanted me to just go with the flow of what they thought was best. It was that day that I realized how political my situation was and that there were just certain things I would never have any control over, one being my CMO and how they want to do things. For all the things I felt I did have some control over, this was one I had no voice or influence in. I just could not continue to allow decisions to be made about a school I was ultimately responsible for by others who did not have any context, understanding, or care for what was really going on from a day-to-day perspective. I would raise concerns and they would be forgotten about. I would ask questions and not get answers. I knew that continuing to work with and for them would not be to my benefit as a leader. I went home after lunch that day and typed up my resignation letter. I decided to sleep on the idea and decide the next morning.

The next morning, I proofread my resignation letter and sent it to Dr. Foss and Dr. Arlington.

Wednesday, May 20th, 2015

Dear Dr. Foss and Dr. Arlington,
First I would like to thank Dr. Foss for the opportunity to be the founding principal of Monarch Baltimore. I know that you took a risk hiring me as a brand new principal of such a large and growing school. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time working with the students and families of Baltimore City and I truly appreciate your belief in my capacity to lead and work in one of your charter schools. I have been inspired and motivated by the amazing students I serve. My favorite Child Guardian workplace expectation is “Be a Brinksman” because I truly believe that the work of opening a brand new school has pushed me to the brink of the impossible. My experience has allowed me the opportunity to build my capacity to lead, further develop my problem-solving skills, and also to grow exponentially on a professional level. For my personal and professional growth opportunities I am truly grateful.

I have decided to resign from my position as principal of Newton Academy Maverick Campus at the end of this school year. It has been a difficult decision for me to make but I believe in my best interest to further develop my skill and capacity as a leader in a different setting. There are a great deal of ever-changing politics involved with leading a Newton school in Baltimore City that has posed some insurmountable challenges particularly related to hiring, teacher attrition, environmental upkeep, and several other issues that I either have no direct control over and/or no support to manage. These issues overwhelmingly impact Newton’s success and challenges every school year and I am evaluated based on these areas beyond my control. I am moving to a role that I feel is more in alignment with my future goals, leadership style, and endeavors in which I can be more successful in focusing on instructional leadership as my main and primary responsibility.

I thank you so much for the opportunity to lead Newton Academy Maverick Campus. I plan to support the new principal through transitioning in any way that I can until my departure. My last day will be Tuesday, June 30th. As a founding principal my ties and commitment to the school are deeply rooted and I hope to continue to visit and support the school in a different capacity. I will be completing my dissertation work at Newton so I definitely plan to continue to support teachers and to keep in touch with the school.

Sincerely,

Sundai Riggins
Founding Principal
Newton Academy Maverick Campus

I sent a group text to my leadership team to tell them that we all needed to meet in my office at 7:30 a.m. that morning. When I got to school around 7:15 a.m., Ms. Gertrude
and Ms. Figeroa were waiting in front of my office. Both looked worried and we started at 7:30 when everyone else arrived. I told them that I had submitted my resignation letter that morning to the CMO and I wanted to be the first to tell them. I told them I had enjoyed working with them all and we would continue to work together to close out school. I told them that my last day would be Friday, July 3. Both Ms. Getrude and Ms. Figeroa started crying. They asked me where I was going and I told them I was not sure yet. I had already been offered a principal position in DC Public Schools, but I did not want to share that with anyone at the time. Shortly after I met with the team, I had our regularly scheduled morning circle with the staff. I announced it at the morning circle. I told the staff that I did not feel that I could lead the school in the direction that the CMO wanted. I told them I enjoyed working with them all and thanked them for their decision to take the ride of being at a new and growing school. Two of my crying staff members walked out, one of whom was my art teacher who had been at the school since day one, and some other faces appeared to be in a state of shock. After I closed the morning circle, some staff members came to me to thank me and some even hugged me. I almost cried announcing my decision to my staff, but I held my tears in and continued my day. Before the end of that day, I sent a letter home to my families announcing my resignation.

Dear Newton Academy Families,

I have had the pleasure of serving as your Newton Academy Founding Principal over the past four years. We’ve been together as the school has grown from 330 students during year one to 990 students in year four. Currently there is a waiting list with 546 students and there are only 84 slots for kindergarten for the upcoming school year. The high demand for a Newton education speaks volumes to the hard work of our staff and teachers. This is a school that provides a quality education for its students. Although we have seen our fair share of challenges together through multiple moves and transitions we are truly a family and we have been strengthened by our trials and tribulations as a school community.
What made working through the challenges so worthwhile has been the support of wonderful teachers, colleagues, and families. Although there is still a long way to go I am extremely proud of the hard work that we have done. I have laid the foundation for new initiatives, systems, and structures so I am equally as excited about the work that will continue in my absence.

It is with much thought and consideration that I have decided to step down from my position as principal of Newton Academy Maverick Campus at the end of this school year. I am truly honored to have served as your founding principal and to have had the opportunity to connect with such wonderful students. I have been a part of an amazing staff and have worked with some truly dedicated teachers and administrators that I would honestly say are the best in Baltimore City. I am especially proud of the relationships that I was able to foster and develop over the years with the students, staff and the wonderful Newton community of parents. Newton Academy is a special place for students to learn and grow. I will always treasure my experience here as a foundational step in being a leader and an advocate for student learning. It is with a heavy heart that I say goodbye to all of the students, staff, and families that have meant so much to me. I will miss the countless hugs and smiles I get throughout the day from students. On my most difficult days the love and support I get from students has been rejuvenating. Our students are truly the joy of the work we do every day.

As a founding principal it is hard to leave but I plan to remain connected to the school in some capacity. It would be nearly impossible to leave a school I built from the ground up behind. I will be working with The Child Guardian, our charter management organization, to figure out how I can further support the school beyond the principalship. News of my role with the school will be forthcoming as things evolve.

I wish all the best to Newton students and families for the upcoming school year. I am confident that The Child Guardian will select a leader that will continue to move the school forward in the direction of continuing the work that I began. Our goal is and will always be to make Newton Academy one of the best charter schools in Baltimore City.

Educationally Yours,

Ms. Riggins
Principal
Newton Academy

Late that same night, my PTA president, Ms. Beverly Johnston, texted me and told me her phone had been ringing off the hook after my letter went out to the families.
that afternoon. She told me she was saddened by my departure and that no one would be able to take my place. She sent me an email.

Good Evening,

It truly saddens me to be aware of your departure. I’m thankful for all the love, hard work, dedication, endless nights, thousands of miles driven daily and partnerships forged with the students. I wish you nothing but the best! I’m confident that more greatness is in the making with any new venture (if it’s another school, let me know so I can transfer the boys).

You are the sole reason why many families made a decision to send their children to Monarch. You have been genuine and authentic which is to be highly respected. You inspire me as a woman and a leader.

Newton has lost its Newton, which causes me to view the future in despair. The foundation you have made is impeccable but I don’t know if there’s someone else who shares your love to carry on. Your “stylish heels” will not be easily filled. As other read the letter my phone went off. Parents questioning the future, what will Newton be without your leadership.

I will miss you!

Best Regards,

Beverly Johnston,
PTA President
Newton Academy

After my resignation was submitted, the wheels were already in motion for my successor to be selected. Deep inside I wanted someone to beg me to stay and to reconsider my decision. No one asked me to stay. I knew I had made the right decision and I really wanted someone to ask me to stay simply because I wanted to feel that I was important. My departure made me realize how disposable I was in the eyes of my CMO. I knew Dr. Arlington did not particularly care for me. I was sometimes too passionate, too outspoken, and one person on the CMO’s executive team described me as “disobedient.” When I decided to become a leader, I did so to make good decisions in the best interest of
kids. The more experiences I gained in leadership, the more confidence I built in being able to speak my mind and act on behalf of what I thought was true and right for my students and families. I knew I had made the right decision, but it was just hard to leave a school that I had spent many long days and nights building from the ground up.

The fantasy I had of being asked to stay was totally thrown out when I started to hear more about things that had been going on with the CMO. One of my colleagues, who was the planning principal of the new DC charter school scheduled to open in the fall, knew Dr. Arlington from her former district. She told me Dr. Arlington had mentioned something about me becoming a leadership coach and he asked her if she thought I would accept the position. He also told her he had someone perfect for my position. She even showed me that they had an ad posted for my position on their website. I had been totally out of the loop and was shocked by all of what she shared. When I had met with Dr. Arlington for lunch that afternoon, I had even asked him about it. He told me that they always keep advertisement for principals just in case they needed to have someone in the pipeline. I knew that the CMO would always act in their best interest, and my presence, opinions, and input were not valued or needed. That lunch meeting was the solid confirmation I needed to move on from my first principalship.

In addition to rumors about me moving to another position and a planned successor taking over after my departure, I also found out that Dr. Arlington reached out to my former assistant principal, Ms. Lane, who was already a principal of a traditional school. She emailed me and told me he reached out to her to ask if she wanted to be the principal of the school. She reached out to me to tell me because she was shocked at my departure and also because they reached out to her after they had promised she would be
considered for a principalship and not honored their word. She told me she admired me for having the courage to leave and move on, and that she could not believe they had the nerve to reach out to her. I thanked her for reaching out to me, wished her well, and told her I would keep in touch.

When I thought about my departure and some of the things that might have made my relationship difficult with my CMO, I think our relationship was more strained during the fourth year because of the pending charter bill. The proposed charter bill held the fate of many BCPS teachers at charter schools in its hands. If passed, the bill would separate teachers at charter schools from the collective bargaining agreement and they would be hired by the CMO. This would take teachers at charter schools out from under the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU) and they would not be unionized or subject to the same salaries as teachers at traditional schools. This bill was supported by my CMO. They felt that some teachers at the school made too much money and at one point I was encouraged to hire new teachers so that we could pay lower salaries, as new teachers would be paid entry-level wages. I knew that if my teachers were separated from the BTU and the collective bargaining agreement, my CMO would be empowered to make teachers work longer hours and they would be paid much less than they would make as BCPS teachers. My CMO decided to organize a bus trip to Annapolis for all those who wanted to support the bill. My teachers and staff members were not interested. Perhaps because I was the principal of the school, they assumed that I would be going to Annapolis to support the bill. Dr. Foss even sent an email and asked me to prepare my speech and send it over to marketing to be proofread so that I could prepare.
I told Dr. Arlington and Dr. Foss that I would not be speaking at Annapolis. I did not feel comfortable speaking for a bill that I did not think would be good for my staff and would ultimately hurt my students if we lost all of our strong teachers because my CMO did not want to pay them. I also knew that my teachers were not in support of the bill, and I think supporting it would have made them all feel uncomfortable and would have made them question my support of them. I could not do it. There were honestly pros and cons to both, and I did not want to choose sides. I wanted to remain neutral. I told them I felt this was the best decision for me. Dr. Foss was upset with my decision and he told me that I had the wrong mindset and I was not supporting the organization in the way that I should be as the principal of a charter school. Dr. Arlington said nothing. He told me that if I should reconsider, let him know so that they can get me on the agenda. I did not take up the offer. They asked Dr. Touro to speak instead.

My performance evaluation improved significantly from my ratings during the 2013–14 school year. Through my experience with the process last year, I learned to become more proactive about documenting my leadership actions. I selected artifacts, meeting agendas, and school improvement plans to address the various domains of the rubric.

I ended the year with an “effective” rating. I learned that I would need to make my efforts visible so that they would understand that even in the midst of dealing with crises and building management woes, I had many structures and systems aligned with effective practice according to the rubric. Based on Dr. Arlington and Mr. Estien’s assessment of my work, I even earned level 4 ratings in a few domains. For Core Value
2: Talented People, I received a level 4 rating. The comments directly aligned to the evidence I submitted:

Structures for school/student support – Title I summer school program developed, modification of services to service the needs of students by grade-level band for push-in/pull-out services. Revamped hiring process to include a mandatory demo lesson and student feedback tool on the lesson. Students give feedback about the teacher’s style and ability to help them to understand content. The hiring committee consists of teachers that view the demo lesson and provide candidates with feedback. Attended multiple hiring fairs in and out of state (Ohio, Philadelphia) to recruit candidates. Mentor teacher induction program was already established and mentors have been selected for this upcoming school year. Admin leadership team meets weekly on Mondays, School leadership team meets monthly and spent the year working on some instructional expectations and standards for the upcoming school year. More should have been done with data analysis and moving the school forward with a more comprehensive action plan to impact student achievement.

I realized that my decision to attend hiring fairs, create a Title I summer program, and many of my other leadership actions were unknown to Dr. Arlington and Mr. Estien unless explicitly stated. In response to my evidence, he rated me a level 4 and provided supporting comments by pointing out that “the principal went to great lengths to be inclusive in the attraction and selection of staff. In addition, the school utilized multiple support systems for teachers. The volume of new teachers makes it tough to provide high levels of support” (See Appendix E).

I would say I was “proud” of my improved ratings, but I was not. I did not think I had done many things differently from how I had operated in the past. I knew that many of the things I received credit for this year were systems and structures I had last year that Dr. Arlington and Mr. Estien did not even know about. They evaluated me based on their perceptions of my leadership. I realized that perception becomes reality if you do not tell your own story. It was a valuable lesson.
Year 5: Lehigh Elementary School

480 students
Ward 8
Washington, DC

A New Beginning: A New Opportunity to Lead

Throughout my final two years in Baltimore City, Mr. Rius, a colleague from my graduate program and the assistant superintendent of Region 1 schools within the District of Columbia Public Schools, had been trying to recruit me to come to DC. He would periodically reach out to me and inquire if I was interested in returning to the district as a principal. During my last year at the school, the climate was so tense I decided I should consider the option. I was in the middle of the charter bill reform and the start of the renovation of the basement of my school building. I was just exhausted from the changes every year and the instability of charter schools within the district. Although I loved the curricular autonomy of being at a charter school, I was in dire need of some upper-level leadership and stability. It was time for a change, and I felt that I knew how the traditional public school system operated.

Walking away from a school I had built from the ground up was one of the most difficult things I have ever done, both personally and professionally. I knew the names of the 1,000 students I served, had greeted their parents during car rider dismissal, had driven many of them home after concerts and plays, and sometimes had bought them lunch or dinner after school. I had fixed ponytails and head buns with bobby pins and hair gel I kept in a box in my office, taught sixth-graders how to play double Dutch during recess, and watched my school grow from one single principal to the largest K–8 charter
school in Baltimore City. It was no easy feat. My experience as a principal building a school from the ground up made me feel invincible. Based on the large variety of experiences I was able to learn and grow from as a principal of a brand new school, I was confident that I could take on any principalship.

**Knowing Is Half the Battle: Learning Before Leading**

Before I was appointed at my school, there were conversations on the district level about what school would be a good fit for me based on my experience. I knew I would be assigned a challenging school, so my appointment at Lehigh Elementary School, the second-lowest–performing school in the district, came as no surprise. In my mind I felt confident that I could do it. Only 480 kids in grades preschool through five in comparison to the 1,000 students I had in a K–8 school? No problem!

Even before I started, Mr. Rius had front loaded information about my school’s challenges. He told me that he was recruiting me to work at a school in his network and wanted to let me know about it. Through my own research from the school’s district profile online, speaking with Mr. Rius, and also meeting with his school turnaround specialist and the school climate specialist, I learned a ton of information about what I would eventually inherit and need to make sense of in order to enact change.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

**School overview.** Lehigh Elementary School is a school located in Ward 8 of Southeast Washington, DC, that serves 500 students in grades PS–5. It is the largest elementary school in Ward 8 and is also the second-lowest–performing elementary school in the district. The school’s proficiency levels on the 2013 District of Columbia
Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS) are within the lowest 5% of the schools in the district—12% proficient or above in reading and 20% proficient or above in mathematics (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Academic Achievement Performance at Lehigh Elementary School

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<td>ELA</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
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<td>Math</td>
<td>28%</td>
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At the beginning of the 2012–13 school year, Lehigh ES was merged with another low-performing school in the ward, Fairmont Heights ES, and the student population grew from 300 to 500 students. Based on reports from veteran staff members, the school continued on an academic decline after the merger and did not regain any momentum in any real academic student gains.

When I took the helm of my school, I remembered two descriptions of my school that were provided before I was actually selected as the principal of the school. On the day of my interview panel, I spoke with my soon-to-be supervisor, Mr. Rius, who described my school by referencing the movie *Lean on Me* with Morgan Freeman. He told me my school was the “Eastside Elementary” that was the feeder school for Eastside High in the movie. He told me it would be rough and he said good luck. Shorty after, I saw a colleague that I went to undergrad with interviewing for a middle school. She asked me what school I was interviewing for and she asked me if I was going to that school with “all those badass kids.” For a moment I felt awkward and doubted myself. I thought that maybe I had jumped into a situation that I was not prepared for. However, I
did not let those descriptions taint my perspectives of my abilities or my confidence. I knew I would need to dig in and hit the ground running. I knew two things after I was appointed to lead my school: we were a “priority” school and we would be in the school climate initiative for the upcoming school year. I had to learn about both of these criteria in order to better understand my work and the lift that I would need to lead for this school year.

**Priority schools.** Priority schools within DCPS are the lowest-performing schools, which have traditionally been labeled as underperforming for an extended period of time. The “priority” school status is generated by a school’s Education and Secondary Act (ESEA) classification determined by a school review process. The ESEA classification process involves a variety of interviews from school stakeholders such as the principal, the Academic Leadership Team (ALT), a group of parents and community members, and a small group of four or five teachers. School performance data are used as a part of the review process and recommendations are made to the principal and the leadership team. The baseline review is completed between September and November and the final review occurs between April and June.

All schools in DCPS are classified by the ESEA standards (Priority: Red, Focus: Orange, Developing: Yellow, Rising: Light Green, Reward: Green), and this information is included on the DCPS website under the school’s profile. Across the district, these classifications reflect overall school performance on a variety of metrics and data points such as academic achievement, in-seat attendance percentages, student suspensions, and school climate and culture. Lehigh ES is a priority school. The priority school status has its challenges, but in the district, priority schools are also funded differently and receive
extra resources in accordance with their low ESEA status, such as an additional at-risk payment and also school-wide Title I funding, which benefits all students within the school.

All DCPS elementary schools follow the DCPS Comprehensive Staffing Model (see Appendix H) formula to ensure that principals do not have the autonomy to make cuts within the school that do not provide all elementary school students with similar experiences. For example, in the past principals had full autonomy over their budgets and could decide to cut a music art class to hire an additional reading teacher or math teacher in an effort to close performance gaps. What resulted were schools in economically disadvantaged areas of the city without any performing arts courses or offerings for students outside of reading and mathematics. In order to attempt to create equity across schools, all elementary schools are required to have art, music, and physical education, and these allocations are based on the number of students within each school. Principals have the ability to choose which arts courses to offer, but the goal is for every elementary school student in the district to have access to a similar elementary school student experience.

Priority schools in the district are schools that have a history of significant underperformance, a toxic school culture, low in-seat attendance, and high numbers of suspensions. Schools in this category fit any or all of the above criteria and have reputations of being “challenging,” “off the hook,” and filled with “bad kids,” and are the subject of many rumors and horror stories of school dysfunction within the district. There are many stories from central administration about schools they have visited in which staff members were unprofessional and people were hanging out at the front desk, and
where there was just a lack of tact and decorum about how the school operated, which made the school neither parent- nor visitor-friendly. Lehigh ES was one of those schools.

**School Climate Initiative.** The School Climate Initiative (SCI) was rolled out to the 40 lowest-performing DCPS schools in July 2015. The objective of the initiative, according to DCPS and the SCI guidebook, is to support schools in creating a positive environment conducive to strong relationship building among school stakeholders in order to promote the academic and social-emotional growth of students. Progress (or lack thereof) is monitored by the district, and all schools within the initiative have started in Phase 1 of the initiative.

To start, each school was rated on eight criteria: vision and mission, accountability, physical surroundings, rules and norms, classroom consistency, student recognition (short/long), customer service, and physical security. After each walkthrough, schools receive a scorecard (Appendix G) and each area is color-coded based on the school’s overall proficiency in that area during the day of the walkthrough. A green rating indicates that the element was fully evident within the school, yellow indicates partially evident, and red indicates no evidence in that area. Data from the SCI walkthroughs are collected in the form of a scorecard, and schools receive scorecards to share feedback with their respective school climate committees to plan next steps to target growth areas and to continue to make progress in improving the school’s climate. The SCI starts with two day trainings for principals and their School Climate Committees to begin planning and developing a school climate plan. DCPS pay staff an “administrative premium” ($34 per hour for all teachers on the committee) for coming
during the summer months to plan for the initiative and to get each school off to a strong start.

As a result of the school’s history of low academic performance and safety issues, Lehigh E was labeled a “priority” school (red) and was selected to be a part of a school culture pilot program the district launched in the fall to help support culture improvements within struggling schools. According to the school climate specialist, teachers claimed that they did not feel safe at the school, and there were other factors like the school’s reputation that concerned me. I jumped right into the work when I was appointed in order to prepare to launch school climate efforts in August, at the start of the school year.

**History.** Principals in the district operated on yearly contracts. Some principals were offered three-year contracts based on their performance, but most of them operated on a year-to-year, at-will basis. In March 2015, the principal left the school for personal and health-related reasons after a performance evaluation indicated that his contract would not be renewed for the upcoming school year. Earlier in the year, the principal was punched multiple times by a parent upset about a disciplinary issue. An acting principal was assigned to the school in April to establish some semblance of order to the school after the principal left.

According to Mr. Rius, when my predecessor was told his contract for the following school year would not be renewed, his attendance became sporadic and he unexpectedly went out on medical leave for the rest of the school year. After he left, it was announced that an interim principal would be there within a week. Ms. Gunther
closed out the school year with teacher evaluations, hiring for vacancies, and tightening up school operations and logistics left in disarray after the principal departed.

According to Mr. Rius and the other specialists who were assigned to work with my school, the issues central to many of the challenges at Lehigh ES are the lack of consistency and lack of high expectations for staff, students, and parents. The school climate specialist provided the results of a school climate survey from parents and the various complaints that parents have made against the school over the course of the past school year. In addition, the central office team members that support Lehigh ES informed me of many of the school’s challenges in relation to culture and climate that limited the success of the school’s efforts. Teachers and support staff members were not held to high expectations in terms of professionalism, developmentally appropriate expectations for students, and completing their job responsibilities. The school does not have a school-wide behavior management system that all staff members follow, so students do not have consistency in ways behaviors are addressed. Suspensions were far more numerous than what a person would normally see in an elementary school. Many incidents of irate parents approaching teachers were reported and documented, although the school has a security desk with two officers at all times. The internal community of teachers and staff had been in great turmoil. About 55% of the staff either were evaluated for unsatisfactory performance, were cut from the budget, or just felt uncomfortable with the school’s transitional status and decided to transfer to other schools. The parent community was uncomfortable with the safety and educational standards of the school. Many parents were hesitant about allowing their children to return to school. As a result, the school’s enrollment was declining.
Leadership Drives Change

**Great expectations: New principal, new rules.** I started my position at my new school on July 3, 2015. The district required all principals to attend two weeks of training known as the New Principals Institute, with some days open during the two-week period for principals to spend time in their schools. A few days into the job, I knew I had grossly underestimated the challenges I would face at my new school. It was an adult-centric culture of pervasive low expectations, and I had stepped knee deep into the madness. It was even evident in the building’s appearance and the marquee’s message from April that was still posted.

When I arrived on my first day and came to pick up my keys from the former interim principal, Ms. Gunther, I met the front office staff. I did not announce that I was the new principal. I took this as an opportunity to watch and learn about my new front office staff. A radio was playing music from a local station. It was loud. The desk was cluttered, the carpet was filthy, and the two chairs next to me looked worn. The walls were plain and clean. Ms. Gunther later told me the building had a Phase 1 modernization, which transformed the main lobby, offices, and all classrooms throughout the building. The modernization did not include the cafeteria and the gym, so those spaces were worn and outdated. There were two women at the front desk and they chattered while I sat there. After ten minutes they told me they would call Ms. Gunther again. One lady at the front desk, Ms. Hooks, opened up her lunch and they all continued to talk. Ms. Guther came out about a minute after the front desk lunch hour began. When she came out of the office she greeted me and afterwards she asked the staff if they knew
I was their principal. Everyone at the desk looked shocked. They stopped eating the lunch and everyone stared at me. One person mentioned hearing good things about my work in Baltimore. Another person said I look different from my picture and too young to be a principal. Another staff member, Ms. Hooks, walked in and said she was waiting to meet me because she wanted to know why she lost her job and wanted to know if there were any other positions available so that she did not need to leave the school.

When I went into the back office with Ms. Gunther, the chatting and lunch meeting in the main office ensued. In the office that was to be mine, Ms. Gunther handed me a single key on a ring and told me it was the key to the office. She told me she had a few belongings in the space since she took the helm only two months before I arrived, so she had not made an effort to settle in. She did let me know that the office was filthy and it was difficult for her to move around the space without thoroughly cleaning it first. It was a nice office space with a restroom. I was thankful for the private restroom, because most of the time when I had a second to run to the restroom someone was in it, and I would run around the building to find an open restroom. She told me that she did not have any other keys to the building because the business manager, Ms. Casson, said that there were no keys. The principal left abruptly and she said she did not get anything from him when he departed. I took my single lonely key on the ring. She hugged me and wished me luck. She said she knew I would do well because she heard great things about me from our boss, Mr. Rius. She told me my school was a “hot mess” and that I would need all my strength to fix it. I thanked her and she left. I sat in my office for about ten minutes and thought about my next move. I had a teacher interview on my agenda for the
day and I had to prepare. It would be my first meeting with a teacher other than the ones I met during my interview panel.

My interview experience was interesting to say the least. I was one of three candidates interviewing for the school, including the interim principal who had just handed over my key. She told me that she interviewed for the school because she was told she had to do it, but really did not want the school. She said there was just too much going on and she wanted a fresh start at another place she could call her own. I understood. When I interviewed, there were three teachers on the panel: one first-grade teacher, the school’s union representative; a special education teacher; and one kindergarten teacher who had been at the school for 25 years. There was one parent on the panel and I remember her because she was nodding and falling asleep during my interview. It was distracting and made me feel as if I were boring the panel. However, there were eight people on the panel and I received eight out of eight votes to be the new principal of the school. My rating was tied with another candidate, but she would be entering as a first-year principal, and the superintendent and the chancellor did not think the school would be a good fit for her. There are some schools that have up to ten candidates for the position. My school only had three, and I was the only candidate who was not someone already in the district’s principal pipeline. I knew my school was rough. I knew it would be challenging, but I believed I was well prepared to lead my school and be an agent of change. What I did not realize was the difference in the skill set I would need to lead my new school. I was a founding principal. In my new school home, I had to shift my thinking from the mindset of a founding principal to a turnaround principal. I did
not exactly know what turnaround meant by definition, nor what it entailed, but I learned pretty quickly that my work in this school would be drastically different.

**First week: Baptism by fire.** There were trainings scheduled for New Principal Orientation, but during my off days I worked in my school building. One of the first things I decided to do when I was appointed to lead my school was to interview my staff. I wanted to know about their perceptions, realities, challenges, and ideas for change. Teachers were out on summer break, and I was in the building with custodians, office staff, and the after-school program coordinator. If they were interested, I interviewed them, too. Over the summer, I had the opportunity to interview 13 staff members to learn about their perspectives on things at school that were working and things that needed to change. I was anticipating that through these interviews, I could learn a lot of my school’s history and background and that what I learned could inform my decision-making moving forward. Although I was entering my fifth year as a principal, it was my first time as the new kid on the block, and I had to remember that I was an outsider attempting to come into a new school experience. Despite the horror stories I heard about the staff, I wanted to develop my own point of view. I thought that the interviews would give me the most information about the school. But my first week was very revealing and set the stage for more learning, seeing, and experiencing than I would have ever anticipated.

During my first week there were several staff members transitioning out of the school. These were the business manager, in-school suspension coordinator, administrative assistant, and special education coordinator. Mr. Rius and the assistant principal, Ms. Frontera, worked on the budget and eliminated all of their positions.
Although they were not in the budget for the upcoming school year, their contracts did not end until August 8. The business manager was there for two days cleaning out her office. When I looked in her office, I saw mounds and mounds of papers and two huge trash bags in the center of a junky office. I saw mouse droppings everywhere. I could not even see the carpet on the floor. I noticed that she did not return to work and later found out she would be on medical leave until August 8. She was only there to pack up her office. Through the interview process I later found out that she was in charge of supplies, payroll, and many operational duties. She never gave me her keys.

I had my first major issue in the middle of the week when one of the custodians decided not to come in and did not call or attempt to reach anyone. He was not at work for about three days and no one had heard from him. I then reached out to him, Mr. Rius, and the labor relations department in the district to inquire as to how I should proceed. I had never had an experience with a staff member deciding not to show up at work without contacting an administrator. I was not sure how to document it other than by sending an email. I sent an email to Mr. Rius to figure out how to document the employee’s absence. Below is what I emailed Mr. Rius:

Question: What is the process for me to document if a person did not show up to work? Mr. Nicholas (one of my custodians) did not come in to work today. He did not call the front office nor did he inform the custodial foreman. What next steps do I need to take?

Mr. Rius forwarded my email and I received the following reply from Dr. Noles in the Labor Relations Department:

This has been a pattern for the last two months. Ms. Gunther wrote him up. We can continue with progressive discipline. The next step can be a three-day suspension. Please consult with the custodial foreman, Mr. Coston. If you have any questions, I can be reached at 202-579-5356.
Thank you,
Dr. Noles

I called and emailed Mr. Nicholas and I did not get a response. He did not call; no one had heard from him all week. I then mentioned something to the business manager, Ms. Casson, and she most likely called to let him know that I inquired about his absence. The next day I received the following email:

Hello Ms. Riggins,

I am Derek Nicholas, sorry this email is just being composed. I've tried several times to call in to inform you I was not going to be able to come in on Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday due to legal procedures. I had no other method to contacting you up until this point, I received your email address from a co-worker. I will however return to work on Thursday July 9, 2015. I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you and the lack of communication. Previously, I was able to contact the former Principal when I was unable to come to work via cell phone. Would it be possible for me to get your contact information as well? I thank you for your understanding in this matter and look forward to seeing you on Thursday morning. Thank you, have a wonderful evening!

Derek Nicholas

After receiving the email, I knew that he was trying to take advantage of me being in and out of the office due to my scheduled trainings for New Principal Orientation. It was unclear to me why he did not just call the office to leave me a message or send an email. We did not have any record of him attempting to contact the front office. So, I sent him the following reply:

Good Morning Mr. Nicholas,

Thank you for your email. We did not hear from you and we were very concerned.

I was in the office on Monday and I did not receive a message nor a call from you. According to what was reported to me by Ms. Allen and Mr. Coston they did
not hear anything from you either. In the future should you not be able to reach me directly it would be appropriate for you to call the front office as well as Mr. Coston. Mr. Coston is the foreman and would benefit from knowing if you would be in for the day. We are in the process of preparing for school readiness and we need all hands on deck. Letting him know if you are unable to be at work helps him to make adjustments to his scheduled plans for building maintenance and cleaning.

If this is in regards to legal matters if you have a court summons or some document to account for your absence, please bring it in to work on Friday. We will need to meet on Friday at 10:00 am to discuss this matter so that we can make sure that there is a clear plan for communication moving forward.

If you ever need to email me feel free to go to the DCPS website and look for Lehigh Elementary School. My name and email address has been listed on the site since Monday so if you were unable to call an email would suffice.

See you Friday morning at 10:00 am.

Ms. Riggins

I knew that Mr. Nicholas was allowed to miss work and had attendance issues. I reached out to Ms. Gunther and she stated she had challenges with his attendance for the short time she was at the school. I told the timekeeper, Mr. Cobb, to mark him as absent without leave (AWOL) for both Monday and Tuesday because we did not hear from him regarding his absence. This got his attention because I received the following response to coding him as AWOL:

Good Morning Ms. Riggins,

I have noticed I have been put down as AWOL for Monday and Tuesday. I did call in on both days and was unable to reach anyone in the office. I feel I should not be marked as AWOL because I followed the procedure on my end. I'm not sure what to do when you call and don't receive an answer. I've contacted Mr. Casson in the past and I was directed to contact previous principal directly.

Derek Nicholas
Mr. Nicholas continued to leave the building early, not complete his work during his shift, and his work schedule was unpredictable. He was unreliable but in the past had managed to be paid based on his relationship with the principal and the business manager.

As I continued to have interviews with staff members, I learned more information. I noticed that the previous year’s school budget showed that $83,000 was spent on overtime and $48,000 was spent on administrative premium. Several staff members during interviews mentioned that they did not receive supplies, the school building was not clean, and there were issues with pay being granted equally. I was told that some staff members received overtime pay and others did not. When my new operations specialist, Mr. Cobb, took over entering, payroll he noticed that Mr. Nicholas had been receiving overtime pay. When we looked into the matter further, Mr. Nicholas was being paid for days that he had not even reported to work. I had no idea this was going on, how long it had been going on, and what my next course of action would be. I emailed the labor relations team to inquire and to follow up on the initial email sent by Mr. Cobb. I sent an email expressing my concern about fraudulent paperwork and my concern for unethical practices in payroll reporting.

Good Afternoon Ms. Pullman,

I am writing to express my concern about an issue (stated below). I am Sundai Riggins, the new principal at Lehigh ES and I am excited to be at the helm of a school with such great potential. As a part of my information gathering process I interview staff members one-to-one and ask a few questions related to school culture, operations, leadership, and possible changes. During my interviews several returning staff members expressed concerns about payroll and overtime pay. It appears that pay was not granted equitably. This matches my expenditures according to the school year 2014-15 data I have regarding budget. According to my expenditure trends about $83,000.00 was spent on overtime and $48,000.00
was spent on administrative premium. The $83,000.00 seems to be an exorbitant amount of money to be spent on overtime for custodians. After speaking with my custodial foreman about overtime for the team (4 custodial staff total) the numbers do not add up.

Please note the email below. I have reason to believe that the former business manager, Cassandra Casson, was providing Mr. Derek Nicholas with overtime pay. Since I started at the beginning of July Mr. Nicholas has not worked overtime and has missed quite a few days of work. His timesheets are not accurate since my appointment as principal and I question documents approved and prepared by Ms. Casson prior to my arrival.

I am not sure if this situation can be further investigated. Mr. Nicholas should not earn overtime pay. His leave slips and sign-in for the day do not match what he is being paid and this appears to be a persisting issue prior to my appointment.

Please let me know if there are any next steps and/or documentation that I can provide to substantiate my concerns.

Best,

Sundai Riggins
Principal
Lehigh Elementary School

What I later found out was that when the business manager was cleaning her office, she was throwing out timesheets and financial records for the school. Although I pushed and Mr. Cobb was able to recover some timesheets from the trash, I did not have documentation to prove that Mr. Nicholas was getting paid on days he did not work. My only course of action was to document the days I had witnessed, but there was nothing I could do about what happened prior to my arrival. I sent the information to the Labor Relations Department (LRD) and asked them to review the situation. After it was all said and done, Mr. Nicholas was somehow able to justify why he “accidentally” signed in, and the former business manager, Ms. Casson, supported his statement. I looked to find
payroll and financial documents for the school just to see what recordkeeping processes were used in the past, but it was all gone. No evidence, no proof, no consequence.

He was a part of a larger dysfunctional team of custodians who had low expectations for the cleanliness of the school and were generally apathetic about their roles in keeping the school clean and secured. There were four of them, including Mr. Nicholas, and I could count on only one to consistently arrive to work on time. The Custodial Foreman, Mr. Coston, lived next door and was a native Washingtonian. He bragged about how he was from DC and knew all the students and families in the neighborhood. I could not understand why he felt so much pride in being from DC yet could not maintain the building properly. He expressed that this past school year “was his worst year ever,” yet when asked, he stated that he thought the principal was committed to the community and had done a “good” job. He blamed the students for the school’s dysfunction and when speaking with me he asked me if I was familiar with the area. I told him I had been familiar and had worked in Southeast DC as an after-school program director for four years prior to becoming an assistant principal in Northwest DC. He proceeded to talk about how he was born and raised in DC, lived right next door, and was an “insider.” He complained about the other members of the team, stating that they were lazy and did not care about their jobs. However, he would laugh and joke with them and not hold them to any standard of operation. There were times when the fire chief and other operational staff would arrive to the building and he could not be located. It was a serious problem and residing in the neighborhood was a gift and a curse.

I received the same “outsider” feedback from the parent coordinator, Ms. Byron. She was on her way out and she was under investigation for a corporal punishment case.
One of the social workers, Ms. Gramby, told me that a student cursed at Ms. Byron and pushed her and she punched the student in the stomach. When the student came to tell Ms. Gramby that he was punched, Ms. Byron approached Ms. Gramby and threatened her if she reported the incident. Ms. Gunther, the former interim principal, also recounted this story when I met with her. She told me that she had to stand between Ms. Byron and Ms. Gramby because Ms. Byron stated that she would hit Ms. Gramby. As a result, the incident was reported and she remained on leave. Ms. Byron came to the school to meet me. She was not authorized to be in the building according to her leave status, but it was the summer and we did not have students in the building. She said she needed to come to pick up a few things. She came in to meet me and the first thing she asked me was, “So are you here for the kids?” I told her that she would see through my actions and not solely my words that yes, I was there for the kids. It was all different for me. It was my first experience as an outsider and the various people I became familiar with in my first week continued to remind me of it. That was a learning experience in itself, and I had to accept my status as the “Outsider Principal” of the school. Everyone called me new but I realized the title “new” was synonymous with being an outsider, so I embraced it.

Then there was the building itself. I realized that in that first week I was only weeks away from school opening in a dirty building. I did not have any keys, an inventory, or a standard manual of operation to know who to call and what to do to get things done. I had to reach out to my supervisor for everything. In that week, I did learn that my custodial staff was questionable, my office staff members had some unsavory practices, and that I would need to learn how to access the financial records and systems needed to prepare for the opening of the school year. I had a ton of questions that were
not answered at the New Principal orientation session. There were many operational and managerial responsibilities that I had to assume immediately upon my appointment. It was the beginning of my sprint to learn and do in order to get the school year off to a strong start.

**Into summer and the school year.** Over the next weeks, I continued to learn more about my new school home through my daily interactions with summer staff members and also during the staff interview process. I sent an email to my staff over the summer inviting them to come in to share their ideas, hopes, and dreams for our upcoming school year. Out of a total of 75 staff members, only nine people responded to the interview. However, it provided me with the opportunity to get some context and perspective into some of the challenges that lay beneath the surface of the reported school data. I asked staff the following four questions:

1. Who would you consider to be a role model and leader within the school building? Why?
2. What are existing school-wide traditions and norms that are working well that should remain in place for the 2015–16 school year? Please explain.
3. What are your future aspirations at our school and beyond? Where would you like to be in five years?
4. If given the opportunity to influence a major change at our school what would you change? How would you support making that change happen?

The responses were interesting. I tried to keep the teachers focused on the questions presented, but they sometimes deviated and shared other stories. The “other” things were much more telling of my school’s previous culture in comparison to the responses I received from the actual questions I asked. I was surprised by the amount of
inappropriate adult behavior and egregious incidents that occurred within the school under the previous administration.

I do not think it is best practice to badmouth any leader of a school. All leaders have their strengths and growth areas. However, the incidents and details of the stories shared were alarming. One of the special education teachers told me a story about a former parent volunteer pulling a child from another classroom to fight a child who cursed at her. The parent volunteer allowed the students to fight in front of her. Another teacher told me about incidents where a student entering the building with a loaded gun, staff members were permitted by parents to spank students in restrooms, and staff members freely used profanity when talking to students. The librarian shared that in beginning this year she felt “stressed and scared” because she left on the last day of school during the previous school year in tears. She stated that an outside company came in to investigate the school for cheating on the state assessment and she was accused of providing accommodations to students who were not authorized to have additional support. She was upset about being accused of cheating and hoped that she would not lose her job.

Although informative, every meeting had emotional energy, and many of the meetings were heavy due to the emotional component. I was not prepared for such a disparity between the staff I left in Baltimore and the staff I inherited at my new school. I underestimated the impact of hiring your own staff. Although I was an experienced principal, this was my first time leading such a different group of staff members. I did not know what to expect, and as I learned more I realized that I would need to develop a modified toolkit to deal with the challenges ahead. Under no circumstance should a staff
member of any school use profanity to address students; students should not be allowed to fight each other in the presence of adults; and I needed to make sure that this expectation was a non-negotiable in my school.

Figure 4.6: Leadership in Transition – New Team, New Needs

In order to communicate higher expectations, I knew I would need a strong team to translate the vision into action. Mr. Rius told me that he left the assistant principal in place because he was not sure of her capabilities. He stated that the former principal was not a good role model of leadership for her and so he wanted to give her another year. He hired Mr. Clemmons prior to my arrival and Mr. Cobb worked with him in monitoring the school’s climate. Mr. Rius was confident in his abilities, although Mr. Cobb had not worked in school operations before. I told Mr. Rius that I had a great candidate, Mr. Wilson, from my previous school, who I wanted to bring with me. Mr. Rius told me to hire him in the coordinator position to work alongside Mr. Cobb.
Ms. Frontera had been at the school for three years and had a lot of institutional knowledge. She verified all of the stories and challenges I had already heard, including the story about the principal being attacked by a parent. She was knowledgeable about the school’s challenges and appeared to be well received by some. I later found out that she had a clique of teachers and staff who supported her in ousting the former principal. She gave me the names of many of the school’s “awesome” staff members, which included three teachers and a school psychologist who eventually were evaluated out or transferred to other schools in the district. Her definition of quality did not meet my expectations. She also called out from work often, stating that she had a headache or was not feeling well. It made her unreliable on most days and I believe she just did not want to be there. She was knowledgeable and could put together a master schedule, create a professional development plan, and delegate tasks to other staff members, but she had a hard time getting people to follow her lead. She had many technical skills and was knowledgeable but just seemed to struggle with being flexible, adjusting her practice to meet the needs of struggling staff members, and letting go of preconceived notions of what staff should be able to do. I also found out from a few staff members during interviews that she thought she would be appointed as the interim principal, but Mr. Rius had thought she was not ready. Honestly, she was not ready. She avoided parent meetings and struggled with earning respect from challenging students. Although I knew her loyalty was not with the school and she felt slighted because she was not considered a viable candidate for the school, I tried my best to work with her and motivate her to do her best so that she could grow her practice.
Mr. Clemmons was new to the district and very personable. He was easy to work with, knowledgeable, and reliable. He accepted feedback well and through his actions showed that he was aligned to my vision for the school. He built strong relationships with students, staff, and parents. Initially, some people did not appreciate him because of the increase in accountability. He ensured that teachers completed their progress monitoring for students’ fluency in reading and held teachers accountable for missing compliance deadlines. Initially, he was not a favorite but by the end of the school year he won over many resistant staff members. I saw Mr. Clemmons as someone I could support and grow to eventually become a principal if he wanted. He had the knowledge, skills, and mindset to move into a leadership role. I could trust him and I knew if I was out of the building for a meeting he could hold down the fort and would do his best to resolve any potential issues that could arise.

Mr. Cobb was the most interesting member of my leadership team. He was formerly a specialist in the Office of School Turnaround and he was very familiar with my school. He would visit my school with the school turnaround team and report back information to my boss and let him know about all of the crazy things that went on at my school under its previous administration. Mr. Rius trusted him and decided to hire him in the Director of Strategy and Logistics role for my school. In this role he was expected to maintain all school operations needs, including building maintenance, facilities issues, payroll, duty schedules, and supervising the custodial team. Mr. Cobb did not have any experience in this area. He was in the position to supervise Mr. Wilson, who had more experience working on challenges and duties in his job description, and was more knowledgeable than he was. At the time, Mr. Wilson was thankful for the opportunity
and wanted to learn as much as he could about his position, and initially it was not an issue. As the year progressed, the learning curve that Mr. Cobb had in his new role manifested in his challenges with holding the custodial staff accountable, his errors and issues with completing payroll on time, and his overly friendly and personal relationships with some staff members.

In one instance in particular, I had to mediate and help resolve payroll issues with him appropriately documenting teachers’ loss of planning time and exceeded class limit timesheets. He did not process any of the paperwork on time. It was so bad that it was eventually reported to the field rep for the teacher’s union. Mr. Wilson tried to help when he could, but Mr. Cobb had a difficult time admitting when he did not know something and needed help. He was too prideful to let Mr. Wilson know he did not know how to do certain things because he was in a supervisory role over him. He also was not organized and had difficulty with follow-up paperwork and documentation to hold people accountable for their work, especially the custodial staff. As a result, I took on many of the operational aspects of his role. I scheduled weekly meetings with the custodial staff, although it did not help because the building was never clean and the accountability for their actions was slipping through Mr. Cobb’s hands. I also managed the master schedule and took over the completion of the monitoring and evaluations of the custodians, and created and maintained the school’s safety plan.

Mr. Cobb struggled with meeting the demands of the job and later it surfaced that the previous year he had an inappropriate relationship with one of our teachers. It took some time for me to figure out why so many staff members did not respect him and felt he was incompetent. When I learned the details around the situation with the
inappropriate relationship with the teacher, I understood why. I talked to Mr. Rius about it and asked him if he would speak with him about the situation, particularly his interactions with female staff members, and how to move forward. It was one of the most uncomfortable meetings I had ever been a part of and I did not want to be there. The meeting felt as if I was caught in between a dad lecturing his son about girls and the trouble they cause. Mr. Rius explained how, when he was a younger man in education, gossip and rumors about women started with him, and he advised Mr. Cobb to watch himself and his interactions with women in the school. I was thankful that Mr. Rius supported me with this conversation and I felt relieved when it ended. I did not want to get wrapped up in gossip, but it was really impacting Mr. Cobb’s reputation around the school and how he was respected (or disrespected) by staff. His personal relationships undermined his work and ultimately fell on my shoulders.

It was a rough year. Each member of the leadership team had strengths, but many challenges. Ms. Frontera would plan initiatives to improve academic progress but teachers would not follow through, and she would get upset about it rather than implement other strategies. She was receptive to feedback but difficult to push and coach because of her own history and experiences at the school. I think she would have been more receptive to feedback if somewhere along the way her interest in becoming a principal had been validated and recognized by Mr. Rius. She decided to put in a transfer to another school for the following year and I supported her in her decision. As for Mr. Cobb, I wrote his position out of the budget and promoted Mr. Wilson to the Manager of Strategy and Logistics position. Mr. Wilson and I had already absorbed most of his duties because he just could not manage and was very disorganized. In hindsight, I wish I had
more time to coach him, because he was a nice and reliable guy and accepted feedback well; but I just did not have the time to coach him. My school was just too challenging for me to have the time to attempt to coach him to move his practice along. There just was not enough time to do it, and he agreed that he needed more experience in school operations before taking on such a huge role in school administration. At the end of that school year, Mr. Clemmons and I were the last administrators standing. We both learned together as we faced each school challenge, figured out how to manage the violence and challenges within the school community, and most importantly spent time in classrooms getting to know our students. Although half of our team did not return, I knew I could trust Mr. Clemmons and he could learn and adjust as quickly as I did.

Professional Capacity

A staff in turmoil. I attended the very last hiring fair of the year during the last week of June, although I was not appointed until July 1. At the time we had two vacancies, a behavior tech and a social worker, and I was fresh out of candidates. I found a behavior tech at the fair and I was still in need of a social worker and a special education teacher. The previous year’s budget had only one social worker and the allocation was increased to two for this current school year. All other vacancies were already filled by my supervisor and the assistant principal prior to my arrival.

To say the least, the candidate pickings were slim. Two weeks after the hiring fair, I found out that the behavior tech I selected to hire did not pass his drug test, so I had a vacancy going into August. I did not know I would have a special education teacher vacancy until the day after the transfer fair. The teacher waited until the last day of the
hiring fair to transfer to another school. The last day for teacher transfers was July 15, and on July 16 I had to figure out what to do. I did not want to hire any of the candidates I had interviewed because they just did not appear to be fit. I did not want to put someone in front of my students who I knew from the interview process would not be successful. Before the beginning of the school year I was able to hire a social worker, but I did not have a special education teacher or a behavior tech.

As the summer and the year progressed, the hiring of the behavior tech and the special education teacher became the least of my worries. In August, a behavior tech, Mr. Wilmore, was forcibly placed at my school because I had a vacancy. I did not interview him and all I was told was that he would be reporting to my school. From the time I walked in the building I was thrust into an incessant series of staffing challenges. Although I had experienced teacher resignations in the middle of the year at my previous school, the magnitude of the challenges I faced in one school year was stressful and significantly impacted my school’s climate and culture, instructional growth in practice, and my family engagement efforts. Below I have included a timeline of human resources challenges I faced and how those challenges impacted the school. My staffing challenges dominated my time and were a large focus area for my work in my first year as principal of Lehigh Elementary School.

Table 4.2: Teacher Retention / Staffing Challenges Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/14/15</td>
<td>Found out via email that Ms. Byron was under investigation from an alleged corporal punishment incident during the 2014–15 school year.</td>
<td>Parent coordinator out of the building during the summer months, low enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Impact</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>7/31/15</td>
<td>Mr. Nicholas emailed about being disrespected by the custodial foreman.</td>
<td>Issues with the custodial team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/4/15</td>
<td>I reported my suspicion of time fraud by the previous timekeeper, Ms. Casson.</td>
<td>Fraud case was thrown out, not enough evidence provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/21/15</td>
<td>My behavior tech vacancy was filled. A person on leave for a corporal punishment investigation was forcibly placed at my school without my consent.</td>
<td>Did not choose staff member, mindset issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/14/15</td>
<td>I received an email notification that my school psychologist was cleared from an investigation during the 2014–15 school year.</td>
<td>Two people from the previous year knew about the incident and did not expect him to return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/15/15</td>
<td>Teacher’s aide resigned from his position.</td>
<td>Teacher’s aide vacancy, less cafeteria coverage during breakfast block, one less staff member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/24/15</td>
<td>Mr. Wesson, 24-year veteran teacher at the school, slammed a student’s finger in the door. Placed on leave for pending investigation of the situation. Student’s finger exploded and student was rushed to the hospital.</td>
<td>4th-grade Science and Social Studies teacher out of the classroom/building, students have a substitute teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/28/17</td>
<td>Received notification that Ms. Bryant’s investigation is still pending and has not been resolved.</td>
<td>Parent Coordinator out of the building, one less staff member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/4/15</td>
<td>4th-grade English / Language Arts teacher resigned on Sunday. Turned in his keys to another staff member on Friday after packing up his classroom that evening.</td>
<td>4th-grade English / Language Arts teacher vacancy, students have a substitute teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/7/15</td>
<td>Computer lab aide came under investigation for a physical incident with a student being slammed on the floor.</td>
<td>Computer lab aide out of the building, one less staff member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Impact</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/14/15</td>
<td>1st-grade teacher was transferred to another school by the instructional superintendent.</td>
<td>Fourth 1st-grade class absorbed by other 1st-grade teachers, class sizes increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/18/15</td>
<td>I interviewed a new teacher to join the team.</td>
<td>Replaced the 4th-grade ELA teacher to provide quality instruction for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/4/15</td>
<td>New 4th-grade English / Language Arts teacher begins.</td>
<td>Needed training and support to adjust to the students, students were rowdy due to the absence of a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/5/15</td>
<td>I was notified that parent coordinator investigation was concluded and she was terminated as of the end of the month.</td>
<td>Some parents were relieved, others were angry. They continued to volunteer at the school and complained about the administration and spoke negatively of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/5/15</td>
<td>I met with Recess Fun Coach regarding perceived inappropriate interactions with female students.</td>
<td>I was suspicious of the coach and kept a watchful eye on him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/8/15</td>
<td>Parent coordinator was terminated, came to school to collect her belongings.</td>
<td>Parents upset by her departure at the school waited to see and speak with her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/10/15</td>
<td>New 5th-grade math teacher hired, current 5th-grade math teacher moved to special education vacancy.</td>
<td>Needed training and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/17/15</td>
<td>3rd-grade teacher came under investigation for allegedly choking a student as reported by the student.</td>
<td>3rd-grade teacher upset, called the union for representation and consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Impact</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/19/15</td>
<td>Mr. Nicholas is put on leave restriction for excessive absences.</td>
<td>Called in and came late, angry about the restrictions, talked about it all over the school building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/20/15</td>
<td>Last day new 4th-grade English / Language Arts teacher was present at school.</td>
<td>Did not know this would be his last day and he would not return, students did not have a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/17/15</td>
<td>Several staff members sent witness statements regarding perceived inappropriate actions of the Recess First coach, documentation and concerns expressed to his supervisor.</td>
<td>Confirmed my suspicions and I did not want him to return, we would not have a recess coach to cover our recess duty shifts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/21/15</td>
<td>Special education teacher from another school transfers to the school to fill my special education teacher vacancy.</td>
<td>Filled my special education teacher vacancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/22/15</td>
<td>I received notification that my Assistant Principal was under investigation for testing integrity violations as the testing coordinator.</td>
<td>Made me suspicious of my assistant principal, I knew the school had been under investigation for testing integrity issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/23/15</td>
<td>4th-grade English / Language Arts teacher notified to complete Leave of Absence paperwork, was a no show since 11/20/15.</td>
<td>Students without a teacher and with a sub for weeks, could not hire another teacher until his vacancy opened up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/14/16</td>
<td>Instructional coach resigned from her position.</td>
<td>One less instructional coach, one instructional coach left in the building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/14/16</td>
<td>Teacher’s aide hired to replace the one that resigned in October, ad placed on Craigslist.</td>
<td>Aide placed in a 1st-grade classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/14/16</td>
<td>Librarian did not return to work after her mother’s funeral—remained on leave.</td>
<td>No library classes and no circulation of books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/1/16</td>
<td>Music teacher came under investigation for a corporal punishment allegation.</td>
<td>Investigation ensued, teacher was upset by the allegation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/5/16</td>
<td>5th-grade Math teacher suspected of being under the influence at work, reported for reasonable suspicion, investigation conducted.</td>
<td>Staff members noticed that he was under the influence, people were talking about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/9/16</td>
<td>Voluntary resignation of new 4th-grade teacher confirmed.</td>
<td>Another 4th-grade teacher left my students, vacancy opened to begin looking for another teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/22/16</td>
<td>5th-grade math teacher terminated for being under the influence at work.</td>
<td>5th-grade math teacher vacancy opened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/26/16</td>
<td>5th-grade English / Language Arts teacher resigns</td>
<td>5th-grade English/Language Arts teacher vacancy opened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/26/16</td>
<td>Early childhood aide came under investigation for a corporal punishment allegation filed by a parent.</td>
<td>Aide and Early childhood department upset by the allegation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/7/16</td>
<td>Family Medical Leave extension granted to the Librarian.</td>
<td>No library classes and no circulation of books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/22/16</td>
<td>Behavior tech placed under investigation for allegedly pushing a student up against a wall and threatening him in the restroom.</td>
<td>Placed on leave, one less staff member in the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/29/16</td>
<td>Computer Lab Aide suspended for 9 days as a result of the corporal punishment allegation, switched positions with another aide from another school.</td>
<td>Placed on leave, no computer lab aide in the school to monitor the computer lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/4/16</td>
<td>Music teacher terminated after a corporal punishment investigation.</td>
<td>Music teacher vacancy opened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/4/16</td>
<td>Librarian’s leave extended until the end of the school year.</td>
<td>No library classes and no circulation of books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/4/16–6/12/16</td>
<td>Continued to interview and hire new staff members, current staff members transition out at the end of the school year, several vacancies to fill.</td>
<td>Large staff turnover, several staff members moving on were checked out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From July 2015 to June 2016, I was in a whirlwind of corporal punishment allegations and investigations as well as teacher retention issues that significantly impacted all other aspects of school operation. Two major issues in teacher attrition / staffing challenges were: (a) instability of teacher retention in the fourth and fifth grades; and (b) allegations regarding teachers possibly harming students.

Losing one teacher at the start of the school year triggered a spiral of staffing issues in my upper grades. The school year started without a special education teacher, and we did not get another special education teacher until December. Students with IEPs and special academic needs were not being serviced. This contributed to some of their behavioral challenges as well as their lack of academic progress during the first half of the school year. As the year progressed, we continued to lose teachers. The inconsistency triggered off-task behavior in both fourth and fifth grade. Some shifts were made to teachers between the two grade levels in order to provide some consistency to the team as well as to have someone lead the team to potentially help support the teachers so that they would not resign unexpectedly. This did not work.

Although there were teacher attrition challenges, we did not lose these teachers because they were not able to manage or overcome their challenges with students. All of the teachers who resigned were not motivated to face their challenges and the learning curve that came with being at the school. One of the teachers did not create lesson plans
on a daily basis. When I came into his classroom and asked to see his lesson plan he did not have one. Even after three different occasions of me walking in to ask for his lesson plan, he did not have it. He simply did not plan lessons and did not care that he was not prepared to teach his students every day. Another teacher did not post objectives. When you went into his classroom, most of the students were on the computer working on blended learning programs supported by the district. He was able to manage the classroom but it was not clear that students were actually learning everything. I went into his classroom during the first week back from Thanksgiving break. It was December 3 and he still had “November 20, 2015” on the board. His classroom was always in disarray and once I walked by with my supervisor and saw him with his feet kicked up on the desk. Mr. Rius was furious and told me he would speak to him about having his feet kicked up instead of teaching. After Mr. Rius spoke with him he said he felt bad because the teacher told him he was ill and just trying to hang in there until the end of the day. Two weeks later I walked by again and saw his feet on the desk again and all students were on computers working independently. I did not see any teaching evident in his classroom. I felt as if I had warm bodies of people in classrooms with students but no teaching going on.

Although it was difficult to have teachers leave unexpectedly and to place subs in classrooms, it was almost as if we had teachers who acted as long-term substitutes and did not care to invest in our students. I think I would have felt worse if the teachers were strong teachers but were just too overwhelmed with everything going on in the school. The teachers who walked out before the end of the school year were not good teachers. They were harmful to kids. I cannot think of any one of those teachers who decided to
resign early whom I would have asked to stay for another year. The positive side of the situation were the open vacancies, which would allow me to hire strong candidates early in the year (which I did) to prepare for a strong start for the upcoming school year. The downside was the lack of consistency and support that my students in two important grade levels would have throughout the school year. My students did not have academic support and they also did not trust anyone. They started the school year with a new principal after their former principal of six years left unexpectedly. They had new teachers and new systems. Their teachers did not stay from year to year. The teacher attrition issues provided a very high level of instability throughout my intermediate grades. The lack of consistency supported the rising instances of staff misconduct in addressing students’ behaviors as well as the surge of staff misconduct being reported to administration by both staff members and parents.

During interviews with staff and my supervisor, I heard stories of parents coming to the school ready to fight teachers, parents fighting parents in the building, and teachers being given permission to physically “discipline” students. There were also stories of teachers with reputations as disciplinarians who would instill fear in their students as a way to ensure that their classroom was under control. For these teachers, whether or not their methods included physical means to address students’ behaviors was questionable. However, given this history, I decided to take a stance on the side of my students and to report every potential corporal punishment allegation that I could not clearly resolve using security camera footage. There were too many stories regarding staff misconduct for it not to be true, and I would not allow myself to turn a blind eye to any staff misconduct that put students in harm’s way.
The allegations were jolting to teachers. Although I explained that completing investigations would clear their names of any alleged allegations against them made by parents, this did not sit well with many staff members. They wanted me to be “on their side” and to take their word over the reports from students. I could not do that and it did not help me to build relational trust with some of my staff members. However, there were others who witnessed egregious things happen in the past prior to my tenure as principal and they appeared to be supportive through thanks and other small gestures of support that I was offered throughout the school year. Some people came to me confidentially speak about things that they witnessed, or even to validate a student’s concerns regarding an issue. I knew I was doing what was right even without the support of other staff members. There were too many external challenges with violence in the neighborhood, trauma, neglect, and abuse that students would face outside of school. I did not want our walls to just contain them in a literal and figurative sense. My main objective was for them to learn, and I would push myself to try my best to provide them with opportunities that would allow for them to learn and grow as they should in a school environment. I would continue to work toward that goal even when enacting my vision for them was seemingly not within reach.

**Instructional Guidance Systems**

A story of student underperformance: No systems, no success. The historical underperformance of the school (see table 4.1) made it difficult to enact change in instructional practice within one calendar year. Table 4.1 presents the academic performance of the school on District tests and includes the 2015–16 school year’s
Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) scores. As Table 4.1 makes clear, the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS) scores for both reading and mathematics at the school trended downward over the past few years. Based on reports from veteran staff members, after Lehigh ES merged with Fairmount Heights ES in 2012, the school continued on an academic decline after the merger and did not regain any momentum regarding real academic student gains.

In my assessment of the school’s instructional systems, nothing was present that could be built upon. Interviews and observations made it clear that teachers were so overwhelmed with addressing students’ behaviors that they could make little progress in supporting their academic needs. The structures for lesson planning and teacher collaboration provide an illustration.

The Washington Teacher’s Union (WTU) contract states that administrators in schools cannot collect lesson plans from teachers and that teachers are allowed 225 minutes of duty-free planning per week. However, the contract also states that all of the 225 minutes can be used for mandated planning structures designed by the principal / school administration. I required teachers to allocate 3 out of 5 of the planning structures to collaborative planning and lesson design. I received push back because previously the teachers only met once per week for planning and did not attend the mandated 30 minutes of professional development/collaboration time at the start of the school day. Teachers wanted the free time to make copies and complete other tasks as they had been allowed to do prior to my arrival.
Strong Parent–Community–School Ties

Principal as outsider: A barrier to family and community engagement. My challenges with the school community were pretty simple. I was an outsider and for some I was not welcome. The previous principal had been in his role for six years and had been a teacher and assistant principal at the school. His history with the school was long standing and even though the school had challenges, many parents turned a blind eye to the challenges because their child’s principal had been their teacher or assistant principal. The longevity of staff members’ tenure in the building earned them credibility and respect within the community. One of my veteran teachers, Ms. Ross, was well respected by the community and was known as a strong teacher. This was evident over the summer when I noticed that several parents submitted notes requesting their child be put in Ms. Ross’s class. Many parents had Ms. Ross as a teacher and wanted their children in her class. I decided to honor the requests as a legacy policy to have students with siblings or parents that had her as a teacher to be allowed in her class. This pleased many parents and honored their voices.

I knew that although my school was in a state of crisis of sorts, I would need to proceed with caution as I learned where the minefields within the community lay if I were to ensure that I could fulfill my responsibilities as a leader, learn, and also slowly shift my status as an outsider to one of a respected member of the school community. As soon as I was officially named as the principal of my school, I sent out a letter to the staff and school community:
Greetings Lehigh Elementary School Families!

It is with great pleasure that I join the Lehigh ES team as your new principal for the upcoming 2015–16 school year. I am entering my 5th year as a principal and my 7th year in urban school leadership. I was a teacher for eight years prior to entering school leadership. I served the Southeast DC school community from 2005–2009 as an afterschool Program Coordinator for CPDC located in the Southern Ridge apartment complex. Many of the students I worked with attended Pipper ES (before it closed), McGregory-Thomas, Marcus Garvey ES, Alton ES, and Bellevue HS (just to name a few of the schools). My most recent experience was as a founding principal of a brand new charter school in Baltimore City.

It is my firm belief that our children need a high-quality education in order to prepare them to be college ready. While some people might believe that every child doesn’t need college to be successful it is my belief that if we prepare students with hands-on learning experiences, strong foundational skills, and build their character they can be anything they want to be! Access to college should be a choice and all students need to be ready for whatever they choose to become.

With your support I am ready to help make Lehigh ES one of the best elementary schools in the district. I am looking forward to working with you as partners to build our school to be its very best this year.

One of the things I need from you is your commitment to being a member of the Lehigh Rockets family for the 2015–16 school year! Please enroll as soon as possible! Enrollment helps us to plan over the summer for learning experiences, keeping class sizes down, and to prepare for classroom space arrangements. Your commitment helps us to better prepare for the start of the school year so that we are able to provide our children with all of the academic, social, and character development supports we have to offer at Lehigh ES this year.

Please come visit me this summer! I am interested in getting to know you, meeting my wonderful students, and learning more about what hopes and dreams you have for Lehigh ES this school year. On the back of this flyer I have listed some of the events I will host that will give me an opportunity to meet students and families.

I am so excited about this school year and I look forward to meeting you. The best is yet to come!

Educationally Yours,

Ms. Riggins
Principal
Louellen J. Lehigh Elementary School
I included activities and events to engage families, including popsicles with the principal sessions on every Thursday during the month of July, as well as a meet and greet ice cream socials in July and August. In total, for all of the events I had about ten parents. Although we did not always have the best participation for every school event in my previous school, I always had a substantial amount of parents attend activities and events. The low level of parent participation at my new school home was alarming. I initially did not know what to make of it and tried to understand. I thought it might have been attributed to the bad reputation my school had; but then I reasoned that even the bad reputation should not have limited the attendance to ten families. None of the methods I used in my previous school to engage families worked. I did mass phone call distributions to households, I conducted home visits, I mailed out flyers, and I even walked around the community with some of my staff members. Nothing really worked. I had to think of some new strategies to engage my families, but I was fresh out of ideas.

During my first few weeks of school I made some major changes based on feedback I had received from staff. First, I changed the arrival procedures. I did not let students into the school before 8 a.m. Based on feedback from returning staff, I learned that students had been allowed to roam through the school building as early as 7 a.m. if someone let them in. By 8 a.m., when teachers were due to arrive, there would be between 30 and 50 children walking, running, and playing in the building without supervision. This posed safety and theft issues during the previous school year. With the new procedures, I had all students enter the building through the cafeteria so that students could gather in one meeting place and we could provide adequate supervision.
Before the change was made I sent home a letter, announced first day of school procedures via mass phone calls to parents, and had signs posted on all of the school’s exterior doors about a week before school started. I only had to provide an explanation to two parents. I had not heard of any concerns other than parents complaining that they did not feel like walking around the school to get to the playground. So, I was surprised when the district’s chief of staff alerted me that a parent did not appreciate this change and had gone straight to the district with a complaint.

Hello Instructional Superintendent Rius and School Operations Chief Miller,

I hope you both are doing well. This morning I received a call from Tasha Mabry, the parent of a 1st grade student at Lehigh ES. Ms. Mabry voiced a concern that the school is no longer allowing parents to drop their children off at the front door and instead enter through the cafeteria door. Ms. Mabry reports that she is concerned by the lack monitoring at the side cafeteria door and worries about the fact that anyone may enter the school in the morning. Ms. Mabry has a meeting with the principal at 11 this morning at Lehigh, but feels as though the administration there has not taken her concerns seriously in the past. To be clear this is what has been communicated to us and we are sure there is another side to this story. We would very much appreciate if you would follow up on this issue.

If you need to contact Ms. Mabry her phone number is (202) 876-2646.

Thank you,

Tamara Wolford
Assistant to the Chief

Initially, I was focused on figuring out what steps I did not take to communicate with families about the change in the arrival procedures. I could not figure out what else I would need to do to avoid such issues. I also knew I was considered “the outsider” and I would need to balance my levels of making changes while attempting to build relationships with parents and families. After I reread the email a few times in
preparation for my meeting, I realized that the concern was based on a lack of responsiveness in the past. The parent had attempted to contact the administration about issues and did not feel that issues were resolved. This distrust, I realized, was at the heart of my school’s lack of engagement.

While I knew that there would be struggles with engagement from a general standpoint because many urban schools struggle with increasing levels of family engagement, I learned from this that I would need to consider the damage that had been done prior to my arrival. As a founding principal, I did not inherit a school with a history. I created the school’s history from its inception. In my new role as principal, I was an outsider trying to learn, lead, and listen so that I could acclimate and adjust to my new surroundings. I was battling years of challenges, issues, and school dysfunction that became more evident in my conversations with parents.

It was challenging to break through parents’ distrust of the school. There were so many teacher and staffing issues associated with corporal punishment and attrition that it was almost impossible to build positive relationships with families. Some parents came to the school to address challenges in an appropriate manner. In my meetings with them, I found they would begin with something that happened to their child during the previous year, and, if anything remotely similar occurred during the previous year, a parent would connect it to what was happening now. But there were some who would persistently come into school yelling, screaming, and using profanity, ready to attack staff. They would refuse to show ID or follow appropriate protocols for entering the building. Some would even approach teachers and use profanity when speaking to them.
I had to continually stress with the security staff the importance of following protocol in addressing challenges with irate parents. The two officers assigned to our school had been at the school for three years and were very familiar with parents—so familiar, in fact, that they would allow parents to not follow the protocols for entering the building. Not following the protocols was the norm, and some parents were upset that I pressured the security to follow the procedures for safety. The situation of parents not following rules, parents with negative past experiences, and parents who just felt that the school would always be the same so they did not bother with getting engaged and involved, was at times overwhelming. I had neither the structure nor the staff capacity for someone to assist in addressing parents’ concerns. My staff capacity fluctuated so often that I took on most of the behavioral and disciplinary challenges as well as conducted the majority of the parent meetings. By the end of the school year we changed the perspective of only a handful of parents.

An Advocate in Leadership: First-Year Evaluation

I ended my first year as the principal of Lehigh ES exactly where I expected to be. I had made significant changes in providing some structure and order in my school. Mr. Rius knew how much work I was putting in to changing the culture of my school. He was present and always in communication with me regarding my practice.

I did have some bumps transitioning into a traditional school. I had to learn the DCPS way. There were many more assessments, databases to account for students’ performance, and other metrics that I was not familiar with. However, by the end of the year, Mr. Rius noted that he could see that I was settling in to the different expectations.
He rated me “highly effective” in the personal leadership domain of the rubric. He told me that he thought it was one of my greatest strengths. He evidenced many of my challenges in his account of my leadership included in my evaluation.

Principal Riggins demonstrates reflective leadership that allows her to engage in continuous self-improvement. Although she has experienced success as a principal in Baltimore, her first year in DCPS has proved challenging not only learning the "DCPS" way but inheriting a school with a pervasive culture of low expectations and unprofessionalism of staff that has been difficult to break and change. Throughout this school year, Principal Riggins has always been honest with her struggles with the instructional superintendent. During these times, it is also clear that Principal Riggins has spent a great deal of time reflecting on the root cause of different issues. Principal Riggins regularly presents her struggles as opportunities to learn, grow and improve practice. Additionally, Principal Riggins has always been both open and welcoming to feedback provided by the instructional superintendent and her colleagues. She consistently demonstrates that she is confident leading from the front and owning the messages that she communicates to staff, students and parents. At the same, demonstrating humility by consistently reaching out to her colleagues for advice and support. Further, Principal Riggins is an active participant in cluster meetings and has worked diligently to implement Region A initiatives. This is clearly demonstrated in the continuous development of the school's academic leadership team (ALT).

Principal Riggins has demonstrated an ability to communicate effectively. This is seen in some of the instructional improvements that have been implemented in the school, missing from past school years, despite dealing with staff who have not been held to instructional expectations over the last few years. Despite dealing with daily crisis, Principal Riggins has tailored verbal and written communication that has led to an increase in teachers planning, analyzing data and attempting to implement high impact instructional strategies. Further, Principal Riggins is open to diverse opinions and will seek the advice of the instructional superintendent in dealing with complex issues.

Other issues that Principal Riggins has addressed that demonstrate her ability to persevere in the face of obstacles include overcoming challenges with safety in the school neighborhood, teacher retention, emotional parents and legal situations with students, and some low-performing staff members that have made then job extremely difficult at times. When crisis situations arise Principal Riggins remains calm and assesses the situation and act in a way that supports the well-being and safety of students and staff. Through the obstacles and numerous challenges Principal Riggins has faced this year, she has demonstrated a clear commitment to challenging the current status quo of the school that has led to low academic achievement over the last several years.
Mr. Ruis knew that I had taken the helm of an extremely challenging school. He stated that it was one of the reasons he recruited me to come as a change agent. However, he also knew I would not see much academic growth in one year. When my final evaluation score was calculated, I was in the “minimally effective” category. Although I had an effective revaluation rating from Mr. Rius, that was only 50% of my score. The rest of my score was based on student achievement data and goals generated by the superintendent derived from district goals.

Everyone in the district knew what I had inherited. Mr. Rius was my strongest and most supportive advocate. He submitted an appeal on my behalf to change my rating from “minimally effective” to “effective.” In his eyes, he saw all of the preliminary structures for success, but he knew of my school’s staffing and teacher capacity challenges. His appeal was approved. He told me that over the course of his three years as an instructional superintendent, he had never submitted an appeal for a change in a principal’s rating. He told me that I was the exception because he could see the hard work I had put in, although I did not have the outcomes yet. It was a win not because of the rating change but mainly because I knew I had a strong advocate who would support my work. It was a great way to end my challenging year at Lehigh ES. It gave me hope that I would get the support and advocacy I would need to fulfill my responsibilities as the leader of the school.
Year 6: Lehigh Elementary School

Second Year as Principal
475 students
Ward 8, Washington, DC

Leadership Drives Change

The struggle yields progress: Cohesive leadership drives change. At the end of the school year I had several staff members transition out. Through the formal evaluation process, I was able to remove my entire custodial team based on their poor performance. Even my students noticed the poor performance of the custodial team. The results from the end of year student satisfaction survey indicated that 85% of students reported that our school building was not clean. In July 2016, when their evaluation ratings were finalized and they knew they were all on their way out, they stopped coming to work. The only person who consistently came to work was Mr. Coston. Mr. Nicholas stopped coming to work in June and I had to press labor relations to issue him a letter to force him to return to work. He did not return to work until the week after July 4, alleging a sick family member was the reason for his absence. I was over being sympathetic toward him and hearing his sob stories. All of the staff members with poor evaluation ratings were projected to be out of the building by the beginning of August.

I was able to begin the year with a completely new custodial team and a newly formed leadership team and structure. Mr. Clemmons returned and I promoted Ms. Engleman to the position of Assistant Principal of Special Education. She was in the position of Dean of Students, but she was a “gift” to my school based on a staffing error. We had numerous special education compliance issues caused by having a special
education teacher vacancy for half of the year, and numerous other compliance errors. She spent most of her time cleaning those things up, and as a result I was able to move a few students to more restrictive environments based on their needs. I wanted her to focus on moving students’ academic data and also the structure of the special education services provided. When I came on board during the previous year, I found out that we had several students who had not made any academic progress over the course of three years—in some cases six years. I also noticed that all special education services provided to students were pull-out services and not inclusive in the general education setting. Ms. Engleman did a great job of cleaning up the issues and errors that were made by the past administration, and she was building a strong special education program at our school. I also promoted Mr. Wilson to the Manager position for Strategy and Logistics after I eliminated the director position that Mr. Cobb was in. Mr. Wilson had absorbed many of Mr. Cobb’s duties, as Mr. Cobb could not handle the responsibilities of the position and struggled with meeting deadlines and monitoring the custodial team for the remainder of the year.
Everyone on the leadership team was committed to the school’s success. We all worked together through difficult challenges during the previous school year. I retained the staff members who showed great promise and a willingness to learn and grow with the team. In addition, I hired two deans to spearhead the school climate initiative work and I departmentalized them in order to help them focus their efforts on building strong relationships with students in a specific grade level band, and also the teachers servicing those grade levels. One of the deans I promoted from the behavior tech position based on his prior experience and the quality of his performance from the previous school year. He had built strong relationships with students and was a positive male influence on many of my older students. The second dean candidate I learned about from my school climate specialist, Ms. Arby. He was a PE teacher at another school and was leading the school climate work at his school, but he wanted to make a change. He had energy and a positive
attitude, and was a great fit to join my school’s team. I also hired two content-specific instructional coaches, one for English / Language Arts and the other for mathematics. Based on our school’s academic performance in both reading and math, I knew I would need to have strong coaches who could move our academic program forward. My new staffing model addressed loops and holes I saw in the previous school year. I wanted to make sure I had quality staffing that could push our climate work as well as our instructional practice as a school.

Although we do not have the academic gains yet, the structures and systems for success are in place. My leadership team members are all committed to our school’s overall improvement and every member accepts feedback regarding their practice in order to grow. I meet with each team member on a bi-weekly basis for a check-in and we have weekly STAT meetings with the entire team to provide a space for everyone to review important data points and to allow each member of the team to share their progress on individual projects and initiatives. Our team is in the early stages of formation and performance, but we all work together to support our school’s mission and vision to see students progress academically and socially. I finally feel that I have the foundation for my school to be successful even with some persisting challenges.

**Instructional Guidance Systems**

*Teacher planning expectations and instructional coaching: A foundation for future success.* The quality of the instructional coaches leading my school’s common planning structures coupled with the district’s professional development modules for teacher planning and growth have been a huge success for my school this year. Planning
Understanding Students Hurdles (PUSH) was a new district initiative for coaching and planning support for teachers. The model includes an observation by a PUSH leader, a debrief, and a side-by-side coaching session in cycles based on teachers’ needs. The district also launched a new math curriculum, Eureka Math, after some pilot schools in the district saw gains on the PARCC exam results in mathematics during the 2015–16 school year. I hired two dynamic instructional coaches and their presence significantly impacted teacher practice and performance. One of the instructional coaches, Ms. Cummings, was a highly effective teacher during the previous school year and assisted the assistant principal as a co-testing coordinator. During the previous school year, she had an intern from a local alternative certification program who eventually became a fourth-grade teacher at our school. The presence of the apprentice teacher intern freed up some of Ms. Cummings’s time to assist with testing administration planning. Ms. Cummings’s students were always engaged and excited to learn, and she had exemplary classroom management. Her teaching practice and classroom climate and culture was in alignment with my vision and expectations for teacher performance that, in time, I would like to see throughout my school. I knew she would be a good fit to lead our literacy work. My math instructional coach, Ms. Pratt, is phenomenal. I interviewed her and found out she had taught Eureka Math for three years in her previous school system in Charlotte-Meckleburg, North Carolina. I had a colleague who was a principal in Charlotte to whom I reached out to figure out what experiences Ms. Pratt had and if her school was similar to my own. I wanted to know that she would be tough enough to withstand the challenges of working in a low-performing school with some teacher capacity and adult mindset challenges. Her school in Charlotte was a replica of my school and she had made
significant academic gains in her classroom teaching Eureka Math. We offered her the job, she accepted, and she has been producing quality work ever since the day she walked into our school building. As a result of her hard work, we have already exceeded the number of students that made a year’s worth of growth in mathematics at the middle of the school year in comparison to where we were regarding students’ growth last school year.

Both Ms. Cummings and Ms. Pratt led PUSH sessions for teachers in grade level bands for vertical planning, lesson modeling, and lesson plan development among teams. The district required that each teacher attend one 90-minute session per content area. However, with such a new team and also a new math curriculum, I decided to build my master schedule to incorporate two common planning / PUSH blocks. The planning structure for PUSH is as follows:
### Table 4.3: PUSH, Mini-Professional Development Schedule for Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:10 a.m.–8:40 a.m.</td>
<td>Mindset Mondays (Ms. Riggins)</td>
<td>Turnaround for Children PD session (K–2)</td>
<td>Fundations Boot Camp (Mr. Clemmons and Ms. Cummings)</td>
<td>Teacher Individual Planning (Staff Potluck Breakfast —every other month)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:11 a.m.–11:52 a.m.</td>
<td>Math PUSH BLOCK 1 K–2 Teachers (Ms. Pratt)</td>
<td>ELA PUSH BLOCK 1 K–2 teachers (Ms. Cummings)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:23 p.m.–2:59 p.m.</td>
<td>ELA PUSH BLOCK 1 3–5 ELA teachers (Ms. Cummings)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Math PUSH BLOCK 1 3–5 teachers (Ms. Pratt)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All teachers attend PUSH blocks for every content area. In order to be flexible, there are days (Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays) when teachers have planning time that they can use for meeting with their teams, coaching, and other activities. PUSH blocks include routine norms, agendas, content, work time for deliverables, and exit tickets to get feedback on what went well and what changes can be made. After only a few short months conducting PUSH seminars, Ms. Pratt has been recognized as a model PUSH leader and has been visited by James Mapp, the Deputy Chief of Instructional Practice for
the district. Someone from his office reached out to me to let me know that Mr. Mapp and a guest planned to visit my school to see Ms. Pratt in action:

Hi Sundai,

I hope you’re having a great weekend! I’m writing with my Interim OIP Chief of Staff hat.

While I know that the PUSH team has been in touch with folks at Lehigh about scheduling, I wanted to reach out personally as well to ensure you were in the loop regarding James’s visit to Annette Pratt’s K–2 math PUSH seminar tomorrow at 10:15am (I think he will arrive around 10am). James will attend with a member of the PUSH team and an external visitor, Mr. Oscar McClain.

Ms. Pratt is one of the district’s strongest PUSH Leaders and we’re excited for James to see her and your teachers in action!

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Best,
Annabelle

In a school with such great challenges, what a difference just half a year would make. I knew that I could lead my school and that adult-centric structures that fostered low expectations for students were at the heart of our underperformance. I knew that with the right people on board I could make some progress. Although we have miles to go in regard to our instructional practice translating into results, I am confident that with the team I have now, we will make some significant academic gains within the next few years.

Professional Capacity

Still getting the right people on the bus. I ended the school previous year with several vacancies due to attrition issues, evaluation separations based on low performance, and teachers opting out of extended school year. The district mandated that
ten of its lowest-performing schools move to an extended school year model to mitigate summer learning loss. I lost some teachers due to the shortened summer; however, I was able to retain others for a variety of reasons. Some were truly committed to the school and believed in my leadership. Others stayed because on average teachers received a $10,000 pay increase for the extra 20 days of instructional time in the classroom. A few teachers who faced management challenges and appeared to be disgruntled during the previous school year decided to stay. I had coached out as many people as I could, but some interviewed with other schools and could not find positions, so they stayed. DCPS is the highest-paid school system in the area, and sometimes it is a gift and a curse. Many teachers stay in their positions although unhappy because of the high salary and the pay decrease they would get if they went to another school district.

I started the school year off with all of our vacancies filled. We had a thorough interview process that included a demo lesson and involved teachers on a personnel committee that collectively decided if a person was the right fit. We thought we had all of our bases covered and we at least had a group of staff that would ride the bus until the end of the school year. We all agreed that it was our priority to ensure that we try our best to reduce our attrition rate by ensuring we had strong teachers in all of our classrooms. Not everyone stayed on the bus for the ride last year, and we thought for sure our returning staff members would be solid. We were wrong.

After the first round of informal teacher observations, some of our returning staff members started to outwardly share how disgruntled they were about their evaluation scores. Our librarian was also struggling and we thought she would resign by December as a natural break in the school year. I had already put up an ad on Craigslist to hire a
new teacher just in case, so I could be prepared for any winter break transitions. My prior preparation was spot on because we were hit with staffing transitions and attrition issues in November. The first was the resignation of the librarian on November 2:

Dear All,

I appreciate the opportunity you gave me, but I’m resigning from my position as Librarian at Lehigh Elementary. I feel that I have not been effective in my position and that the students deserve better.

I wish the students and staff at Lehigh all the best.

Please accept my resignation effective immediately.

Sincerely,

Jan

I knew the resignation was coming but it was a little earlier than expected. I collected resumes and began interviews to fill the vacancy right after she resigned. That same day a teacher sent me a Facebook post from one of my Academic Leadership Team (ALT) members, Ms. Calvin:

I’m tired and completely overwhelmed by working in a school that thinks I’m a terrible teacher and is systematically designed to fail students. I rarely share posts like this on Facebook but am in need of some positive thoughts and prayers. Today I left school early because I couldn’t stop crying in front of my class, never mind my peers and coworkers who consistently criticize me for being too sensitive. In the past few weeks I’ve acquired 4 new students in one day, have had an iPad smashed without an apology from students or any offer to help fix the damage done, have had my classroom overturned by students who become frustrated by their work (including one instance where I called multiple adults for help but no one came—resulting in me having to remove all of my students from the room in fear of their safety because desk chairs were being thrown), have had materials destroyed, had Halloween treats stolen, have been cursed at by multiple students (who I will remind you are 6 years old), and I could go on and on. There are only so many days I can handle being told that 100% of my students are high risk students, it’s all my fault they’re struggling in school, and no help is given to support any of the needs they bring into the classroom. I’m not a doctor, nurse, social worker, or parent, but am left with the responsibility of performing all of
their jobs and more on a daily basis. What is happening in our world today is frightening but I think what disturbs me the most is how we allow it to happen to our world’s most precious resource, our children.

The day before, Ms. Calvin received her first formal observation score of the year and although she did not miss the mark by a long shot, she was furious and angry that she had not been deemed an “effective” teacher. She came into my office while I was speaking with Ms. Engleman and looked surprised that Ms. Engleman was in the room. She wanted to speak with me alone. Ms. Engleman was her evaluator and I could only imagine that she wanted to report her to me and talk about her evaluation while she was not in the room. She then came in and in front of both of us said, “So you think I’m not an effective teacher?” and “Well maybe I should just leave,” and proceeded to say that I had a hit list of teachers whom I was trying to get rid of and that I was ruining everyone’s careers. Just earlier in the year she had thanked me for allowing her to be on the Academic Leadership Team and praised my leadership:

Hello Ms. Riggins,

The math PD that a few of us are at today is awesome! I feel like I have a lot of useful resources I am planning on immediately implementing in the classroom. I know I missed our personnel meeting (I'm sorry) and for missing so much “in school” time the past two weeks. It has been clarifying for me to have some time away from the classroom and I wanted to thank you for supporting that.

I know I volunteered to help interview candidates and would still like to be a part of this if possible. Let me know how I can help.

I also wanted to thank you for talking to me yesterday. I really look up to you and value your opinions. You're doing an amazing job at Lehigh. I think it's a Herculean task. I'll see you tomorrow and I will be at ALT to scribe (I need to work on my note taking skills).

Sincerely,
Ms. Calvin

I told Ms. Calvin that I would be happy to discuss her scores with her and Ms. Engleman. I suggested we work on some action steps to ensure that her scores would improve. I told her I would not indulge her in discussion unless it was focused on solutions. She stormed out of my office crying, went home for the day, and posted her frustration on Facebook later that evening. I forwarded the email to my supervisor and also to HR because I believed it was slanderous and exaggerated. She mentioned getting new students but volunteered to take them as the team leader, and her class size including the four students was at a total of 20 students. She mentioned a broken iPad screen but the screen did not have a cover. I have an iPhone and I have replaced my screen three times. An iPad without a cover is a guaranteed accident waiting to happen, especially in first grade. She mentioned a host of other issues in her post that were extreme and did not paint a true representation of the situation. The next day she provided documentation from a therapist that “Lehigh Elementary School is causing Ms. Calvin mental stress and she cannot return,” and I forwarded it to my supervisor, Mr. Rius, and the labor relations department. Would she ever return? Would she go on medical leave and would I be left with a teacher out and be forced to take on a substitute for an indefinite amount of time? I did not know what the outcome would be, but I knew I did not want to leave my students without a teacher for weeks upon weeks while the situation was resolved. I waited to hear back from labor relations regarding my next steps. In the meantime, Ms. Calvin sent me an email while she was out on leave:

Dear Ms. Riggins,

Thank you for the opportunity to teach third grade, kindergarten, and some of the
year in first grade. I have enjoyed getting to know my students and our Lehigh families. I am at my threshold for what I can do to help rewrite our Lehigh narrative while also learning how to be a successful teacher in our very challenging environment. I would like to know about the process of transferring schools, how quickly that can happen, how you can assist in making that happen, and when we can meet next week to discuss these details?

Thanks for your time.
Ms. Calvin

I knew that if I did not allow Ms. Calvin to transfer to another school, she was going to remain on leave indefinitely. Her doctor’s note indicated that she could not return to my school. I reached out to Mr. Rius and asked him if there were any vacancies and if she could transfer to another school. He told me he would approve a transfer if I approved it, and that he had a vacancy in a much easier high-performing school in his network of schools. I really did not want to transfer her. I was annoyed by her Facebook post exaggerating her version of the truth and trashing my school. She knew that we launched a social media campaign to “rewrite our school’s narrative,” and she had contributed to slandering it because she did not like her evaluation score. I felt as if I were caught between a rock and a hard place and had to give in to have the vacancy opened so that I could replace her. I did not want my students to have a substitute indefinitely. I was done with having substitutes teach my kids last year and refused to allow it to happen again. I gave her permission to transfer to a more resource-rich, “easier” school. I hated every minute of the decision in the moment. The word got out to my staff and they were all annoyed. Many wondered how she was able to transfer. I could not disclose the details around what happened to them because it was confidential information. I felt it made me look weak in my leadership to my staff, but I knew it was the right thing to do for
students. Ms. Calvin was a decent teacher but she victimized herself too often and did not try to problem solve. In the long run it would be better to have her off the team, but in the moment it sucked. I was able to make peace with the situation because I knew it would be best to try to hire a teacher and give my students some form of stability. I did not want their classroom to have a revolving door of substitutes. After I allowed her to transfer, she reached out to me to inquire about getting her things and also seeing her students. I tried to answer her as neutrally and professionally as possible. I responded to her email by embedding my answers in her email in bold print:

Hello Ms. Riggins,

I am going to continue to move things from the classroom this afternoon around 4:30. **Ok that works.**
I also want to make sure the Fundations materials are in order for the next classroom teacher to use.
If I do not finish today is there any chance the building will be open over the weekend? **The building will not be open this weekend. You are welcome to stay until 8pm to gather the rest of your things. I can have Ms. Cummings reorganize/sort the Fundations materials to save you time so that you can focus on packing up.**

I would like to say goodbye to my students. I'm very unfamiliar with the proper protocol in regards to transferring schools and how to say goodbye, or if that is at all necessary. **At this point I don't think a goodbye is necessary. The students have already been sorted and moved to another classroom and parents have been notified that you are not returning. Departure in the middle of the school year is difficult to explain so I don't think the goodbye is necessary.** If it's more appropriate I could also write and mail a letter to each student separately. **No letter is needed.**

Thanks for your response and time.

Sincerely,
Ms. Calvin

Ms. Calvin wanted closure but I could not allow her to do it. I thought it was selfish and would be disruptive to students. I was in the process of interviewing and I had two strong
candidates I could choose from and I had already split the class into two groups. I did not want to resurface feelings of abandonment and sadness that her return could spark in my students. Ms. Calvin came to get her things and that chapter closed. She reached out to my PE teacher and asked if she could still go on the ski trip in January. She was the co-captain of our school’s Ski Club with the PE teacher, Mr. Norris. I told him that she should not go on the trip and he agreed.

The situation that occurred also made me appreciate the growth in my staff culture. The year before, people indulged in drama, but this year no one wanted to be a part of it. Even some of the personal relationships with colleagues she had were shattered. Some colleagues with whom she had relationships came to speak with me about her departure. They were angry about the Facebook post and her efforts to diminish our hard work and blame our kids. They did not respect her for quitting, and someone even said, “She is throwing a tantrum.” Another staff member, one of Ms. Calvin’s grade-level teammates, said that she was going to take a break from Ms. Calvin because she was “toxic.” I had already made peace with my decision, but I was proud of my staff members for taking the team Lehigh perspective and seeing her actions as not an escape to a “better” school but more cowardly, and thus disappointing.

After Ms. Calvin’s departure and the buzz of the Facebook post died down, rumors of another teacher on her way out started. Shortly after I got wind of the rumor, I received a reference for Montgomery County Public Schools for the teacher, although she had not told me she was leaving. I called the teacher down that afternoon and she admitted that she planned to give us a week’s notice and would be leaving to go to another school. She said her only penalty was that she would owe the school system one
thousand dollars. I told her that she was breaking her contract in the middle of the year and giving up on kids and that it would be unethical for me to recommend her. She resigned the Friday before winter break and used the email distribution list that I use for my weekly principal’s updates to send this email to the entire staff:

My time has come to an end at Lehigh. My boat has sunk and a yacht came and rescued me. It was great meeting new people and friends.

For those who want to know, I am doing guided reading and math with a few teachers. The school has its challenges but it has a great atmosphere and leadership.

See you at Dave and Buster's on Friday!

P.S.
Thanks to those who encouraged me to keep it moving.

Shortly after she sent the email, I read it and kept working. I had lunch duty and was headed downstairs and I saw two of my teachers. They stopped me and made faces and asked me, “Did you read it?” I said yes, I had, and kept walking. The teachers laughed and joked with each other about our school’s “boat.” Were we in a canoe? What boat are we in? Staff members laughed and took her mass email as a joke. They even saved her a chair at our staff party at Dave and Buster’s as a running joke because they knew she could not have shown her face. It was pretty humorous, and staff members shook off her departure. Several teachers stated that we were getting rid of “bad apples in a good bunch,” and that if people did not want to be at our school they should leave. They took the words right out of my head. It was a sign that my staff were proud to choose our school and were committed to its improvement and wanted staff members with the same vision on board.
By the end of December, I had replaced the librarian, first-grade teacher, and the third-grade teacher with new hires. They would start in January after winter break. We opened up the building early so that they could fix up their classrooms and get settled in. Our vacancies were filled and we were ready to keep moving forward.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

**Building school climate: The dream dean team.** My school’s climate and culture grew leaps and bounds with the promotion of my behavior tech to a dean and my new hire from another school. Mr. Holliday and Mr. Fieldstein revised the school’s climate plan and created weekly rewards using the Class Dojo system. They also planned all of the monthly incentive activities. Students would earn points on a daily basis, receive weekly rewards, and be invited to participate in monthly incentives days based on the number of points they earned. They provided coaching support to teachers, conducted home visits, entered behavioral referrals in the district’s behavior tracking database, and conducted professional development sessions on behavior management for teachers. They built strong relationships with students and conducted most of the parent meetings. During the previous school year, I had been overwhelmed with behavioral concerns and meetings with parents. During this school year, most of my time could be spent in classrooms and working with students.

At the end of the 2015–16 school year, my school’s student satisfaction scores dropped down to only 50% in comparison to 76% at the middle of the school year. I was really disappointed. I attempted to have activities for students, but the teacher attrition, staff culture, and dirty school building did not go over well with students. Students
reported that they did not like the school, that they did not feel safe, and that it was dirty. The students’ responses to the school year were honest and matched my own experience as a principal. In preparation for the current school year we decided to plan all activities and monitor students progress toward exhibiting desired behaviors through allowing them to earn and track points in a database.

Before the end of the previous school year, I surveyed students to inquire about what activities they would like for our school to offer. Students wanted basketball, cheerleading, track, and flag football. This year we offered track and field, basketball, and cheerleading. The students had a great fall season. Although our boys only won one game and continue to be frustrated with their losses as the season progressed, we helped them cope with the losses and told them they would be better next year. Our positive staff culture was evident through basketball game attendance to support kids. Teachers allowed siblings of students on the basketball or cheerleading teams to carpool with them to see their sisters, brothers, and cousins in action. On average we had about ten staff members attend games. All games were away because we do not have basketball hoops in our gym. One of our closer away games had 15 staff members attend, and our last game of the season we had 24 members of our staff attend. The cheerleaders brought home a trophy for “outstanding” performance after they participated in the DC Interscholastic Sports Cheer Competition. I watched my school’s culture shift with the addition of sports teams. The students’ excitement for the new activities and teams was contagious, and staff caught the buzz of joy from watching students play and work hard to support their team and represent our school well.
In addition to adding sports activities, I had a new custodial team, and the building was, according to a staff member who has been at the school for several years, cleaner than it had ever been in the past. We had a new custodial foreman and he was working diligently to lead his team and was committed to keeping the building clean. He took great pride in his work and pushed his team to pay attention to details and to maintain the cleanliness of the building in an effort to improve the reputation the building had in the past. I shared our student satisfaction scores with the team and they saw their work as a part of changing the reputation of the school.

In addition to physical changes in the building and seeing staff mindsets changing, I was also starting to see shifts in students’ behavior and also their attitudes toward school. Many students push themselves to try harder on assessments, improved their behavior, and also showed that they cared more about their peers by extended acts of kindness if someone was hurt on the playground or needed help in class. The culture is changing.

Our school climate scorecard in November of 2016 only had three yellow areas and one red area. The areas of needed improvement were in the domains of Rules and Norms, Classroom Consistency and Expectations, and Student Recognition. The rest of our scorecard was green. My deans even received praise from our school climate specialist, Ms. Arby, for their progress and efforts to use feedback to make changes and improvements:

Good Evening Lehigh Deans,

I wanted to THANK YOU for your hard-work, relentless commitment, consistent professionalism and tenacity! You continue to push climate and culture while supporting staff and students in a way that is caring and helpful. I just want to tell
you that I appreciate your continued collaboration. Happy holidays!

We are a long way from where we were at the start of last school year. It was our goal to have an all green scorecard by January 2017, and we are on track to accomplish that goal.

**Strong Parent–Community–School Ties**

*Parent and community ties: A work still in progress.* Our parent and community relations are slowly shifting in a different direction. Last year we had irate parents frequently visit the building, yelling and screaming at staff and coming to the school in a threatening manner to address issues. Now such instances are rare and isolated. We also have three parents who routinely come to school every day and assist us with a variety of tasks such as: running the school’s snack cart; monitoring the lunchroom and playground during lunch and recess duty; assisting with printing and cutting flyers for our weekly Tuesday Take Home Folder distribution; and assisting with morning arrival and dismissal when needed. One parent, Mr. Wolford, even dresses up in a suit and tie when he comes to volunteer. Last school year, we had challenges with his daughter’s behavior, and although he volunteered often, he was also frustrated by his daughter’s behavior and would sometimes get upset when she was in trouble. He would take her side and not reason with staff, which made our relationship with him difficult at times. Toward the end of the school year he stopped volunteering. However, he decided to come back this school year. He ended the year on a good note after his participation in our first Girls on the Run season. One of our partners paid the $3,000 fee for our school’s participation and his daughter was on the team. She had a great season and it helped to improve her behavior. He was proud of her for staying on the team, completing her first
5K with her teammates, and thankful that she was finally in an activity that made her feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. He was proud and it gave him renewed hope for her success and his role in the school. He comes to school every day and helps out with whatever we ask him to, in his suit and tie, with a smile.

This school year I decided to focus on improving our parent–teacher conferences structure. The district allocates one full day for parent conferences three times per year. Last year on average we had between 20 and 30 parents attend. Most teachers would purposely not send home reminders so that they could have a free day to catch up on work and do things in their classrooms. The attendance was horrendous and I thought it was a waste of a day. This year I decided to challenge my teachers to get at least 80% of their parents to complete a parent conference. It could be over the phone, on FaceTime, at the parent’s home, during open planning time, or at any time in the morning or after school outside of regular class time. If teachers were able to get 80% of their conferences completed within the parent conferences window, I would give them the parent–teacher conference day off. This worked. During our first parent–teacher conference day we had 157 completed conferences documented. This was a drastic improvement in comparison to the 20 to 30 parents we averaged during the previous school year. Teachers made more aggressive efforts to reach out to parents, and when I shared the information at one of our staff meetings I saw looks of disbelief, and they all applauded. We still have some parent engagement challenges but we will continue to forge ahead and make strategic efforts to reach out to them. I am confident that as we continue to build relational trust with parents and families, we will continue to see increases in parent numbers at school events, activities, and parent conferences.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

The purpose of my self-study was to provide a firsthand account of the changes, challenges, and successes of my five (and a half) years as a principal in two different school districts as a means of exploring questions related to leadership in urban schools. My aim is to provide a real-world context-sharing and sense-making lens for studying the leadership experiences of a principal. The development of my leadership trajectory as an urban school principal in two different school systems and settings, charter and public, has provided me with a unique lens through which to share my experiences and key learnings with others in the field. In the design of my study, I planned to answer the following two major questions:

1. How can a principal reflecting on her past practice use her experience to inform and influence her leadership actions and decision-making in a new context?

2. What does my experience in two different urban schools teach me about what it takes to lead a school?

My first question was divided into two sub-questions that specifically reference the juxtaposition of past and present and the ways in which the one influenced my actions in the other. These two sub-questions specifically focus on past experience as a lens through which to examine current experiences, decision-making, and leadership practice:

a. How has my past experience shaped my understanding of my current school?

b. How does my past experience influence my current decision-making and leadership practice as a principal?
The first sub-question focuses on how those experiences have shaped my sense-making and understanding of my current school context. The second question specifically speaks to my decision-making and leadership practice within my school in my role as principal.

My second research question and two sub-questions focus on my learning and sense-making about the principalship and provide a space for the “other” to be named and highlighted:

a. What are the realities and stakeholder influences that contribute to the successes and challenges of a principalship?

b. How does the use of a framework for successful schools help me to further develop my understanding of my leadership?

To address these questions, I have drawn on Bryk’s (2010) framework of “Five Essential Supports for School Improvement” to discuss the importance of each component relative to the functioning of the two different schools in which I have served as principal:

1. Leadership as the Driver for Change
2. Professional Capacity
3. Parent–Community Ties
4. Student-Centered Learning Climate
5. Instructional Guidance

While Bryk (2010) noted that in order for a school to improve, these five essential supports must be present, he emphasized that “leadership drives the change in the four other organizational supports” (p. 26). Essentially, he positions school leaders in the role of facilitators and cultivators of the four other supports.
Coherent Instructional Guidance System

In my first principalship, I learned how critically a robust instructional model could positively impact a school community. Expeditionary Learning, our project-based instructional model, provided enriched and meaningful learning opportunities for teachers to plan engaging lessons for students. Our professional development opportunities in and outside of the school, as well as the guidance of the school designer, allowed for teacher support directly aligned to the school’s model and mission. The school’s instructional model was clear and transparent to all stakeholders, which significantly contributed to the school’s successful start. Teachers were engaged in lesson design and planning in alignment with the model. Bryk (2010) asserted that “the efficacy of individual teacher efforts depends on the quality of the supports and the local community of practice that forms around their use and refinement” (p. 24). All teachers in the school had professional development and support to implement the Expeditionary Learning model. Although the school’s growth and challenges from management organizations impacted the effectiveness of the instructional guidance system, the system was at least functioning and present.

In my current school setting, there were a handful of teachers following the district’s curriculum model. The majority of teachers’ classrooms were managed with work packets of dittos not aligned with the district’s expectations for content, as laid out in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The school did not have expectations for common planning and teacher collaboration, which set the tone for teacher pushback and complaining when I attempted to implement structures in my first year as principal.
Though the district offered professional development for teachers; the majority of teachers would not attend. I had to institute a mandatory professional development attendance protocol and keep meticulous attendance records to document any absences so that I could cite these in their performance evaluations. Although my actions to make change were not well received, I knew that the lack of structures and systems regarding instruction can be one of the factors that limit growth in academic achievement, so I knew that these professional development sessions were necessary in order to create an instructional foundation for teacher practice to develop and grow.

My first experience as a principal provided me with an opportunity to see true teacher collaboration in action and to reap the benefits of such meaningful teacher planning and preparation. My first four years made me a believer that students can achieve at high levels given the right conditions, and that teachers can achieve at high levels with the right instructional supports. Leading a school that proved what was possible in its instructional model shaped my thinking about what structures I would need to put in place to begin the work at my school. Bryk (2010) stated that “schools in which student learning improves have coherent instructional guidance systems that articulate the what and how of instruction,” and that “how we organize and operate a school has a major effect on the instructional exchanges in its classrooms” (p. 24). When I took the helm of my current school, the “what” and “how” of instruction was non-existent. The conditions to support academic learning were simply not present. I knew that my work during my first year would be to begin developing the instructional model in order to shift the culture toward one with a clear instructional guidance system. Given the importance of such work in improving my school’s outcomes, I had to hold people
accountable for adhering to the set structures. I had to show that the adherence to instructional expectations was a non-negotiable within my school.

**Professional Capacity**

Bryk (2010) affirmed that “schools are only as good as the quality of faculty, the professional development that supports their learning, and the faculty’s capacity to work together to improve instruction” (p. 24). In my first principalship, I learned firsthand the importance of a strong support staff and their influence as a major catalyst for school success. I had the support, trust, and strong relationships with my staff that largely contributed to our success. The pressure of accountability for common planning, attending professional development, and high levels of teacher collaboration impacted my retention of teachers going in to my second year as a principal. However, this is was not a loss; it was actually a gain.

Over the course of my four years as a principal in a growing school, I had to hire an exponential number of staff members in alignment with my targeted enrollment increases every year. I had developed a hiring committee of teachers who would review resumes, watch candidate demo lessons, and participate actively in assessing if the candidate would be a good fit for my school.

Bryk et al. (2010) wrote that the “faculty’s capacity to work together to improve instruction” is a key component of professional capacity (p. 24). Because of my first principalship, I knew this to be true. I knew how critical professional capacity and strong staffing would be to significantly improving the culture in my current school. In my current setting, there were no clear protocols or structures for hiring candidates, and
several people on the staff had inappropriate personal relationships with their colleagues. The adult culture was so dysfunctional and toxic that the capacity of the staff was severely limited. In the absence of instructional guidance systems, coupled with numerous personal ties among staff members, the focus was not on student achievement.

My first principalship prepared me to be able to be clear about my vision for my school as well as my expectations in order to counsel out low performers and to recruit stronger teachers. In my first year, I was able to move out 60% of my staff and to recruit staff members who would buy in to the vision and would work toward improving academic and social-emotional outcomes for students. Although in a new and different school environment in comparison to my first principalship, building the professional capacity of a school was a familiar challenge.

**Strong Parent–Community–School Ties**

As a founding principal, developing strong relationships with families and the community was challenging; yet, overall, it is one of my strengths. Through the student recruitment process, I was able to meet numerous parents and families at open houses and information sessions. This provided me with opportunities to know students and families on a first-name basis. In hindsight, I now understand how important the connections and relational trust were in my first principalship in comparison to my current setting. Bryk et al. (2010) affirmed that relational trust can be considered “both a lubricant for organizational change and a moral resource for sustaining the hard work of local school improvement” (p. 27). They also stated that the absence of relational trust makes it nearly impossible to strengthen parent–community ties.

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In my current setting, I can see the vast difference in the parent–school relationships and how the discord impacts the overall school performance. In the past, there were staff members at the school who mistreated both students and parents. Corporal punishment allegations, parent complaints about school staff, and parents aggressively approaching teachers and other students to resolve incidents was the norm in my first year as principal of my current school. The anger and frustration of parents was deeply rooted in a history of negative interactions and confrontational situations that went unresolved.

By listening to parents’ concerns and their stories of unresolved situations, I developed an understanding that parents’ frustrations were not personal but were fueled by their lived experiences interacting with school staff in the past. I learned that parents did not have the experience of coming to the school for positive reasons connected to students’ academic or socio-emotional gains. Parents were only familiar with sending their children to a low-performing school in a violent neighborhood. Their perspectives and experiences shaped their lack of trust for my school.

My experiences as a principal have shaped my view on how to engage my families in my current setting. I know that parents want to feel affirmed by their efforts to support their children. All parents want to hear positive feedback about their children. Positive feedback transcends school-based conditions and circumstances. I saw this in action in my first school and I now see it in my current setting when we have performances showcasing students’ activities, awards assemblies, and mother–son, father–daughter, and family bonding events and activities. I am in the process of building relationships with parents and families to earn their trust.
In my first principalship, I had gained trust because I was at the school when it first opened its doors. Through my actions, I was able to gain trust. In my current school, I understand that I am earning trust by working to change perceptions based on negative experiences. I am learning about my families’ challenges, needs, and experiences to better understand them. Although I have begun the work of transforming my school into a place where they are welcomed and supported, I know it is a slow process.

Bryk et al. (2010) asserted that the principal is key to fostering and developing relational trust. They claimed that “principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others, actively listen to their concerns, and eschew arbitrary action” (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 27). This experience of building relationships after trust has been lost is very different from my experience in my first principalship, where trust and credibility was much easier to gain. As a result, my understanding of my school’s unique context guides me to be flexible in how I lead my staff in meeting parents’ needs. I continue to think about and consider ways to encourage and engage parents and work to support my staff in utilizing strategies to gain parents’ trust.

The violence in the community is a very different challenge than I experienced in my first principalship. In my first principalship, I spent one year in a temporary school location and it was in a dangerous neighborhood. That year I implemented lockdown and active-shooter drills with staff and students. It was unfamiliar for everyone and it caused a level of stress when there were police raids and we had to utilize the drills we practiced. The fact of being in an old school building combined with safety issues was stressful for my staff and students.
In my new school setting, the violence is permanent and normalized. This knowledge of the attitudes toward the neighborhood has pushed me to continue to advocate for increased police presence and for safety patrols to ensure that, at a minimum, the neighborhood surrounding my school is safe for students during school hours. The experience of leading a school in a rough neighborhood in just one year helped to prepare me for my experiences in my new setting. I am aware of the neighborhood challenges, but I also realized that I am limited in what I can do because the history of violence in the community is generational and systemic. Therefore, my efforts focus on keeping my students and staff safe. These are my primary concerns. Preparation is within my control. I continue to advocate for support, but I also know that strengthening my staff and student awareness regarding how to respond in these situations is what I can do given the challenges that exist in my school’s community.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

Bryk (2010) affirmed that school climate is an important factor in motivating students to think of themselves as learners. In his research, he claimed that “at a minimum, improving schools establishes a safe and orderly environment—the most basic prerequisite for learning” (Bryk, 2010, p. 25). In my first principalship, I spent a large majority of my time developing a positive school climate in order to create the conditions for my teachers to focus on developing engaging and meaningful lessons and learning experiences for students. The exponential growth of the student body, staffing challenges, and also moving for two consecutive years created some instability in the learning environment. However, despite the continual churn of changes I experienced with my
staff, we maintained a safe and orderly learning environment in which students could learn and grow.

When I took the helm of my current school, the minimum expectations for a student-centered learning climate were not in place. The environment was not a “safe and orderly” one (Bryk, 2010, p. 25). Students’ academic and socio-emotional needs were not being met. Teachers yelled at students and sometimes became physical with them. Academic expectations did not exist school-wide and students were allowed in the majority of classrooms to do whatever they wanted.

Establishing expectations and norms for the environment was a heavy leadership lift. I received opposition and pushback from teachers and staff. Many of them blamed the students and believed that the students simply could not learn. The students had been neglected for so long that their frustration with learning was rooted in other needs that were not being met. There were students who needed special education services that had not been assessed and prescribed supports based on their learning needs had not been provided. There were students who had vision challenges and needed glasses; and students who had experienced significantly traumatic situations but were not receiving therapeutic services.

My current school also had one of the top three suspension rates for elementary schools in the district. There were hundreds of documented instances of fights between students, and in my first year, I documented numerous corporal punishment allegations made about staff becoming physical with students. Lehigh Elementary School had a reputation as the worst school in the district, and the only way I could shift the culture was to make significant and sustainable changes.
My first principalship’s changes and challenges with hiring new staff and building culture every year with a new set of students provided me with a vast toolkit of strategies to lead change. I learned to provide structure, inspire with vision and possibility, and recruit like-minded staff to the team I already had. Recruiting teachers who wanted to buy in to the vision and were committed to ensuring students’ success was one of my major priorities in leading my school.

Although the culture was in chaos in my second school, the work was the same. I needed to assess the climate and identify the pockets of success and stability. I also needed to coach out low performers and develop systems and structures that would impact the climate. I developed norms for teachers and students with my leadership team and recruited teachers aligned to the vision. My decision-making required me to move out low performers, although many of them had strong neighborhood ties and attempted to create conflict.

In summary, I can see that my past experiences as a principal have shaped my work in my current context. In my first principalship, I learned the power of a strong, positive school culture as a foundation for students’ success. I witnessed firsthand the excitement and the magic of learning within my school. I know that it is possible if the school’s climate is focused on students’ success. I am currently at the foundational stages of building a culture of student learning where none existed before. In just the first half of my sixth year as a principal, I can see the foundation of my school’s culture being built and sustained.
Leadership as the Driver of Change

In my five and a half years as a principal, I have learned that school leadership is one of the most critical factors in school success and improvement. I have also learned that it is an ever-changing role that sometimes requires leaders to make shifts in thinking and practice based on the context and situation. Bryk (2010) wrote, “Principals in improving schools engage in a dynamic interplay of instructional and inclusive facilitative leadership” (p. 25). The interplay of leadership requires a variety of leadership skills and strategies. Many of the strategies are outside of the realm of what is taught and thought about instructional leadership. In my first principalship, I had some opportunities to focus on instructional leadership by supporting teachers with expedition plans and planning learning experiences through our Expeditionary Learning model. However, I spent a great deal of time managing change within my school environment. I had to manage the pressures of the CMO and their priorities while managing change within my school environment. At times, the priorities competed for my time and pushed me to simultaneously manage both, while buffering the pressure from the CMO in order to protect my staff. As Bryk (2010) wrote, a principal is responsible for “buffer[ing] externalities that might distract for coherent reform” (p. 25). This buffering puts an enormous amount of pressure and stress on the leader.

Heifetz and Laurie (2011) claimed that “regulating distress” is a leader’s toughest job; that “a leader must have presence and poise,” and that the “pressures to restore equilibrium are enormous” (p. 66). In my first principalship, I spent every year growing student numbers, recruiting new staff, and moving to a new building attempting to create and restore equilibrium. Each year, I started the school year off establishing calm and
managing the aftermath of change and disorder, and I would end the year preparing to manage more chaos and disorder in a new change ahead. These experiences pushed me to learn how to manage complex changes and to be able to navigate change in a way that allows for change to occur with a clear vision of what is to come and how the change will impact others. My experiences as a founding principal prepared me to be able to lead change, although in ways that were very different from what I have done within my current setting.

Through my experiences as a principal, I have been able to gain a sense of wisdom and resilience. Experience has been my teacher that have shaped how I am able to lead, and have also provided a toolkit of familiarity that allows me to make connections to previous situations and experiences. It is through the challenges in my first principalship that I have been exposed to a level of stress, decision-making, and change that has increased my leadership capacity. This allowed me to accept a principalship in a low-performing school and to have the confidence that I could enact change in a meaningful way to influence and achieve a level of school improvement.

Bennis and Thomas (2011) claimed that true leadership is generated from leaders’ experiences in challenging environments and situations (p. 97). They wrote, “True leadership is an individual’s ability to find meaning in negative events and to learn from even the most trying circumstances” (p. 97). Although I would have benefitted from more support from my CMO in my first principalship, I learned from that experience how I would want to lead others and how to manage complex changes independently. These experiences helped me to learn and also strengthened my own practice. According to Bennis and Thomas (2011), such situations strengthen leaders (p. 97). They pointed out
that “the skills required to conquer adversity and emerge stronger and more committed than ever are the same ones that make for extraordinary leaders” (Bennis & Thomas, 2011, p. 97). Simply put, as the old expression goes, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

In my current principalship, there was a lot of staff turnover (see Chapter 4, “Year 5”), corporal punishment allegations, and a dysfunctional leadership team. Through those challenges, I was able to build relationships with high-performing staff members, learn more about my students and their experiences in the school, and gain trust with some of my parents. With a vision of what was to come, I was able to forge ahead through a tumultuous culture. I ended my fifth year as a principal with a low evaluation score and little success under my belt. However, it was through these negative experiences that I was able to learn. My learning in my first year impacted the policies and practices I established in my second year. Through all of the various challenges, I was equipped to deal with the challenges based on my past experiences. I am accustomed to managing high levels of change. Although my school was a different challenge and a large change to manage, the change process was familiar.

My first principalship had all of the components of Bryk’s (2010) framework, and while they all needed improvement, the components were at least in place. One of my key findings in studying my second and current role as principal was the realization of the absence of several of the components and weak, dysfunctional structures in place of others, as I have described throughout this study. Leadership was in turmoil with two principals at the helm of my school prior to my appointment. My experiences in my past context shaped my perspectives on how to build a new infrastructure. My experiences
also shaped my understanding of what would be needed to develop a blueprint and foundation that would support the school’s improvement moving forward.

Bryk’s (2010) assessment of leadership as the driver of change focuses on leadership as guided by the principal. He described a principal’s work as “building relationships with the school community” and “cultivating a growing cadre of leaders (teachers, parents, and community members) who can help expand the reach of this work and share overall responsibility for improvement” (Bryk, 2010, p. 25). In many respects, this description of leadership is true and necessary. However, Bryk’s work does not account for the external factors that may influence a principal’s ability to focus on instructional leadership, relationship building, and galvanizing the school community. Supervisors, district-level politics, school community challenges, and the context in which the school is situated are all external factors that may influence a principal’s ability to effectively lead his or her school.

Bryk (2010) wrote that principals “establish priorities and buffer externalities that might distract from coherent reform” (p. 25), yet there is no mention of what happens when the “externalities” limit the ability of the principal to enact change. These external factors influence and impact the principal’s ability to focus on instructional leadership, just as I experienced in my first principalship: they also impact a principal’s ability to enact change in a strategic and meaningful way. In addition, Bryk does not mention the sustainability or the magnitude of the buffering that the principal is expected to absorb.

How long can a principal sustain and maintain their own well-being when they are responsible for buffering these externalities as a normal and expected part of their principalship? How long can a principal absorb the blows of externalities and be the
buffer from pressures? What happens to the actual person—the principal—sitting in that office as a result of long-term buffering? Is such an expectation reasonable and sustainable given the demands principals already face? When juxtaposed with Bryk’s theory of practice, my lived experiences suggest that there is a fundamental misalignment. External challenges are not accounted for in Bryk’s five essential supports for school improvement, but they should be considered a potential part of a principal’s school context. In this study, it is clear that my lived experiences as a principal suggest a huge disconnect from a theory that does not address the complex impact of external challenges.

In Chapter 2, I touched on Buchen’s (2004) concept of the “viability of the principalship” and the idea that principals face many challenges that are often described from a theoretical lens but seldom in a firsthand account from those with lived experiences. The first sub-question references realities and stakeholder influences. These two things are not highlighted in Bryk’s framework; however, both surfaced in my data and are important components in examining the big-picture view of the principalship and the enigmatic complexity of each school and its unique challenges. The second sub-question focuses on an understanding of Bryk’s framework for successful schools and how that framework shaped my understanding of my leadership. My leadership in my current setting has been greatly influenced by my past experiences, understandings about school context, and the hidden truths and power plays embedded within each specific school context. These learnings are not a part of the student achievement measures, school climate data, or many of the other factors that influence and shape a school’s infrastructure. Though certainly implicit in such data, they are not easily discerned unless
one has lived with a complexity of external challenges and been able to find some patterns that enable a leader to shape change rather than be shaped by it.

In the next section of this chapter, I attempt to address the first sub-question from my second research question (What are the realities and stakeholder influences that contribute to the success and challenges of a principalship?) through my analysis of data regarding the identification of the stakeholder influences and their impact on my role as principal in the two different settings.

**School 1: Newton Academy**

**Stakeholder Influence 1: The Charter Management Organization**

**Reality: “External” leadership drives change.** The CMO was a heavily influential force in the driving change within my first principalship. They made decisions regarding our enrollment, school location, and transportation. All of these operational aspects of the school had a significant impact on my school’s culture as well as my ability to lead. Although it was in their charter agreement to manage facilities and the school’s operation, they did not. I learned in my first year as principal that any aspects of a school’s operation ultimately fall on the shoulders of the principal. What is written in any agreement or governing document is irrelevant in the eyes of stakeholders who see the principal’s role and positionality as the leader of the school. The power of the principal and the office he or she holds is ultimately responsible for all aspects of the school. Parents, families, and school staff members are not always privy to the inner workings of school-level management and the dynamics of external forces that influence leadership.
Bryk (2010) wrote that “buffering externalities that might distract from coherent reform” is critical to focusing on school priorities (p. 25). I learned that this buffering is not as simple as it seems. Rather, buffering and navigating external influences and pressures is a major and complex nuance of the principalship. As an example, consider the relationship I was navigating with my CMO: This externality was the guiding force for my track record as principal. My CMO was my evaluator and also controlled my school’s board. The CMO recruited the board members. The CMO completed my leadership evaluations. I did not have any way to hold the CMO accountable for their responsibilities in managing my school. They had the opportunity to critique my leadership without assuming responsibility for their lack of support in creating the conditions for my school to thrive. I was forced to absorb the external pressures of leading in a completely unsupportive and unstable environment.

The perception that the leadership is exclusive to one man—in this case one woman—in the principal’s office is a farce. Buffering such a vast amount of external pressure in addition to the regular stress of the principalship was neither healthy nor sustainable. Depending on the intensity and magnitude of the external influences, leaders start by buffering and eventually start to absorb the stress. I am living proof of this. After years of taking on such a heavy burden in my first principalship, I decided to resign. I knew that I could not continue to lead with such powerful external pressures that impacted and stifled my ability to lead in a meaningful way. I did the best that I could but I was not truly supported. The principal is at the heart of school leadership, but there are other externalities in play that can significantly influence the success or challenges a leader may face.
Overall, I can attribute my first principalship to providing me the opportunity to lead in a highly stressful environment. The successes with building professional capacity, creating a student-centered learning environment, and developing instructional systems all occurred despite the lack of support from the CMO. They made my work more challenging. However, I was able to see firsthand success and the power of a strong school community of both teachers and parents working together.

When principals buffer staff and others from the blows of the external forces, they assume responsibility for absorbing those pressures. I continued to absorb those pressures until it was too much to bear. The idea that principals can sustain such high levels of stress contradicts Bryk’s (2010) claim that a principal can simply buffer such blows. Buffering is no easy feat. In some instances, the externalities can have a significant impact on the viability of a principalship, and this should be considered when assessing the enabling conditions for school improvement, unique school contexts, and also principal attrition rates in high-needs urban schools.

**Stakeholder Influence 2: The Community**

**Reality:** Parent–school ties are not enough; the community component is **essential.** In my third year as principal, I moved to my permanent school community. The school location was a former factory and was not set up for the volume of prospective inhabitants. The traffic from neighboring schools and the location did not allow for a seamless transition. The traffic issues and challenges were horrible and created a negative relationship with the community. This challenge was fueled by the lack of transparency and anticipated challenges presented to key stakeholders in the
community. It created a lack of trust for my CMO within the community, which also lead back to the principal’s office. I inherited the frustration and stress from community members as soon as I moved into the neighborhood.

Navigating the community was challenging because the councilwoman and other community members were assured by my CMO that my school’s moving to the neighborhood would not impact them in any way. This was not true, and it put me in a position as a leader of having to work toward regaining and establishing trust within the community. It was a situation that my CMO created due to unrealistic expectations regarding our impact on the neighborhood and how the community stakeholders would be able to either embrace or reject the changes. They decided to reject us and the task of building some semblance of relational trust was placed on my already strained shoulders.

This was another example of an externality that was beyond my control. My school did not have the community support and it became my responsibility to modify school activity schedules, change arrival and dismissal routes, and continually facilitate community meetings to hear residents’ voices. Many of the things I implemented were best practices that should be present in any school in order to engage the community; however, in my case the steps were necessary in attempting to address a volatile situation that could have been handled differently. Once again, externalities lead back to the principal’s office.

The reality of the principal’s role in assuming responsibility for all school-based challenges, even those beyond their control, is a daunting and mammoth task. Community support is a necessary and vital support within any school’s improvement,
but the discord that was created from broken promises from my CMO made the relationship stressful and challenging.

**Stakeholder Influence 3: The Parents**

**Reality: Parent–school ties are a strong example of relational trust in schools.**

In my first year as principal, I learned the power of being an authentic and engaged leader with families. I learned that it is vital to building trust with parents and families. Bryk (2010) wrote:

> Principals engage parents and other community members in activities that enable participants to contribute to the school and advance the learning of their own children and thus experience a sense of efficacy. “Small wins” gradually build a school community’s capacity for the greater challenges (and higher-risk social challenges) that may lie ahead. (p. 28)

The celebrations of learning, meaningful learning activities, student-led conferences, and other meaningful experiences all built trust with families. They allowed us to sustain and maintain our enrollment goals because many parents and families believed in our long-term vision for our school. However, that vision was difficult to see clearly through all of the changes and challenges. The “small wins” we created with families allowed them to be committed to our school through the moving and changes. However, we lost many of them. Many of them expressed that they wanted to stay but could not bear the burden of continuous change and movement. Overall, the reality of the effects on students of continuing to undergo high levels of change on students was too much for many of the families we recruited, even though they had high levels of trust in my leadership and the long-term vision for the school.
Stakeholder Influence 4: The Teachers

Reality: Professional capacity—teachers are an essential influence to a school’s success. In my first principalship, I had the opportunity to recruit many great teachers. I was able to establish a vision and clearly communicate the vision to people who wanted something different and innovative in education. The teachers wanted to be in a school with a different instructional model that focused on high expectations for students. I was able to create a positive school culture committed to students’ success with a strong cadre of teachers. The teachers embodied the school’s vision and were significantly influential in the sustainability of the instructional program, school climate, and parents’ decisions to stay committed to our school despite the many challenges we faced. Bryk (2010) wrote that “schools are only as good as the quality of their faculty” and “the faculty’s capacity to work together to improve instruction” (p. 24). We all worked together to plan lessons and meaningful learning experiences for students. Teachers did the work with or without administrator input. It was an expectation that lived within the school and was supported by staff.

The challenge of growing a school’s staff and student body so rapidly impacted the sustainability of the professional learning culture among teachers within the school. While the establishment of such a culture can be considered a success, the reality of sustaining such a culture through such a high level of transition and change was that the culture would inevitably continue to weaken with the rapid growth and expansion. The continual orientation and onboarding of newcomers required a continually high level of planning, preparation, and effort in resetting and re-establishing school culture. This was
a heavy load that did not get lighter, because there was always a great level and rate of change to navigate.

**School 2: Lehigh Elementary School**

**Stakeholder Influence 1: District Leadership**

**Reality: District-level leadership supports leadership as the driver of change.**

My experience in my current setting has provided me with a model for effective upper-level leadership. In my first principalship, I was managed by the CMO, a district-level supervisor of all 32 charter schools, and also the Newton Academy board. All of these stakeholders had different opinions of my leadership, different experiences as leaders, and different understandings of what is required in school leadership. My most recent supervisor, Dr. Arlington, had experience as a school principal in a suburban environment. No one providing feedback to me in my leadership role had experience as an urban school principal.

In my current setting, my instructional superintendent has provided strong leadership, engagement, and investment in me as a leader at my school. He has been in the district for his entire career. He has provided support with challenges, and the district manages certain operational aspects such as human resources management (onboarding and processing school employees hiring paperwork) and facilities management.

Lehigh ES is a traditional neighborhood school, so I do not handle transportation. Some of our special education students are transported to school via yellow bus and this is all managed by the school district. Not being responsible for managing large levels of change regarding operational aspects of my school’s function has allowed me to focus
my energy on developing a student-centered learning environment, developing the professional capacity of my staff, and beginning to establish strong parent–community–school ties.

Though Bryk (2010) addressed the influence of district-level or principal supervisory leadership (what Bryk described as “local leadership”) on the principal, his treatment of its influence on the operational aspects of a principal’s work lacks specificity and texture. While Lehigh ES’s systemic dysfunction and challenges in change management have been difficult to navigate, the support from the district and my immediate supervisor has made the difference. It has enabled me to understand the power of “local leadership” to influence a principal’s work. The leadership of a school does not end with the woman (or man) in the principal’s office. There are other players that influence the work of the principal, and the collaboration of school-level and district-level/CMO leadership should be indicated as an important factor in school improvement.

In my role as a leader of a challenging school, I have the support of my instructional superintendent. He is aware of my vision for my school and supports my efforts to bring that vision to fruition. I have a great understanding of how the lack of district-level/CMO support can significantly hinder one’s ability to lead. In my current setting, the principal’s office is seen not only as a place to allow the principal to make decisions, but also a place that allows space for thought partners and learning influences that can benefit one’s leadership.
Stakeholder Influence 2: The Community

**Reality:** Community challenges are reflective of systemic inequities beyond my control. Bryk’s (2010) work on the five essentials for school improvement highlighted the effectiveness of all components working within a school; however, the basic conditions must exist for this work to occur. He affirmed that “differences among neighborhoods in their bonding and bridging social capital help explain why their essential supports were more likely to develop in some neighborhoods than others” (Bryk, 2010, p. 29). Although the prospects for meaningful change are evident in my school’s improvements, the reality is that the odds are stacked against us.

My current school community has had a generational history of violence and underperformance. Although many of the problems from last year were school-based challenges that could be mitigated with strong leadership, the problems my school currently faces are “a result of the social, political, and economic context in which schools are rooted” (Nieto, 2003, p. 19). My school has had a number of men and women who occupied the principal’s office but were not successful in significantly impacting school improvement and sustainable change. It could be reasonable to believe that each person in the principal’s office at the helm of the school did not have the necessary leadership skills to turn it around. However, I am sure each predecessor had strengths that could have possibly contributed to a marginal level of school success. What has made this school a miserably failing one for the past three decades? Why have the others who sat in my office not been successful? Why did everyone before me fail to significantly improve student achievement? My school has had great difficulty maintaining consistent leadership and has a history of underachievement and performance that no one within the
past 30 years has been able to change. This is a harsh reality of the urban school principalship in a school situated within a concentrated pocket of poverty.

Like others who have studied urban schools, Bryk (2010) found that “the proportion of children who were living under extraordinary circumstances—neglect and abuse, homeless, foster care, domestic violence—also created a significant barrier to improvement in some schools” (p. 29). Bryk’s description of “extraordinary circumstances” is a description of the lived experiences of the large majority of my elementary school–age students (p. 29). He claims that the potential for success is significantly limited in these environments:

The odds of school stagnation soared when a concentration of these students appeared in the same place. On balance, schools are principally about teaching and learning, not solving all of the social problems of a community. However, when palpable personal and social needs walk through the doors every day, school staff can’t be expected to ignore those needs. Our evidence suggests that when the proportion of those needs remains high and pressing, the capacity of a school staff to sustain attention to developing the five essential supports falls by the wayside. A few schools managed to succeed under these circumstances, but most did not. (Bryk, 2010, p. 29)

My students are products of a community of generational poverty. They have significant challenges within their homes and within the neighborhood. Within a ten-day period my school had to be put on lockdown due to gunfire across the street from school. I worry daily about the possibility of having to evacuate them from the playground due to gunfire. My students are often in unsafe homes as well as in unsafe areas and spaces outside of school. Some worry about when they will get their next meal when school is not open. These are serious challenges reflective of their circumstances that impact their ability to learn.
Although the forecast for school improvement is seemingly bleak based on my school’s circumstances, I can see the beginning of change occurring. I know that making changes within the school is the start of school improvement. It is my hope that in a few years, our influence may trickle out to the community. In my own leadership, I think it is important for me to recognize that the community challenges are rooted in a systemic history of poverty and community violence that impacts my students’ lived experiences. Understanding their challenges and the neighborhood context helps me as a leader to support my staff in addressing my students’ needs and also to develop realistic expectations for community engagement.

**Stakeholder Influence 3: Parents**

**Reality: Parents are products of their lived experiences.** The history of generational poverty impacts parents’ perspectives on the importance of school and how they view our efforts to support their children. Many of my students’ parents are facing systemic challenges. Many of my students’ parents do not have jobs, some are in transitional housing/shelters due to their own challenging situations and experiences, and some are dealing with the loss of multiple loved ones due to gun violence within the community. Many of them do not have stability in their own lives. This trickles down to my students.

My students and families are products of generational poverty. “It is no secret,” wrote Dyson (2009), “that concentrated poverty does more than undermine academic success and good health; since there is a strong relationship between education and employment, and quality of life, it keeps the poor from better paying jobs that might
interrupt a vicious cycle of poverty” (p. 248). In a 100% African-American community with 97% of my parents receiving some form of public assistance, the stakes are extremely high for my students. It is difficult to wrestle with the idea that my students’ lives are at stake because of their school dependency and the odds that are stacked against them. Concentrated poverty in itself greatly “stifles the academic success of black children” (Dyson, 2009, p. 247).

Through my experiences in my current setting, I realize that many parents are just trying to survive. They are dealing with numerous stressors in their own lives that impact how they view the importance of school. Their vision of school as a “social equalizer” is too long-term a goal for them to envision for their children (Staiger, 2006, pp. 6–7). My students’ parents are living day to day just trying to make it with limited resources. Education as a means to change their generational trajectory through the empowerment of their children is a dream that is too abstract and remote for many of them to conceptualize and process. Their disengagement should not be attributed to a lack of interest but rather to their prioritization of other needs, responsibilities, and obligations. Establishing relational trust in such a challenging community is a slow process.

**Stakeholder Influence 4: Teachers**

**Reality:** Teachers need support in dealing with such systemic community challenges. Bryk (2010) pointed out that “schools are principally about teaching and learning, not solving all of the social problems of a community” (p. 29). The structures within most schools support this idea, and the large majority of teachers do not have the support to manage such challenges and adverse conditions. However, “social problems”
in my school plague and impede the work of teachers and school staff in improving student outcomes. Much of what teachers experience in high-needs environments like Lehigh Elementary School is way beyond the scope of what they have learned in their background, education, and training to become teachers. As Nieto (2003) wrote:

A simple focus on teaching practices or on technical aspects of curriculum development are inadequate to address the complex problems of education. While vital and necessary, these things are insufficient, especially if we mean to change the outlook for children who are the most poorly served by public schools. Teachers also need to elaborate a more critical approach to education so that they may understand the context in which their work takes place and to learn to think strategically about how to change not only the context of their own classroom but also the broader context of what it means to teach. (Nieto, 2003, p. 20)

What does it mean to teach in my school? It means that we might need to provide students with food to take home over a long weekend or a school break. It means we take students to get physicals completed in order to join sports teams with their parents’ permission. It means we test students for hearing and vision impairments when we see there might be some learning challenges. It means we give students rides to sporting events in our own vehicles. It means that despite public attention to staff misconduct in schools, we give students hugs.

Teaching in a high-needs school requires supplementing the things that students may not be able to access in their homes. We, as educators, fill in the gaps. The reach of the decisions made in the principal’s office must expand to equip staff with the skills, resources, and training to support students. It also reaches to provide supplemental services and supports to families. It reaches far beyond the instructional scope because such a stretch is necessary. Bryk (2010) wrote that this work is necessary and cannot be
ignored: “When palpable personal and social needs walk through doors every day, school staff can’t be expected to ignore those needs” (p. 29).

In my current school setting, I have a mental health support team, additional social workers, deans, and additional support staff to assist with meeting students’ needs. In addition, we provide training and support to teachers as well as coaching to support them in navigating challenges related to students’ needs that are beyond the instructional realm. However, our needs as a school are so overwhelmingly vast that all of the services still are not enough. I wonder about the sustainability of such a comprehensive school model. Every year budget cuts impact schools and the longevity of such a staffing model is unrealistic. Last year when I had to complete my budget I barely made ends meet in order to afford the staffing model with the additional yet necessary resources. As Ladson-Billings (2009) noted, “If students are not healthy enough to take advantage of what schools have to offer, what difference does the reading method or math approach matter?” (p. 232).

In the Principal’s Office: Reflections on Leadership

My second sub-question from my second research question (How does the use of a framework for successful schools help me to further develop my understanding of my leadership?) has helped me to understand how the infrastructure of the school has influenced how I understand my leadership. In examining my leadership, I consider the actions I took to make changes in my first year in a new school setting as well as the actions I begin to take in starting my second year in the school.
My experience as principal in the two different settings suggests to me that what is not acknowledged in Bryk’s (2010) work are two fundamental understandings: one is that the extent to which leadership is able to support change has everything to do with support coming from school or district administration for the leadership of the principal; the other is that the basic strength of the other four factors shapes leadership priorities so that when all four are weak, the leadership challenge can simply be beyond the scope of the individual leadership.

In my reflections on my leadership, I can see connections between the differences in the strength of Bryk’s (2010) five essential supports for school improvement in my first principalship in comparison to my current principalship. My first principalship provided me with the opportunity to build a school from the ground up and to establish systems and structures in alignment with the components that Bryk’s work suggested are essential to a school’s improvement. We had a robust curriculum, a dedicated and supportive staff, and multiple learning opportunities for teachers to improve and refine their practice. It was a school that was developed with a clear vision and plan for students’ success. However, this plan was thwarted by the rapid school growth from 330 to 990 students, the addition of another grade level and the challenges that come with creating and developing a middle school, relocation, and the addition of numerous staff members. Each successive year the school expanded and the attention to the vision was increasingly blurred. The resulting instability significantly impacted the school’s reputation and the relational trust that was established with families.

Each year the assessment and evaluation of my leadership also declined. Although I had many additional responsibilities due to the CMO’s negligence, my leadership was
measured using a school effectiveness rubric that was used to measure every school in the entire school district. This tool did not account for or quantify the impact of the growth, changes, and nuances around the opening of a brand new school. Although I had numerous successes, small wins, and a staff and parent community that supported and believed in my work, my ratings did not reflect the magnitude and scope of my work as a principal. Initially, I was not concerned about the ratings. I loved my school and wanted to remain a constant fixture within my community, especially considering all of the growth and changes that my teachers, students, and staff endured over the years. However, the years of being unsupported and constantly thrust at the forefront of managing leadership challenges that were outside of the scope of my anticipated work took its toll on my leadership. I was sacrificing my personal well-being, my reputation as a leader, and my own ability to truly focus on school improvement for the sake of remaining at the helm of my school. While all of the essential supports were in place, my efforts to grow the strength of each was limited.

When I resigned from my first principalship, four of Bryk’s (2010) five essentials to school improvement were in place. The essentials for school improvement were not perfect and would need modification and further development after all of the transitions that occurred during my tenure. The next school leader would be able to build upon and strengthen the systems that were already in place.

When I entered my current principalship, none of the structures and systems highlighted in Bryk’s (2010) work were evident. There was mass chaos and vitriolic adult behavior that fueled the school’s dysfunction. Although I had built a school from the ground up and thought I could take on any school leadership role, I did not have the
experience of entering a new school as an outsider and inheriting staff members who were not in alignment with my vision. I was now charged with leading a school without a vision and, due to its historic underperformance, with a negative reputation. I had a mammoth task on my hands. My evaluation ratings over the course of my leadership tenure in my current school setting (see Table 5.1) highlight the areas in which time and the school district’s support for my efforts have come together to suggest that the reputation of Lehigh may be changing.
Table 5.1: My Leadership Evaluation in Comparison to Bryk’s Five Essential Supports for School Improvement in My Current School

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<td>Operations</td>
<td>3 (effective)</td>
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<td>Leadership as the Driver of Change</td>
<td>Personal Leadership</td>
<td>4 (highly effective)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong Parent–Community–School Ties</td>
<td>Family Engagement</td>
<td>3 (effective)</td>
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Placing Bryk’s framework in juxtaposition with my own district’s school leader evaluation system has helped me further develop my understanding of my leadership and leadership more generally.
Lesson 1: Talented Teachers and a High-Quality Staff Are the Most Important Aspects of a School’s Composition

My experiences in both school settings have taught me the importance of quality teachers in a school. It is the difference between leading a school that will fall apart when you are not around to manage it versus leading a school that can thrive and grow on its own. How teachers think about their students and their mindsets about the ability of their students to learn is a critical component of strong teaching practice (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

It is clear to me now that even though I am recognized as a strong leader (as indicated in Table 5.1), the instructional capacity of my school will not improve until better teachers who are in alignment with the school’s vision are in place. The school environment I entered last year was deplorable and not focused on students’ success. We had some strong teachers and staff members, but the others were very toxic and crippling to the school. At the halfway mark of the current school year, I have already improved outcomes for students in mathematics by almost doubling where my school’s performance level ended last year (38% of students making one year of growth) to date (70% of students on track to make one year of growth).

My school district’s evaluation system is rigorous and allows for underperforming teachers to be moved out after one year, so that has allowed me the opportunity to change my staffing model rapidly and strategically. I spent my first year figuring out which teachers I could support and grow and which would need to move on. At the start of my second year, I was able to turn over 60% of my staff members so that I could improve instructional practice in my school. By improving the quality of the teaching staff, I was
able to improve instructional practice in my school. By improving the quality of the teaching staff, I was able to improve in other areas such as school culture.

The rating “minimally effective” is designated for all three evaluation periods and is reflective of the lack of instructional guidance, systems, and accountability indicated in Table 5.1. When I arrived, no instructional systems or structures were in place. By implementing a complete overhaul of the custodial team and hiring two deans to lead our school culture work, I was able to improve my school’s overall climate and culture.

With this overhaul, I was also focusing on instructional guidance because I have found it is the most difficult aspect to improve if not considered in respect to teacher quality. Supporting staff to improve their practice cannot occur if they are not open to feedback, not aligned with the school’s vision, and do not work and make decisions in the best interest of students. Now I am seeing dramatic changes. For example, I am most proud of the work of my special education team. One of my students had not shown any growth in reading level in his five years at the school. From the beginning of this current school year to the middle of the year testing, he grew four reading levels. I am confident that by the end of this current school year or the beginning of the 2017–18 school year, I will see a shift in the ratings for the Instructional Guidance domain. The foundation for teacher reflection and learning is in place and I now have willing teachers who are aligned with my school’s mission.

Lesson 2: Not All Title I Schools Are the Same

Schools use Title I status as a way to indicate the socio-economic standing of a student population. Many schools are designated as having large Title I student populations as if
this is a homogeneous group of students who face the same challenges academically and socially. This is a huge misconception. In Chapter 2, I referenced Comer’s (1999) point regarding students in low-income communities as dependent on their schools for their academic and socio-emotional growth and development as well as their basic needs. All of these factors impact one’s understanding of the Title I designation and what that means for students and their families. My first principalship averaged an 85% Title I student population and my current school population is at 100%. Such high Title I percentages do not automatically indicate that the two different student populations are the same. In fact, the two populations were very different; and while there were some similarities, there was a vast difference in the concentration of “school-dependent” students in one environment in comparison to the other.

Some low-income communities have working-class families that cannot make ends meet, and thus they earn the Title I status. Others in this category are in crime-infested and underdeveloped communities that expose students to experiences that significantly impact their socio-emotional wellness and growth. My school is the latter. In my current setting, students are dependent upon the school for food, school supplies, before- and after-school care, and additional services (we provide supper, eye and dental exams, physicals for elementary athletics, and uniforms). We do not have a grocery store in the neighborhood. The closest grocery store is in a neighboring county and requires transportation to access. Ward 8, the area in which my school is located, has approximately 80,000 residents. However, there is only one supermarket in Ward 8. By contrast, another area of the city, Ward 6, is home to about 65,000 residents and includes 9 supermarkets. Food options in my school community are limited to fast food restaurants
and corner stores. Flourishing businesses and restaurants outside of check-cashing places, liquor stores, corner stores, and fast food restaurants are within a 15 to 20–minute drive in outside neighborhoods and communities.

My first school setting had some students in need of services, but the majority of students’ parents figured out ways to provide what they needed. If they struggled and saved to purchase what kids needed, we at the school did not know about it. In my current school, we do not have enough services to provide and we try to access as many resources as we can to support our students and their families. The level of poverty in my current school setting is concentrated within the school and the neighborhood. There are students struggling academically, but many also struggle socio-emotionally due to experiences with trauma, stress, abuse, and neglect.

Most urban schools have homeless students and students in foster care. I now have students who have witnessed home invasions leading to drug arrests, students who witnessed parents using guns to bring order to their households, and students who have been sexually abused for money. I have large numbers of students who are aware that their fathers were shot and killed. The students can share detailed stories about parts of the neighborhood you should not visit at night and why. I have students with parents who are on drugs and do not feed them over weekends and school breaks.

Title I status does not equate to the same lived experiences for students. The label is a distinction that does not mean the same thing in every school community. It is a failed attempt at being able to quantify the socioeconomic status of a school community as a way to determine the circumstances in which students are living. However, the idea of poverty is not synonymous with one standard way of living for students. This term
must be disaggregated in some way in order to get a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of what issues plague our most challenging school environments.

In claiming that “schools are principally about teaching and learning, not solving all the social problems of a community” (p. 29), Bryk (2010) seems to have ignored the fact that our society has laid this burden on schools. By neglecting to acknowledge that the responsibility of reform is placed on schools rather than on reform efforts by those with the power to make more informed decisions regarding funding and support for struggling schools, urban students are “forced to live life on the margins of society, both inside and outside of school” (Jackson & McDermott, 2012, p. 31). As Dyson (2009) noted, “we are thus able to decry the circumstances of the poor while assuming we had nothing to do with their plight” (p. 243).

There is an overwhelming amount of need in the social-emotional realm for students in high-poverty environments, and the implication is that such school environments affect the school and teachers’ ability to focus on meeting students’ academic needs. Bryk (2010) concluded his research by noting that “when the proportion of these needs remain high and pressing, the capacity of a school staff to sustain attention to developing the five essential supports falls to the wayside” (p. 29). According to Bryk, the majority of schools in these circumstances do not succeed. This majority translates into too many young lives left in peril and despair.

My experiences as a principal in my first school did not expose me to the myriad socio-emotional student challenges I face in my current setting. I had students with challenges, but the number of students in more significantly traumatic situations was low and not nearly of the magnitude of what I face in my current setting. Comparing schools
as Title I and designating them as similar by that measure is a problematic way of normalizing and neutralizing the possible diversity of a school population. Some considerations for exposure to trauma or some other more in-depth measures of the lived experiences of students should be considered as a way to highlight and categorize the diversity of a school population. This would enable a more strategic approach to providing resources to school leaders and to the schools themselves so as to support a school’s success.

**Lesson 3: Relational Trust Is at the Heart of School Improvement**

Although not listed as one of the five essentials to school improvement, Bryk (2010) situated relational trust within schools as essential to all aspects of school improvement (p. 27). He asserted that “cultivating teacher buy-in and commitment” in order to maintain “cultural change” within a school is essential to developing strong parent–family–community ties, building professional capacity, and developing a student-centered learning environment (Bryk, 2010, p. 27).

In my first principalship, I was able to benefit from developing a strong ethos of relational trust with teachers and parents. It was the reason why staff members would go above and beyond to support our school’s instructional model, extracurricular activities, and continual growth, changes, and challenges. Both teachers and parents believed in the school’s vision.

My current school environment was an example of the impact of low trust within a school. As Bryk (2010) found, “low trust is linked to weaker developments across the organizational supports” (p. 27). The absence of the instructional supports within the
school community perpetuated low levels of trust among staff and families. In my second year as principal, I can see the beginning of relational trust being cultivated through my leadership and the retention of strong teachers. The significant change in staffing to move out low performers and to retain high-performing staff coupled with higher expectations for all stakeholders has created the conditions for relational trust to grow. Teachers are invested in school committees and activities, which, in turn, speaks to the development of a culture in which teachers “see their behavior as advancing [the school’s] vision” (Bryk, 2010, p. 27).

**Lesson 4: Leadership IS the Driver of Change**

Bryk’s (2010) work highlighted the importance of leadership as a critical and vital component of change within a school. Strong leadership is highlighted as essential to school improvement. He affirmed that “school leaders influence local activity around core instructional programs, supplemental academic and social supports, and the hiring and development of staff. They establish strategic priorities for using resources and buffer externalities that might distract from coherent reform” (Bryk, 2010, p. 25).

However, as noted earlier, Bryk did not take into account the “externalities” that may impact a principal’s effectiveness. District initiatives, supervisory support, and principal coaching also impact a principal’s effectiveness in driving change within a school community. Principal support and appropriate supervision is an important factor to consider when examining leadership practice.

In today’s schools, the urban school principal tenure is often too short-lived in order to make schools successful and changes sustainable. I wonder if the external factors
and influence create realities and challenges that, within each individual school context, can be insurmountable for some, causing them to leave. If, for example, the rise and fall of student test scores are the essential measure of a school’s success and a school like my current school context has historically underperformed for numerous years, it is highly likely that no one person can turn around the school’s performance. I believe that in such situations, more radical approaches to school reform and leadership should take place in order to enact change. As Ladson-Billings (2009) affirmed, “the problem is rooted in how we think—about the social contexts, about the students, about the curriculum, and about instruction” (p. 163).

Bryk’s (2010) study of leadership highlighted internal criteria for success, but did not dig into the differences in respective schools that may account for why some schools thrive and beat the odds and others do not. While we know numerous theories of effective leadership practices in schools, we know these stories only as pockets of success—as beacons of hope that we attempt to use to guide and inspire us in our practice. However, as Bryk did point out, “unless we understand more deeply the dynamics of school stagnation, especially in our most neglected communities, we seem bound to repeat the failures of the past” (p. 30).

During my five and a half years as a principal, I have learned countless lessons about myself as a leader, about how people manage and deal with change, and about how my ability to navigate my context influences my sense-making of my experiences. Through my self-study, I believe I have unearthed more questions and wonderings about leadership and the experiences urban principals have that may or may not impact their work.
In this chapter, I have provided a comparison of experiences in both of my school settings that have influenced my leadership and decision-making as a principal. Through my numerous leadership experiences, I have captured learnings about external conditions, supervisors that influence the principal’s effectiveness, key community players, and the power of parental collaboration in schools. Despite the unique challenges within my current school context, I am still hopeful of the possibilities to influence, change, and improve students’ academic outcomes.

I have learned a great deal about what it takes to lead schools. George et al. (2011) asserted that real leadership begins with an understanding of one’s own experiences. They affirmed that “your life story provides the context for your experiences, and through it, you can find the inspiration to make an impact in the world” (George et al., 2011, p. 165). My experiences, whether considered successes or challenges (or a combination of both), have provided me with opportunities to learn about myself as a leader and to unpack the context of what is behind my role as principal within each unique setting.

The office of the principal is a place where courage, authenticity, relationship building, and a strong vision all must shape the actions and decision-making of the principal. There is no one skill set or one set of leadership characteristics that equates to a principal’s success. It is a position that requires self-reflection, analysis of the decision-making processes, and sense-making of one’s own context in order to decide on next steps. I have come to understand that a leader does not enable success alone. Effective leadership practice continues to evolve, change, and grow. It is a fluid role that requires a multitude of skills, qualities, and professional as well as personal attributes. There is no
one prototype that will meet success when crossing the threshold into the principal’s office. Each leadership role in each unique setting is different, and every new year requires a new and more refined set of leadership skills.

Self-reflection is at the heart of making sense of leadership in action and the process of improving schools. It is through sharing my experiences and lessons that I am able to contribute to some sense-making and understanding of the complexity of the urban school principalship. Being the woman in the principal’s office has been a challenging and extremely complex leadership endeavor that has provided me with numerous learning experiences and life lessons that shape and influence my practice as an educator. It is through my experiences that I hope to contribute to a better perspective on the enigmatic role of the urban school principalship in today’s most troubled school communities.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study highlights the lived experiences of the principalship through a firsthand account of my successes and challenges over the course of five and a half–year period in two different school settings. The two school settings provided opportunities for leadership challenges, reflection, and growth in my practice. The findings were generated from considering the key players and stakeholders that influenced my work as well as the supports and limitations that influenced my experiences in both settings. Each research question was explored through analysis and sense-making of the past experiences as a means of discovering how those experiences influence my current practice. This chapter extends the analysis and findings from Chapter 5 and, based on Bryk’s (2010) Five Essential Supports for School Improvement as well as my leadership experiences, also summarizes conclusions and key takeaways.

This chapter is organized into four sections: (a) new understandings of urban school leadership based on my research questions and relevant literature highlighted in Chapter 2; (b) charter schools and traditional public school leadership; (c) implications for future research and practice; and (d) summary and concluding statements.

New Understandings of the Urban School Leadership

Learning Communities Matter

Through my professional experiences both in my role as principal and my role as a doctoral student in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, I realize the dire need for reflection on one’s own leadership. I remember when I was in my third year as a
principal and I presented a leadership challenge to my colleagues in one of our classes. At the end of the consultancy simulation, I was given two recommendations: create a second-order change to completely revamp my leadership structure, or move on to another leadership role in another organization/school. My colleagues recognized the impossible task of school leadership and improvement that I was faced with in my first principalship. They could see that it was a no-win situation before I did. I took their advice and, to start my fourth year, implemented the second-order change. By the end of that year, I resigned.

I am fortunate that through the majority of my time as a principal I have been in learning communities that have fostered and cultivated reflection as a natural part of the leadership process. My three years as a member of Penn’s learning community have provided me with a lifetime of thought partners on whom I can lean and to whom I can reach out in order to make sense of my challenges and consider new and different approaches to tackle those challenges. I have a rich learning community that I can draw from. I am constantly in a state of reflection during morning and afternoon commutes, writing emails and typing up informal and formal observation feedback on weekends, and often thinking about how I might have ended a parent meeting. My dissertation process was one long reflection on leadership. Through narrating my story, I have been able to examine my strengths and areas for growth. I have been able to reimagine my work in different ways. I am thankful for this leadership journey and the added value it has brought to my practice. However, I know that there are many leaders in urban schools all over this country with limited resources, supports, and thought partners who could shape
and influence their work, and I wonder whether there are ways to enable them to find opportunities for such support.

**Leadership Is Imperfect Work**

Bryk (2010) identified five essential supports for school improvement: (a) Leadership that Drives Change, (b) Instructional Guidance Systems, (c) Professional Capacity, (d) a Student-Centered Learning Climate, and (e) Strong Parent–Community–School Ties. Key to the success of the five supports, he identifies relational trust. Bryk situated a principal as the manager of complex systems—a leader who is capable of navigating all school challenges and changes in an effective way—indicating that the principalship is a healthy balance of technical and instructional skills. This model of a perfect principal is an unrealistic and unattainable one for leaders in today’s urban schools. There is no one way to lead, so the principalship is inherently imperfect. Mistakes will be made. Challenges will be overwhelming. However, mistakes provide opportunities for growth and self-reflection.

Bryk’s (2010) emphasis on the “leader” as the driver of change does not take into account the fact the leader is one component of a school’s success, albeit essential; but there are many “externalities” that ultimately influence and impact school leadership. While Bryk’s five essential supports are critical, what the research fails to show is that each of these signifies and embrace a reality in many high-poverty urban schools that is so complex that one leader in the principal’s office cannot be expected to absorb, buffer, and navigate it alone. The five essential supports then should be read as critical structures that enable a school’s success, but, because leadership is acknowledged as the driver of
change, attention must be given to leadership development and self-reflection as it specifically relates to the growth and sustenance of the principal. Without some serious consideration of the magnitude for buffering required in specific settings and the leader’s capacity to provide the buffering, many of the most needy schools will continue to fail.

Bryk’s (2010) work focuses on unpacking school experiences in urban schools to provide a formula to describe school improvement. It leaves the schools with heavy concentrations of poverty as outliers on the fringes of solutions and most likely to fail rather than positioning them as integral to developing more comprehensive understandings of the dynamics in play when some schools succeed and others fail. As Friere (2000) asserted, in order to understand systemic oppression we need to “critically recognize its causes” in order to create new solutions (p. 47).

Bryk’s (2010) work does not begin to unpack the complex context of schools with concentrations of poverty. As these schools are left out of the dialogue for change and the development of a formula of success, we further isolate urban school leaders in schools with concentrations of poverty and further marginalize the students they serve. The dearth of research specifically focused on improving schools in concentrated neighborhoods with poverty leaves leaders and those on the front line in these schools without more public and meaningful strategies for understanding what it takes to enact change. More than ever, we need an understanding of what’s at play and what we can do in those schools—those students’ lives depend on it.

As a principal working in such circumstances, I seek to bring truth to light and act as a voice for my school community. I do not have all of the solutions but it is my moral responsibility as an educator and a citizen in this nation to try my best to do so. Leaders
like me in struggling schools in poverty-stricken communities that have generationally underperformed need to be a part of the dialogue and conversations about solutions—and so should researchers and all those who invest time and energy into understanding schools. We need authentic and thoughtful ideas, conversations, and perspectives about how to make improvements. From an educator’s standpoint, it is not acceptable to acknowledge the trajectory of failure of young people in a community imploding with social ills and accept their circumstances as inevitable. We all need to be a part of the solutions and we need to see their success as vital and necessary to improving our public education system.

In addition to educational research and thought partners and ideas that can help improve all urban schools, principals need safe communities of practice that provide meaningful opportunities for reflection on leadership. It is through my community of practice at Penn GSE that I had a safe space to tell my stories and make sense of my experiences. I was immersed in a healthy environment that encouraged self-reflection and challenging my thinking about my practice. I was fortunate to have that opportunity. The reality of the principalship is that it is a lonely place from which to lead. The high energy level and complex situations a principal may encounter on a daily basis can make the time for self-reflection a necessity to sustaining effective practice and sense-making of lived experiences, both good and bad. Nowhere is this more important than in the setting of a high-needs urban school.

As Jackson and McDermott (2012) have written, the history of the urban school leader has been one of “scarce support and plentiful criticism” (p. 65), and the role will continue to be challenging and enigmatic. Urban school leaders should be provided with
opportunities to be affirmed through district leaders and other principal support staff as ways to get a better understanding of their practice. Leaders need spaces to speak freely about the challenges, limitations, and community-specific truths that influence their work. They need a space to reflect and also a space to be heard. As Bryk (2010) affirmed, the space to explore questions and wonderings about how to improve schools is critical to bringing about dialogue and meaningful change: “What is really going on in these school communities, and why are the important tasks of improving schools so difficult to advance?” (p. 30). He asserts:

Asking questions, bringing evidence to bear on them, and in the process advancing public discourse about the improvement of public education is a vital role that applied social inquiry can and should fill in a technically complex and politically diverse democratic society. (Bryk, 2010, p. 30)

Perhaps opening up more doors for dialogue among urban school leaders will provide opportunities for those leaders to reflect and learn from their own practice. Spaces to ask questions and make sense of challenges can also inform superintendents and other leaders who work directly with principals so that they can understand real-time challenges that impact their ability to effectively lead. There is a great need for time and space for practitioners in the field to share leadership challenges and questions with the larger educational community of policy-makers, CMOs, and any educational entities that work directly with principals. Friere (2000) asserted that “true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them” (p. 92). This idea of solidarity—between school-level and district office personnel, superintendents, policy-makers, and the communities in which they serve, must be a
vision for education in order to enact change. The disjointed nature of the various stakeholders serving students leaves gaps in the conversations and narrative regarding real sustainable and replicable urban school improvement. As Delpit (2006) wrote:

By seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one’s own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color, and to listen, no, to hear what they say. I suggest that the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet seen in the educational realm. (p. 47)

We must bring conversations about school improvement to the table with a diverse and unified cross section of leaders and also members of the community working together to enact change. We must be willing to engage in brutally honest conversations about what is going on in schools—suspending judgment, blame, and displacement of responsibility on others. We are all complicit in the problem if we do not attempt to fully understand and address it. As Dyson (2009) pointed out, “we are thus able to decry the circumstances of the poor while assuming ourselves that we had nothing to do with their plight” (p. 243). Until we all own our collective responsibility toward the improvement of urban schools, we are all a part of the problem.

Charter School Leadership and Traditional Public School Leadership

The controversy surrounding charter schools and traditional public schools positions one model being better than the other. However, each school type has its strengths and areas for improvement.

In my first principalship, all of Bryk’s (2010) essentials were in place. I had evidence of all of Bryk’s five essentials for school improvement, and my efforts to be
successful were hindered by my CMO. The autonomy of my charter school principalship was a gift and a curse. It provided me with the opportunity to have an innovative curricular model and to create meaningful and authentic learning experiences for students. As is typical of Charter schools functioning in public school districts throughout the country (Frye, 2012), we were not bound by the metrics and prescribed learning plans from Baltimore City Public Schools. However, the accountability for assuming the responsibility for the building maintenance and operational aspects of the school’s function that is required by law of a school district or CMO was not monitored by the district, and neither was the evaluation of my work. In what was a clear conflict of interest, I was expected to be a learner and also to be able to advocate for the supports I needed. I could not truly advocate for what I needed without jeopardizing my own professional reputation and evaluation outcomes within the district. With pushback and attempts to manage comes the risk of retaliation.

In my current traditional public school setting, there are systems and protocols for managing facilities and human resources; there is also an established curriculum. I am not responsible for facilities maintenance, transportation, or any other school operational aspects. These responsibilities are managed by the school district. Although there is a set curriculum, there is some room for curricular modifications to meet the unique needs of a specific school. There is structure, but the structure does not wholly thwart efforts toward innovation and making reasonable changes based on individual school needs.

In addition to structures for operations, there are also structures for leadership supervision and evaluation in the public school. Instructional superintendents are required to visit schools on a bi-weekly basis (at minimum). They are expected to provide
coaching support to principals and to visit schools regularly to get firsthand accounts of the school’s climate and the quality of instructional practice. There are also clear structures for formal evaluations. Principals complete self-reflections and instructional superintendents complete leadership narratives that they share in conferences with principals twice per year.

I have had the opportunity to regularly meet with my instructional superintendent about my school’s challenges and my efforts to make change. He is able to walk through my school building and see the work I am doing. While a cursory look at my school’s data would indicate that my school is a failing, low-performing environment without any chances for success, all of Bryk’s (2010) five essentials for school improvement are now in place—and we expect that we will begin to see gains in student achievement.

Both charter schools and traditional public schools need strong leadership. Principals in both environments can benefit from the same conditions—an opportunity to lead, learn, and be supported in their work to improve their schools. There are low-functioning traditional schools and charter schools in urban communities in every city. Some considerations should be made to examine the supports for principals in charter settings that may have less accountability for principal support. In addition, leadership coaching and experiences should be made readily available to all principals in charter and traditional schools. The responsibility of improving schools should not fall solely on the shoulders of principals. There should be genuine commitment from administration in both charter and public settings to supporting principals to improve their practice. In the long run, such support accrues to the students and their teachers and lifts the school in the eyes of the community.
Implications for Future Research and Practice

This study provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my leadership experiences, successes, and challenges as an urban school principal and validated for me the importance of self-reflection and having a valuable framework like Bryk’s (2010) available for examining structures and practice within schools. This study also provides an autoethnographic view into two principalships—one in a charter school and one in a traditional public school setting. It highlights the challenges in a school that Bryk (2010) characterized as a school where attaining real school improvement, due to the extremity of the adverse conditions of the school’s context, may not be possible. It is now clear to me that more consideration should be given to the study of the principalship and the supports that are needed to enable principals to lead toward school improvement in all urban school environments, especially environments where the odds are heavily stacked against their success. Efforts must be made to support the viability of the principalship so that the principal’s office is not a revolving door opened and closed by a host of optimistic men and women making failed attempts to impact student achievement. Our students cannot afford the leadership and staff attrition, waste of time and resources, and constant churn of change at their expense. Providing authentic spaces for principals to make sense of their work could be a pathway for retaining and supporting urban principals.

I am currently in a traditional public school environment that has supported my growth as a leader. DCPS has further invested in its leadership by offering principals the opportunity to earn an Executive Master’s Program in Leadership from the McDonough
School of Business. Through their work with philanthropists, they have discounted the price of the program so that principals pay a little over 10% of the tuition in order to join the cohort. The goal of the program is to engage strong principals in a cohort model of study regarding ways to reform their schools and reflect on their practices. I think this is an innovative way to provide principals in the DCPS with opportunities to learn and grow as they lead their schools. Most recently, the program included leaders from both the traditional public school district level and also the charter school sector. The cross-sector collaboration of leaders in both settings allows for the “solidarity” that is necessary to begin the universal dialogue of urban school improvement that transcends individual school buildings and geographic location (Friere, 2000). Professional learning opportunities for principals to reflect on their practice should be made readily available for all. These communities of practice should be a safe space for principals to be vulnerable and open to learn with colleagues and to engage in sense-making about their experiences and challenges. Developing such communities of authentic learning and practice could lead to a national model of school reform and principal empowerment toward reflection, self-understanding, and leadership capacity building.

One major question I am considering as a result of my study is: How can we provide spaces to share the lived experiences of principals with policy-makers, district-level leadership, and CMOs? There are too many policy-makers, business-owners-turned-charter-school-operators, and other professionals seeking education as an alternative enterprise. For the most part, they seem to be oblivious to the real challenges that urban schools face. The practitioner’s voice is muted or turned low when decisions are being made that directly impact the work of the principal. More opportunities to share practice
in conjunction with theory must be made available so that sense-making about the school context and the challenges of individual schools can be taken into account when fiscal decisions and policy modifications are made. As Delpit (2006) wrote, “we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to be turned upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness. In other words, we must become ethnographers in the true sense” (p. 47).

Another consideration for further study would be to explore the perspective on the perceived understanding of the principalship from the perspective of those who aspire to become leaders and have a principal’s office of their own. What experiences will those preparing to take the helm of a school have that will prepare them for the challenges they will face? How will they learn to unpack and understand their unique school challenges? Will they have the professional development and a safe space to reflect? How will they be supported in their work? If learning about the lived experiences of a principal is challenging and highly complex, how do we prepare emerging leaders to shape their understanding of what lies ahead? Given what we know about the complexity of the principalship, how can we learn from the challenges and better prepare our leaders? What can be done to support new principals in learning from their successes and challenges in order to inform their leadership?

The urban school principalship, by nature, is complex and enigmatic. Many have come before me and spent some time in the principal’s office attempting to improve student outcomes at Lehigh Elementary School. My study aimed to share experiences and to provide a space for reflection on leadership and decision-making as a result of lived
experiences. Through telling a story, some lessons were learned and even more questions were raised about leadership and principal support.

I am now convinced that the “viability of the principal” (Buchen, 2004, p. 81) may be sustained by creating more safe and authentic spaces for principal self-reflection and learning from their experiences.

The work of improving urban schools is too important and the matter too urgent not to try to create such spaces for educators, researchers, and policy-makers to understand and influence urban school reform efforts. As Delpit (2006) wrote about such comings-together, they “may not understand their rationales, but that in no way mitigates against the existence of these rationales or reduces our responsibility to attempt to apprehend them” (p. 47).

Those not working with students in schools directly may not fully understand the dynamics at play, but they must approach the idea of school improvement and sense-making as one that includes principals, teachers, parents, students, and those interwoven into the fabric of urban schools. Every leader in a position of authority must consider the vantage points of those working within the schools they seek to improve. There must be a way for policy-makers, superintendents, and other leaders empowered with significant decision-making power to understand the ground-level perspectives of those working in schools. As Delpit (2006) noted, “keeping the perspective that people are experts on their own lives” (p. 47) can bring a level of humility and a desire for understanding that speaks to the “indivisible solidarity” Friere (2000) identified as a necessary component of the urban school improvement dialogue (p. 92).
More authentic stories about leadership in practice should be shared to provide opportunities for more contextual learning and understanding about leadership within urban schools. It is my hope that my study will contribute to contextual seeing and sense-making regarding the number of leadership challenges an urban principal can face within any school environment—charter or traditional public school. District leaders, superintendents, and anyone in a school leadership or decision-making role—especially those who do not have the lived experiences of being a principal—can learn from seeing the work of school improvement through the lens of the principal. It is a vital lens for learning about school reform, that, as Delpit (2006) wrote, must begin with those with power in influential leadership roles:

It is those with the most power, those in the majority, who must take the greater responsibility for initiating the process. To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (p. 47)

Despite our individual roles in education—superintendent, principal, teacher, support staff, parent, community member—we all need to take responsibility for urban school reform. Students’ lives depend on the decisions we make. As Nieto (2003) pointed out, “the unfulfilled dreams of these young people—in the worst cases lives of despair—are a stain on us all, whether we are educators, parents, or simply citizens concerned with the future of public education” (p. 7). We all must take responsibility for generating questions, encouraging sense-making, and sharing learning about what it takes to lead
and improve urban schools. The solutions Tough (2016) envisioned include all educators, policy-makers, and citizens:

We need to change our policies. Fundamentally rethinking and remaking many of our entrenched institutions and practices: how we provide aid to low-income parents; how we create, fund, and manage systems of early-childhood care and education; how we train our teachers; how we discipline our students and assess their learning; and how we run our schools. These are essentially questions of public policy, and if real solutions are going to be found to the problems of disadvantaged children, these questions will need to be addressed, in a creative and committed way, by public officials at all levels—by school superintendents, school-board members, mayors, governors, and cabinet secretaries—as well by individual citizens, community groups, and philanthropists across the country. (pp. 112–113)

It is no secret that we are in the midst of an educational crisis that is engulfing our neediest students in our most struggling schools. It is very clear from many educators and researchers that there are many ideas and solutions that can lead to true urban school reform. The central issues relate to who is invited to the table, what information we use to make decisions, and how much one’s lived experiences are included in the dialogue regarding reform. These conversations require an unearthing of hidden truths and inequities in our educational systems, and recognition that some communities within our nation have been marginalized by socio-economic ills, drugs, poverty, and violence—communities that we as a nation have turned our backs on.

What do we do with “most” of the schools that do not succeed? What can we learn from the few that have and how can we replicate their efforts? Coming to the conclusion that some schools will succeed and others will not provides a bleak and grim outlook for students in schools with concentrated poverty. If schools are responsible for “teaching and learning” and not for curing social ills, but the ills walk into school doors every day, what are the solutions? We cannot accept that some schools will fail and
others will beat the odds. As we praise and note that some schools are successful and others are not, we are accepting that the community issues and problems will supersede the efforts of educators to attempt to close the achievement gap. Bryk (2010) pointed out that when the concentration of social issues is so severe, most schools do not succeed. This idea is left as a fact, a grim finding from his research that translates to hundreds of thousands of students across this nation being told to accept that they will not succeed. If schools are not responsible for curing the social ills of the world and are too overwhelmed to do so, who is responsible for these schools and these children? As Dyson (2009) pointed out, “we are not responsible for the poor and black being left behind; the local, state or federal government is at fault” (p. 243). Yet we do not have any real plans to address the numerous students living and attempting to learn against the odds. The constant ricochet or perceived responsibility from school to government, from teachers to parents, from adverse circumstances to socio-economic ills leaves us all immobilized by blame and shirking of true responsibility. Dyson (2009) described this as our ability to “confront our complicity in their long-term suffering. By being outraged, we appear compassionate. This permits us to continue to ignore the true roots of their condition” (p. 243).

I realize that the challenges I face may be insurmountable. I realize that I might be just another woman in the principal’s office. However, I believe that the work is too important, and our students’ lives depend on making sense of urban school challenges and making our best effort to figure it out. Jackson and McDermott (2012) affirmed that, although a mammoth task, it is “one that every child deserves, and one that urban leaders need to cultivate with intensity and intentionality” (p. 9). Bryk (2010) agreed that despite
the challenges school leaders face, our motivations to improve “three strikes” schools “represent our highest, most noble aspirations for our children, our schools, and systems of schools. They are ideas worth of our beliefs and action” (p. 30). This cognizance of such “aspirations” needs to be transformed from abstract and aspirational to concrete actions that significantly improve and impact these communities in ways that move them toward progress with a sense of urgency. Bryk (2010) pointed out that these aspirations are noble, yet he should describe them as necessary. We cannot leave these schools behind.

This is a heavy truth and a burden of responsibility that we all need to live with. However, truth is power. There is no time like the present for us all to take responsibility for our children and seek solutions and answers. Where can we begin to start to seek understanding and meaning? Some ideas and possible suggestions for urban school improvement may indeed be found right in the principal’s office.
APPENDIX A: NEWTON ACADEMY SCHOOL PROFILE

Newton Academy Public Charter School
School No. 318
School Profile

Welcome
School profiles present a summary of up to three years of public schoolwide data on each school in the district. They include information on principal and teacher tenure, official enrollment, student demographics, attendance, suspensions, and the school survey. This profile also reports results from the Maryland School Assessments (MSAs) for Grades 3 through 8. For more information, visit www.baltimorecityschools.org

School Information

Management Type
Charter
Grades Served
K-7

Tenure with City Schools
4 years

Total No. of Teachers
54

Enrollment
The official student enrollment is determined as of September 30 of the school year specified. (For example, enrollment for the 2015 school year that spans 2014-15 is determined on 9/30/2014.) FARMs students are those who receive free/reduced price meals at school. ELL (English language learners) students are those whose primary or home language is not English and who have been assessed to have limited English proficiency. SWD (students with disabilities) are those who have current Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). An asterisk (*) indicates the percentage for the category is <1 and the data are not reported for confidentiality reasons.

Total Student Enrollment

2015 Percentage of Enrollment by Demographic

African American
White
Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander
American Indian
Multiracial
Native Hawaiian/Other

2015 Percentage of Enrollment by Subgroup

FARMs
- FARMe
- Non-FARMe

ELL
- ELL
- Non-ELL

SWD
- SWD
- Non-SWD
Newton Academy Public Charter School
School No. 318

Attendance

Attendance rates are calculated by dividing the total number of days attended by the total number of days enrolled during the school year. Chronic absence rate is the percent of students who were absent more than 10 days, among students who were enrolled for at least 40 days during the school year. Data are for the school year ending in the calendar year indicated (i.e., "2014" indicates the 2013-14 school year).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance Rate (%)</th>
<th>Chronic Absence Rate (%)</th>
<th>Number of Student Suspensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93.1</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suspensions

The number of suspensions in a school year includes all suspension incidents and exclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Student Suspensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Survey

The annual school survey is given to students in grades 3 to 12, all school-based staff, and parents of students in pre-K to grade 12. Three separate indices were calculated that represent a combination of student, staff, and parent reports. They reflect key measures of school climate as defined by the National School Climate Center. Data are not reported when any of the three groups had 5 or fewer respondents, or if the response rates for students or staff were less than 30%. The Physical Security Index measures the extent to which students and staff feel safe in a school building; parents feel that their child is safe, and students feel safe when their school is free of weapons. The Respectful Relationships index measures the extent to which students and staff report that there are respectful relationships among students and between students and staff at their school. The School Connectedness Index, which was introduced in 2012-13, measures the extent to which students and staff feel they belong at the school, that parents feel welcome, that staff and parents work closely to meet student needs, and that the administration is responsive to parent and staff concerns. Data are for the school year ending in the calendar year indicated (i.e., "2014" indicates the 2013-14 school year).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Security Index</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>79.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respectful Relationships Index</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Connectedness Index</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*New for 2013*
Newton Academy Public Charter School  
School No. 318

MSA Results

Numbers in parentheses represent the number of students who took each test. Groups are color coded and categorized by basic, proficient, and advanced performance. "% proficient or advanced" indicates the total percentage of students scoring either proficient or advanced on the MSA. From 2014-15 the MSA was replaced by the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) assessment, aligned to Maryland’s College and Career-Ready Standards implemented in 2014. Until 2014, the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) was administered in the spring of each year to all students in grades 3 to 8. It assessed student achievement in both math and reading. By spring 2014, the MSAs did not align with the teaching and learning students experienced during the school year, as a student transferred to curriculum aligned to new statewide standards. Data are for the school year ending in the calendar year indicated (i.e., "2014" indicates the 2013-14 school year).

**Mathematics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(120 Students) (292 Students) (472 Students)

% proficient or advanced: 76% (2012), 62% (2013), 54% (2014)

**Reading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(123 Students) (292 Students) (452 Students)

% proficient or advanced: 72% (2012), 71% (2013), 68% (2014)

**Performance Percentage by Grade**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Denotes subgroup with fewer than 10 students who took the test. Blank entries indicate there are no data to report.
Newton Academy Public Charter School  
School No. 318

MSA Comparison (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MATHEMATICS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Percentage by Subgroup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARMs</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>READING</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Percentage by Subgroup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARMs</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWD</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Performance Percentage by Demographic |       |            |          |
|                                      | 2012  | 2013       | 2014     |
| African American                     | 24    | 58         | 18       |
| White                                |       | *          | *        |
| Hispanic                             |       | *          | *        |
| Asian / Pacific Island               |       | *          | *        |
| American Indian                      |       | *          | *        |
| Multiracial                          |       | *          | *        |
| Native Hawaiian / Other              |       | *          | *        |

* Denotes subgroup with fewer than 10 students who took the test. Blank entries indicate there is no data to report.
APPENDIX B: FAQ TEMPORARY BUILDING LOCATION DOCUMENT

What is the plan for behavior issues due to 330 new students? Why are we growing so fast?

The plan for expansion has not changed. Newton Academy’s charter was written so that the student body would increase each of the first three years until we reach our limit of 990 students. The behavioral concerns will be addressed in the same manner as with the original 330 students. There will remain a strong school family connection, implementation of the first six weeks of school routines and standards, staff modeling and expectations of high academic and behavioral standards, parent orientation meetings, and ensuring the current students, staff, and families model the culture we have worked to develop this year. Parents need to keep in mind that to provide the quality of education we need to provide and parents desire we need 990 students to support the quality.

Will most of the teachers move to the new location?

The staff members were given the opportunity to visit the temporary location and give input with regard to the decision. Based on a survey of teacher intentions for the upcoming school year, it appears that all the staff member’s intent to return to the school.

What is the timeframe for acceptance of the temporary location?

The Newton Academy Board is meeting to review and discuss the options and community feedback on March 8, 2012. The recommendation will then be sent to BCPS for vote by the Baltimore City School board. It is expected that this vote will take place during the month of April.

Additional information and building updates will be provided on a monthly basis in the weekly Tuesday folder. Proposed bus routes, building updates, and before and after school information will be available sometime in late April/early May.

Thank you for your patience and understanding as we plan and prepare for our upcoming 2012-13 school year.
APPENDIX C: 2013–14 PERFORMANCE EVALUATION


Background
Baltimore City Public Schools is committed to ensuring that excellent teaching and learning is what our students’ experience - every day, in every classroom, in every school. To do this, the City Schools is building systems to strengthen, support and measure effectiveness among teachers, school leaders and schools. The School Leader Effectiveness Evaluation represents the culmination of nearly two years of collaborative development between school leaders, office staff and the Public School Administrators and Supervisors Association (PSASA).

This year's School Leader Effectiveness Evaluation is designed to provide information about principals' strengths and areas for improvement. This information helps Executive Directors and the district support principals' ongoing professional growth in appropriate ways. The evaluation was intentionally designed with multiple components to reflect the complex, multidimensional nature of the work that principals do. It was informed by best practices, research, and extensive field-testing. And, most importantly, the evaluation was developed in collaboration with, and with input from, principals themselves.

As you know, 2013-14 has been a year of transition, as schools have moved into full implementation of Maryland's College and Career Standards and supporting curricula. At the same time, the state standardized assessments did not reflect this shift. As a result, growth measures that include these assessments are not included in the School Leader Effectiveness Evaluation for 2013-14. At a later date, you will receive information about how your students did on these assessments, but, again, this student assessment data will not be part of the principal evaluation for this year.

Components of Your End of Year Report

Overview
The 2013-14 School Leader Effectiveness Evaluation report displays results for the professional practice for all principals. Below are explanations of the various components of your end of year report. For more information about the components, visit City Schools Inside.

Principal profile
This confirms a Principal's personal information such as the principal's school, credentials and supervisor name.

Professional Practice

- Leadership Framework (70%)
- 360 Feedback Survey (30%)

Leadership Framework Measure
The score is based on the principal's ratings on the indicators related to the four core values of the City Schools School Leadership Framework (i.e. Highly Effective Instruction, Talented People, Vision and Engagement and Strategic Leadership). Each indicator is rated on a scale from 1 to 4. The Leadership
# Principal Evaluation Results SY 13-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness measure</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Weight (in %)</th>
<th>Weighted score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Framework</td>
<td>55.21</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>38.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>360 Feedback Survey</td>
<td>68.00</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leader Effectiveness Overall Weighted Score</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Effectiveness Annual Rating</td>
<td>Developing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Leadership Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task name</th>
<th>Evaluation waiver</th>
<th>Average/score (Out of 4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 1: Highly Effective Instruction Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 2: Talented People (Capacity Building) Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 3: Vision and Engagement Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 4: Strategic Leadership Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Leadership Framework Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Leadership Framework Score</td>
<td></td>
<td>55.21 (I.e 2.21 * 25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 360 Feedback Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Survey</th>
<th>Score (Out of 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal Mean Score</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Mean Score</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Mean Score</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall 360 Feedback Survey Score</td>
<td>68.00 (I.e 3.40 * 20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Leadership Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Value</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 1: Highly Effective Instruction</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 2: Talented People (Capacity Building)</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 3: Vision and Engagement</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core Value 4: Strategic Leadership</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Core Value Ratings

**Highly Effective Instruction**
- Core Value 1.1: Highly Effective Instruction. 1.1 School leadership supports highly effective instruction.
- Core Value 1.2: Highly Effective Instruction. 1.2 School leadership plans, assesses, and adjusts to ensure highly effective instruction.

**Talented People (Capacity Building)**
- Core Value 2.1: Talented People (Capacity Building). 2.1 School leadership develops systems to select and retain effective teachers and staff whose skills and beliefs meet those needs.
- Core Value 2.2: Talented People (Capacity Building). 2.2 School leadership develops its own capacity and that of faculty and staff by engaging in school-wide reflection and professional development.
- Core Value 2.3: Talented People (Capacity Building). School leadership makes full use of the evaluation system to both develop faculty and staff capacity and to hold them accountable for performance.

**Vision and Engagement**
- Core Value 3.1: Vision and Engagement. The school leadership provides clear vision and mission promoting a welcoming and supportive learning environment for students, families, staff and all other stakeholders.
- Core Value 3.2: Vision and Engagement. The school leadership cultivates and sustains open communication and decision-making opportunities with families.
- Core Value 3.3: Vision and Engagement. The culture of the school reflects and embraces student, staff, and community diversity.

**Strategic Leadership**
- Core Value 4.1: Strategic Leadership. The school leadership manages progress towards clear goals through a cycle of planning, action, assessment, and adjustment.
- Core Value 4.2: Strategic Leadership. The school leadership allocates and deploys time, human capital, and funding to address the priority growth goals for student achievement.
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>360 Feedback Survey</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Mean Score</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Mean Score</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Mean Score</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Mean Score</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Principal: Sundai Riggins  
School District: MD Baltimore City School District  
Survey ID: 1dd518  
School: Monarch Academy  
Date of Report: 06/06/2014  
Date of Evaluation: 04/29/2014  
VAL-ED Form: C

Purpose of the Assessment

The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education or VAL-ED is designed to provide a summary of effectiveness of a principal's learning-centered leadership behaviors during the current school year. A comprehensive picture of the principal includes input from teachers, the principal's supervisor and his or her own self-report.

The VAL-ED focuses on leadership behaviors defined by six core components and six key processes known to influence student achievement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Components</th>
<th>Key Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Standards for Student Learning</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigorous Curriculum</td>
<td>Implementing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Instruction</td>
<td>Supporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture of Learning &amp; Professional Behavior</td>
<td>Advocating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to External Communities</td>
<td>Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Accountability</td>
<td>Monitoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents to the VAL-ED were asked: How effective the principal is at ensuring the school carries out specific actions that affect core components of learning-centered leadership. The effectiveness ratings, based on evidence, range from 1 (ineffective) to 5 (outstandingly effective) for each of the leadership behaviors.

This VAL-ED report addresses the questions of:
(1) who responded?
(2) what evidence was used to evaluate the principal?
(3) what do the results say about the principal's current leadership behaviors?

The results are interpreted against both norm-referenced and standards-referenced criteria that highlight areas of strength and possible areas for improvement. A leadership development plan can be developed based on these results.

The VAL-ED provides technically sound scores when used as designed, however, it is recommended that it be used along with other information when making important evaluative decisions.

For more information about the VAL-ED, please visit our website: http://www.valed.com.
Who Responded and What Evidence Did They Use?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Possible Respondents</th>
<th>Actual Respondents</th>
<th>Percent (%) Responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A response rate of greater than or equal to 75% is high, 50% to 74% is moderate, and below 50% is low. When response rates are low, resulting scores should be interpreted with caution.

Sources of Evidence
Ratings of a principal's behaviors should be based on evidence that is recent, relevant and representative. Evidence comes in many forms (e.g., observations of behavior, review of documents that record leadership actions and communications with people who have directly observed the principal's behavior). After reflecting on a sample of evidence, respondents' effectiveness ratings of leadership behaviors are behaviorally-anchored and more accurate. The graphs below summarize each type of evidence used as a basis for effectiveness ratings of the leadership behaviors. The bars display the sources of evidence for each item used by the principal and all teacher and supervisor respondents in the school. Percentages are based on number of items for which a source of evidence was checked; these percentages need not sum to 100 across sources.

Evidence Sources Used by Principal
- Reports From Others: 29.83%
- Personal Observation: 91.67%
- School Documents: 100.00%
- School Projects or Activities: 88.89%
- Other Sources: 0.00%

Evidence Sources Used by Teacher
- Reports From Others: 32.44%
- Personal Observation: 74.74%
- School Documents: 33.12%
- School Projects or Activities: 32.40%
- Other Sources: 18.71%
- No Evidence: 8.77%

Evidence Sources Used by Supervisor
- Reports From Others: 6.94%
- Personal Observation: 76.39%
- School Documents: 16.67%
- School Projects or Activities: 0.00%
- Other Sources: 0.00%
- No Evidence: 0.00%
Assessment Profile and Respondent Comparisons

The principal's relative strengths and areas for development can be determined by comparing scores for each of the 6 Core Components and 6 Key Processes across different respondent groups. The next two graphs present an integrated visual summary of the results. They show the Mean Effectiveness associated with each Core Component and Key Process.

First, examine the profiles as recorded by each of the three respondent groups. These scores can be interpreted by
(a) Comparisons among Core Components and Key Processes
(b) Examination of scores among respondent groups
(c) Comparisons to the mean effectiveness scale
(d) Distribution of ratings among teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal (P), Teacher (T), and Supervisor (S) Mean Effectiveness Ratings Across Core Components</th>
<th>Mean Effectiveness</th>
<th>Teacher Rating Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Effectiveness P</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.49 (0.78)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Standards for Student Learning P</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.50 (0.82)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigorous Curriculum P</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.40 (0.85)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Instruction P</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.39 (0.87)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture of Learning &amp; Professional Behavior P</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.71 (0.86)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to External Communities P</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.63 (0.78)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Accountability P</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.34 (0.69)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ratings for a core component are based on twelve items. The higher the ratings, the more effective the leadership behaviors of the principal. When there are large differences between respondent groups, the focus should be on the results for each respondent group rather than the overall effectiveness score.

- Page 4 of 175 - Copyright 2008 Vanderbilt University
### Assessment Profile and Respondent Comparisons (Continued)

The ratings of the six Key Processes are based on 12 items that focus on a given Key Process. Again, the higher the score, the more effective the leadership behaviors of the principal. For more details about the technical aspects of the VAL-ED scores and tips on interpreting scores, visit the VAL-ED website [http://www.valed.com](http://www.valed.com).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal (P), Teacher (T), and Supervisor (S) Mean Effectiveness Ratings Across Key Processes</th>
<th>Mean Effectiveness</th>
<th>Teacher Rating Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Effectiveness</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness Rating</th>
<th>Ineffective</th>
<th>Minimal</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers in ( ) are standard deviations for teacher’s ratings. (The larger the standard deviation, the greater the dispersion of teacher ratings.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Using Results to Plan for Professional Growth

The matrix below provides an integrated summary of the principal's relative strengths and areas for growth based on the mean item scores for the intersection of Core Components by Key Processes across the three respondent groups.

- Cells that are green represent areas of behavior that are ‘proficient’ (3.60 - 3.99) or ‘distinguished’ (4.00 - 5.00).
- Cells that are yellow represent areas of behavior that are ‘basic’ (3.20 - 3.59).
- Cells that are red represent areas of behavior that are ‘below basic’ (1.60 - 3.28).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Components</th>
<th>Key Processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Standards for Student Learning</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigorous Curriculum</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Instruction</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture of Learning &amp; Professional Behavior</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections to External Communities</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Accountability</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leadership Behaviors for Possible Improvement

The leadership behaviors listed in each cluster on the following pages are representative of the lowest rated core component by key process areas of behavior. If fewer than six core component by key process areas of behavior are listed, that is because the principal had fewer than six that were below distinguished. If no behavior clusters are provided it indicates the principal’s current learning-centered leadership behaviors are considered acceptable.

The behaviors on each page that are **boldface** type are those that were actually assessed in the evaluation. The other behaviors represent the entire pool of VAL-ED behaviors for each core component by key process. All of these behaviors are relevant targets for improvement.

For a list of all the leadership behaviors associated with each core component area, consult the VAL-ED Handbook.
Individual Development Plan
Development of Individual Development Plan

The Chief Executive Officer, following the Maryland State Department of Education mandate as defined in COMAR 13A.12.05, requires that all certificated employees develop a yearly Individual Development Plan.

- The IDP is a personalized tool for facilitating the professional growth and development of certificated employees in the Baltimore City Public School System.
- The IDP is a road map that describes the knowledge, skills/behaviors, attitudes and/or interests that an employee wishes to develop to improve job performance. It includes specific goals, enabling activities, time frames and outcomes.
- The IDP should be used to address areas in need of improvement if a teacher’s performance in any Performance-Based Evaluation System domain is weak or marginal.
- The IDP should be flexible and responsive to the ongoing growth requirements of the employee.
- The IDP is a focused, achievable plan designed by the employee with input from the supervisor as appropriate. The IDP describes the employee’s professional growth and development. It is a requirement for renewing a certificate or advancing to another certificate for certificated employees.
- The IDP is cumulative and transferable to new worksites.
- The IDP should address the coursework needed to satisfy requirements for certificate renewal.
- The IDP should not be used as a resume or a recollection of disparate workshops and activities.
Baltimore City Public School System

Individual Development Plan

Last Name: Riggins  First Name: Sundai  Middle Initial: M.  SSN: XXX-XX-XXXX
School Name: Newton Academy  School Number: 318  Supervisor’s Name: Dr. Arlington & Mr. Esten
Job Title: Principal  Years in BCPSS: 4  Years in Present Position: 4

GOAL
Core Value 1: Highly Effective Instruction
1. School leadership plans, assesses, and adjusts to ensure highly effective instruction.
   - Collaborative planning includes reflection and adjustment of instruction based on data
   - Differentiated teacher support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Anticipated Credits</th>
<th>Observable Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data dive and review protocols during team</td>
<td>September 2014-</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Use of student work samples and data during team meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>planning in alignment with the iReady</td>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>Improvements in teacher practice based on the TEACH domains of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assessment schedule (BOY-MOY-BOY)</td>
<td>September 2014-</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Instructional Framework (SY 12-13) observation data targeted feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Framework PD Cycles</td>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>on specific TEACH domains)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Core Value 2: Talented People
2. School leadership develops its own capacity and that of faculty and staff engaging in school-wide reflection and professional development.
   - Faculty meetings devoted to instructional practices
   - Collective responsibility for staff
   - Alignment with professional development goals
   - Engagement in schoolwide PD planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Anticipated Credits</th>
<th>Observable Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership team meeting development of</td>
<td>September 2014-</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Increase in collective responsibility of staff and stakeholders in the hiring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faculty meeting calendar based on</td>
<td>June 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>process. Increase in transparency level of the hiring process for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instructional practices and schoolwide PD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>planning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Detailed hiring process document collection into a binder in addition to adding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed hiring process document</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>two parent and/or board representatives and a rotation of students to the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collection into a binder in addition to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hiring committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adding two parent and/or board representatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FRED Handbook (Revised 2009)
Core Value 2: Vision and Engagement
5. The school leadership provides a clear vision and mission that promotes a welcoming and supportive learning environment for students, families, staff and all other stakeholders.
   - School community has a general understanding of the school mission and values
   - Reaches out to potential stakeholders
   - Creates an environment in which students feel safe
   - Establishes structures for recognition
   - Develop systems to address student needs
   - Establishes professional learning communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Anticipated Credits</th>
<th>Observable Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of merit/recognition system for students during schoolwide</td>
<td>September 2014 - June 2015</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Increase student motivation to complete work and assignments in accordance with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community meetings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>having high expectations for themselves and their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring the Student Support Center team in the development and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in number of situations addressed proactively, decrease in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maintenance of the BeSafe boxes throughout the school to proactively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>student-to-student altercations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>address bullying and student-based issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in stakeholder attendance at school events and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of a “Friends of Newton” list of partners and stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decrease in number of student support center referrals and HEAT tickets related to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to engage them in attending events at Newton Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>behavior management concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rework and refinement of the Student Support Center use and referral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>process to build teacher behavior-management capacity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Core Value 4: Strategic Leadership
4. The school leadership manages progress towards clear goals through a cycle of planning, action, assessment, and adjustment.
   ***Goals are connected to math performance in accordance with MSA math and current BOY/Ready assessment results.
   - Establishes goals that are measurable
   - Establishes key priorities
   - Consistently revisits action plans
   - Supports for school wide analysis of data
   - Enhance of families in school-wide goal setting
   - Is adaptive to changes in the environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Anticipated Credits</th>
<th>Observable Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of short-cycle math assessments schoolwide.</td>
<td>January 2013 - June 2015</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Teacher use of student work samples to inform instruction and flexible groupings in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of math Brief Constructed Response (BCR) protocols for</td>
<td>January 2015 - June 2015</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>math.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>review and school-wide systems for the implementation of regular student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work reviews and grading.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The employee and the supervisor shall sign this document to indicate that it has been reviewed and discussed. Keep one for your file. An additional copy should be submitted to your supervisor.

Employee’s Signature

Supervisor’s Signature

Date
## APPENDIX E: 2014–2015 PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

### SY14-15 LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: END OF YEAR REFLECTION AND RATING SHEET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Value 1: Highly Effective Instruction</th>
<th>Self Rating</th>
<th>ED Rating</th>
<th>Supporting Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership Actions</strong></td>
<td>FOY Self Rating</td>
<td>FOY ED Rating</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 – School leadership supports highly effective instruction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Evidence of the above: Secured aligned professional development to deal with cultural competency issues for spring professional development/learning. Revision of lunch schedule to provide APs with more time in classrooms to support teachers. Celebration of Learning planning. S. professional development time for preparation, feedback, and PD on SLs, now 15-16 SY schedule with prioritized common planning for all teachers and deprofessionalization of grades 3-5 to support collaboration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Value 2: Teacher Effectiveness and Student Growth</th>
<th>Self Rating</th>
<th>ED Rating</th>
<th>Supporting Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership Actions</strong></td>
<td>FOY Self Rating</td>
<td>FOY ED Rating</td>
<td>Evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 – School leadership plans, assesses, and adjusts to ensure highly effective instruction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Data collection was evident and distributed and discussed. Teams were definitely meeting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations/Next Steps:**

- Ensures the regular planning of standards-based units and lessons that are well-paced and that employ teaching practices described within the Instructional Framework.
- Demonstrates an understanding of data analysis, but only some elements of the data cycle are evident in the school’s practice.
- Forms faculty teams and has them meet regularly to plan, assess, and adjust classroom practices.

Evidence: Notes/feedback on Expedition plans, Attendance at grade-level team meetings (1st grade in particular), identification of teacher leaders to support faculty teams, some grade levels employ elements of the data cycle (6th grade) but it is not schoolwide (2nd grade is from the developing domain of the rubric).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Value 2: Talented People</th>
<th>Leadership Actions</th>
<th>Self Rating</th>
<th>ED Rating</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sy 14-15 LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: END OF YEAR REFLECTION AND RATING SHEET</td>
<td>2.1 - School leadership implements systems to select and retain effective teachers and staff whose skills and beliefs meet these needs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>The principal went to great lengths to be inclusive in the attraction and selection of staff. In addition, the school utilized multiple support systems for teachers. The volume of new teachers makes it tough to provide high levels of support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Evidence: Structures for student support – Title I summer school program developed, modification of services to service the needs of students by grade level band for push-to-pullout services. Ramp hiring process to include a mandatory demo lesson and student feedback tool on the lesson. Students give feedback about the teacher’s style and ability to help them to understand content. The hiring committee consists of teachers that view the demo lesson and provide candidates with feedback. Attended multiple Hiring Fairs in and out of state (Ohio, Philadelphia) to recruit candidates. Mentor teacher induction program was already established and mentors have been selected for this upcoming school year. Admin leadership team meets weekly on Monday. School Leadership team meets monthly and...
SY14-15 LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: END OF YEAR REFLECTION AND RATING SHEET

2.2 - School leadership makes full use of the evaluation system to both develop faculty and staff capacity and to hold them accountable for performance

3

- Articulates performance expectations and allocates time to support staff in meeting those expectations.
- Provides timely support and interventions to struggling teachers and staff as indicated by data and/or informal or formal observations.
- In accordance with sanctioned practice and based on multiple data points, such as documented interventions and observations, school leadership persistently attempts to remove those who do not make reasonable progress toward meeting professional expectations.

Evidence: Teacher responsibilities document, end-of-year check in meetings to provide feedback on performance. Frequent meetings with BCR for additional support to struggling new teachers. Two teachers in particular were assigned an additional BCR coach that provided feedback/observation/coaching at least three times a week. All struggling teachers had mentors and additional support plans. Some struggling teachers had improvements and received regular feedback on their performance. Those not making reasonable progress (4/4 of the most difficult/struggling teachers) will not be returning for the 2015-16 school year.

Recommendations/Next Steps:

Feedback to teachers was specific and honest. The principal is ensuring that struggling teachers are receiving adequate support, and for those who do not improve the principal is taking steps to ensure they are rated accordingly and held accountable.

Core Value 3: Vision and Engagement

Leadership Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Value 3: Vision and Engagement</th>
<th>Self Rating</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>EOY ED Rating</th>
<th>Supporting Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 - The school leadership provides a clear vision and mission that promotes a welcoming and supportive learning environment for students, families, staff, and all other stakeholders</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Creates systems so that the school community shares a clear understanding of and commitment to the school's mission, vision, and values, including a clear understanding of strategic initiatives and goals.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>The school mission is continually reinforced through multiple communication formats. In addition, the principal actively worked to increase the visibility of the mission with multiple stakeholders. There was alignment to the &quot;brand&quot; of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 - School leadership makes full use of the evaluation system to both develop faculty and staff capacity and to hold them accountable for performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evidence: Student/Family Handbook, 2015-16 SF Budget Work Session for parents/families, monthly principals' breakfasts, parent/family survey: 4-year-old food pantry program expanded to offer produce and frozen items and is entirely operated by parents and will expand and run in the summer as well. 
Exceptional progress in this domain: SLC student/parent attendance in the fall was about 55% of the school population. Spring SLCs had a 99% student attendance rate which is a significant increase in the use of the student portfolio to reflect on goals and promote higher student achievement.
### SY14-15 Leadership Framework: End of Year Reflection and Rating Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3.2 - The school leadership cultivates and sustains open communication and decision-making opportunities with families</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Uses multiple strategies, languages and vehicles to communicate information, such as progress toward school-wide goals and initiatives, school progress, policies, events and the academic and social development of students to families and community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Consistently provides opportunities for families and the community to participate in or provide feedback on appropriate school-wide decisions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Establishes multiple structures for frequent communication with teachers and staff members regarding policies, progress, and school culture by using effective tools and routines and providing clear explanations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence: Weekly Tuesday Folder, Robocalls, Living Tree updates, website and social media usage, weekly emails to staff from the principal, academic and social events to include honor roll/recognition assemblies for the middle grades (new this year), attendance, arrival and uniform compliance recognition during monthly community meetings for all students.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The principal is quite strong in communicating with families collectively and individually. In addition, there is a real sensitivity to family issues. A staff member was dedicated to family outreach and there were several efforts to decrease report outreach.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3.3 - The culture of the school reflects and embraces student, staff, and community diversity</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Consistently reviews and analyzes culture data regularly, adjusts practices as necessary, and holds self and others accountable for maintaining a positive school culture.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Anticipates and prepares for culture challenges with proactive strategies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Oversees the selection of resources that reflect a commitment to equity and an appreciation of diversity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Collaborates with families and community partners to garner resources to meet the needs of students and the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence: Weekly review of suspension data in adInf team meetings, institution of student support collaborative team meetings with related staff.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The principal was fierce in her commitment to the culture of the school. Through staff selection, professional development and a strict adherence to the importance of cultural sensitivity was evident.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Recommendations/Next Steps:

- Provides guidance and the SNC survey administered to students in all grades (teachers in K surveyed students during morning meeting) and K-7 reflection spaces were developed in every classroom, cyberbullying presentation for grades 5-7 in response to social media issues, use of a variety of resources to include the Second Step curriculum, meetings with PTA and other organizations (Planned Parenthood, Experience Corps) to consider additional school resources

---

Junell Riggins, Newton Academy

Page 7 of 11

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## Core Values & Strategic Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Action</th>
<th>Self Rating</th>
<th>ED Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.1 - The school leadership manages progress towards clear goals through a cycle of planning, action, assessment, and adjustment</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| - Establishes rigorous goals for the improvement of student learning that are measurable and aligned to student need.  
- Consistently revisits and adjusts the action plan with teachers and staff.  
- Stays abreast of the local, national and international educational context for emerging trends and their impact on goal setting.  
- Ensures that all stakeholders clearly understand and can articulate the school mission | 3 | 3 |
| Evidence: Math probes to monitor student progress towards goals, development, review of data and ongoing monitoring of progress towards SOL goals, review of teacher goals and plans during grade-level team meetings, conferences, and some faculty meetings. Teachers receive current articles and research-based professional learning opportunities via mailboxes, email, and also during faculty meetings. Regular communication with parents and families in support of the school’s mission through Tuesday folders, school events, parent-centered events, and school activities. | Decide and redicide is a Child Guardian tenant and there is much evidence that multiple systems were revisited as new data was gathered. There were many examples of the changing or adapting of systems in the school to improve functioning. |
| **4.2 - The school leadership allocates and deploys the resources of time, human capital, and funding to address the priority growth goals for student achievement** | 3 | 3 |
| - Develops a schedule that maximizes time on student learning.  
- Budget allocations and resource allocations almost always support teaching and learning.  
- School operations and resource management cause little disruption to teaching and learning.  
- Leverages teacher and staff talent, expertise, and effectiveness by delegating essential responsibilities and decisions to appropriate | Budget decisions were creative and always aligned to the school needs. The master schedule was challenging due to the number of classes in the building and the constraints of the facility. Teacher leadership was leveraged well. |

---

**SY14-15 LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: END OF YEAR REFLECTION AND RATING SHEET**

**SY14-15 LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK: END OF YEAR REFLECTION AND RATING SHEET**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individuals.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evidence: Master schedule provided four planning periods instead of the three required by BCP. Budget cuts/decreases based on non-BDU members in order to ensure the sustainability of smaller class sizes than the district average. Title I resources allocated to the students with the most need (after-school program and addition of a summer school program). Summer school program started because the district does not allow students attending charter schools to attend summer learning programs at traditional schools for free. The Title I budget was allocated to the students most likely to be significantly impacted by summer learning loss. Improvements made in coffee systems and culture from mid-year to end-of-year. Administrators rotate duty in order to ensure the coffee systems are running smoothly. All APS, Deans, and support staff have roles and responsibilities listed in the Go-To Guide (since last year). Document has already been updated for the 2015-16 school year and everyone is aware of their roles and responsibilities to prepare for the fall.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations/Next Steps:**

---

329
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Name:</th>
<th>Sundai Riggs</th>
<th>School Name:</th>
<th>Newton Academy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal ED Name:</td>
<td>Mr. Estien</td>
<td>Network #:</td>
<td>Charter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Principal Signature** ___________________________  **Date** ________________

**ED Signature** ___________________________  **Date** ________________
APPENDIX F: LEHIGH ES SCHOOL PROFILE

- Impact Evaluation
  - 2014-15 Teacher Ratings
  - Effectiveness (41%)
  - Leadership (21%)
  - Work Environment (8%)
  - Staff Effectiveness (5%)

- Enrollment
  - Total Enrollment
    - Kindergarten
    - First Grade
    - Second Grade
    - Third Grade
    - Fourth Grade
    - Fifth Grade
    - Sixth Grade

- Special Education
  - EIT Time/Ineligibility
  - ELIGIBILITY
  - TIMELINESS
  - EIT SpEd Enrollment

- In-Seat Attendance & Chronic Absences
  - Absence Rates
    - 14-15
    - 15-16
    - 16-17 YTD

- Suspensions
  - SUSP PER 100 STUDENTS
  - % SUSPENDED TO STUDENTS
  - % SUSPENDED TO SPED STUDENTS
  - % SUSPENDED TO STUDENTS

- Truancy
  - Truancy Rates
    - 14-15
    - 15-16
    - 16-17
### APPENDIX G: SCI SCORECARDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vision &amp; Mission</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Physical Surroundings</th>
<th>Rules &amp; Norms</th>
<th>Classroom Consistency &amp; Expectations</th>
<th>Student Recognition</th>
<th>Customer Service</th>
<th>Physical Security (Operational)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V&amp;M are clearly articulated and focused on achievement</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Transitions are timely and orderly</td>
<td>If a student needs help, the teacher responds promptly and follows through.</td>
<td>School staff is polite, patient, and helpful.</td>
<td>School is clean and orderly.</td>
<td>The school is safe and secure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V&amp;M and core values posted in classrooms and corresponding</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Behavior expectations are posted and followed.</td>
<td>School staff is polite, patient, and helpful.</td>
<td>School is clean and orderly.</td>
<td>School is clean and orderly.</td>
<td>The school is safe and secure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School environment is free of trash and debris and countertops are clean.</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Adequate and effective staff supervision is consistently provided.</td>
<td>Students receive specific and positive feedback from teachers.</td>
<td>All visitors are welcomed and provided with a safety guide.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classrooms are neat, organized, and clutter-free.</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Entry and exit procedures are smooth and fluid.</td>
<td>Updated student work is displayed in classrooms on a timely basis.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Students are recognized for social and emotional growth.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallways and stairwells are clean and graffiti-free.</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Daily procedures are clearly marked and easy to follow.</td>
<td>School staff communicates a high level of care in daily interactions.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>School has an ongoing student recognition calendar.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classrooms are neat, organized, and clutter-free.</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Teachers are ready to start class on time with a “No New” assignment.</td>
<td>Photographic proof of students engaged in current activities are displayed.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School environment is free of trash and debris and countertops are clean.</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Teachers are ready to start class on time with a “No New” assignment.</td>
<td>Photographic proof of students engaged in current activities are displayed.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallways and stairwells are clean and graffiti-free.</td>
<td>School has a clearly articulated and focused V&amp;M that is communicated to all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Teachers are ready to start class on time with a “No New” assignment.</td>
<td>Photographic proof of students engaged in current activities are displayed.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td>Office hours are clearly marked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

332
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vision &amp; Mission</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Physical Surroundings</th>
<th>Rules &amp; Norms</th>
<th>Classroom Consistency &amp; Expectations</th>
<th>Student Recognition</th>
<th>Customer Service</th>
<th>Physical Security (Orientation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V&amp;M are clearly articulated and focused on student achievement</td>
<td>School has created a school climate committee (SCC) with a designated POC</td>
<td>Classroom rules and expectations are clearly posted and referenced as needed</td>
<td>Student consistently receives non-distracting attention from school staff</td>
<td>The real crisis management team is visible and all staff members have been trained</td>
<td>School entryway is properly supervised and monitored throughout the day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V&amp;M and core values posted in common areas: classrooms</td>
<td>SOO provides training and support to school staff to ensure implementation fidelity</td>
<td>Staff teach and model expected student behavior</td>
<td>Student recognition boards are displayed in the hallways highlighting growth and/or achievement</td>
<td>Front staff is polite, pleasant, and helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School has developed a morning meeting which is infused into daily activities such as morning announcements, phone greetings, wall postings, etc.</td>
<td>Adequate and effective staff introduction is consistently provided</td>
<td>School has a clearly communicated referral process and discipline policy in their core curriculum</td>
<td>Teachers are ready to start class on time with a &quot;Do Now&quot; or structured activity</td>
<td>Photographs of students engaged in school activities are displayed</td>
<td>Office has and uses an uniform phone greeting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallway and bathrooms are clean and graffiti free</td>
<td>Classrooms in neat, organized, and clutter-free</td>
<td>Classrooms are regularly checked for cleanliness</td>
<td>All students are acknowledged within 25 seconds of their arrival</td>
<td>Students are recognized for social and emotional gains</td>
<td>Office is welcoming and free of inappropriate adult and student interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scorecard Key:

Green: Clear Evidence (85-100%)
Yellow: Inconsistent Evidence (64-50%)
Red: Minimal Evidence (49-0%)
Blue: School is not held accountable for this indicator

Regression from Previous Walkthrough: 
Progress from Previous Walkthrough: 

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APPENDIX H: DC COMPREHENSIVE STAFFING MODEL – BUDGET

School Name
Title and At-Risk Funding Attribution Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th># of Positions</th>
<th>$ Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title I</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title II</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Improvement</td>
<td>Grant (SIG) Personnel</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Improvement</td>
<td>Grant (SIG)/NPS</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Item Name</th>
<th>$ Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supplies for Related</td>
<td>Arts &amp; Libraries</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Technology</td>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After School</td>
<td>Programming</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Arts</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Day &amp; Extended</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Grades</td>
<td>Investment (MG)/Social Emotional Basket</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Grades</td>
<td>Investment (MG)/Experiences &amp; Excursions</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Grades</td>
<td>Investment (MG)/Clubs &amp; Activities</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Literacy &amp; Reading Specialist</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Inclusion Teacher</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL Counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended Hours/ESS</td>
<td>Computer Lab</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Athletics &amp; Activities</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC Teacher Resident</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evening Credit Recovery</td>
<td>(ECCR)</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Investment Teacher</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal Intervention</td>
<td>(A.P.)</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>Pathways</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAF Academy Director/Coordinator</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty Funds</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Instruction</td>
<td>Coach (TIC)</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual Language Program</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic Training</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-risk Payment</td>
<td></td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I: 2015–2016 PERFORMANCE EVALUATION – LEHIGH ES

2015-16 Final School Leader IMPACT Report

Prepared for Sundai Riggins at Lehigh ES

What is the purpose of this report?
This report summarizes all of your School Leader IMPACT information and includes each of your individual component scores.

What are the components of my evaluation?
The school leader evaluation has two key components: (1) Student Outcome Goals - measures of students' learning or other student outcomes over the course of the year; and (2) Leadership Framework Assessments - measures of the effectiveness of school leaders' leadership practices.

Student Outcome Goals
- **Student Outcome Goals**: Each Student Outcome Goal emphasizes a different aspect of your school-level impact on student outcomes and measures the progress towards DCPS' Capital Commitment Goals. Student Outcome Goals are differentiated by school level to reflect the unique priorities and needs of different schools.

Leadership Framework Assessments
- **Leadership Framework (LF)**: This is a measure of the effectiveness of your leadership practices. Leadership Framework Assessments include both qualitative and quantitative measures of your impact on your school and students along six key standards. The scores in each Leadership Framework domain from your mid-year and end-of-year assessments are averaged and weighted to generate a Total LF Score.
## 2015-16 Final School Leader IMPACT Report

**Prepared for Sundai Riggins at Lehigh ES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL GOALS</th>
<th>LEVEL 4 TARGET</th>
<th>LEVEL 3 TARGET</th>
<th>ACHIEVEMENT</th>
<th>GOAL SCORE</th>
<th>WEIGHTED SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metric: DIBELS: % of students at benchmark</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup: All students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade: All Grades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric: I-Ready Math: % of students at proficient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup: All Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade: All Grades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric: Student Satisfaction: Student Satisfaction Index</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup: All Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade: 3rd-5th Grades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric: Suspensions: # of suspensions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup: All students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade: All Grades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL WEIGHTED GOAL SCORE** 70

*A score of 1 means student performance did not reach level 2 target OR assessment was not approved or completed OR score not validated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK STANDARDS</th>
<th>MY LF SCORE</th>
<th>EOY LF SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruction (25%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent (15%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Culture (15%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations (15%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Community (15%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Leadership (15%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AVERAGE LF SCORE** 2.90 3.20

**LF WEIGHTS** 20% 30%

**LF WEIGHTED SCORE** 58 96

**FINAL IMPACT SCORE** 224

**FINAL IMPACT RATING** Effective
2015-16 Final School Leader IMPACT Report

How was my score calculated?
School Leader IMPACT scores are calculated using the framework outlined below. The Leadership Framework accounts for 50% of the overall score; the Mid-Year and End-of-Year Leadership Framework scores are weighted at 20% and 30%, respectively. School leaders' goals also account for 50% of the overall score; each goal carries an equal weight. For example, in the case where a school leader has 5 goals, each goal is weighted at 10%.

The combination of weighted Leadership Framework Assessment scores and Student Outcome Goal scores results in a final score that falls into one of three final rating categories: Highly Effective, Effective, or Minimally Effective. All non-reappointed school leaders receive a rating of Ineffective.

OVERALL IMPACT SCALE

MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE

EFFICIENT

HIGHLY EFFECTIVE

100 Points

300 Points

350 Points

400 Points

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
2015-16 Final School Leader IMPACT Report

What does my rating mean?

- **Highly Effective**: This rating signifies outstanding performance and indicates that a school leader has the ability to teach other school leaders. School leaders who earn Highly Effective ratings are considered for Standing Ovation awards, tapped for district leadership opportunities, and will receive performance bonuses.

- **Effective**: This rating signifies solid performance. School leaders who earn Effective ratings are provided with developmental opportunities throughout the school year and are tapped for district leadership opportunities.

- **Minimally Effective**: This rating signifies that a school leader is experiencing challenges and/or struggles, and may need additional support to improve. Instructional superintendents will prioritize working with these principals to identify their specific developmental needs and provide targeted professional development resources. Principals with a Minimally Effective rating will not receive a step increase for the 2016-17 school year.

- **Ineffective**: Individuals who are non-reappointed receive this rating and are removed from their school leadership position.

Am I eligible for a bonus?

School leaders who receive a Highly Effective rating are eligible for an annual bonus according to the chart below. School leaders with a Highly Effective rating who lead high poverty schools (free and reduced-priced lunch rate of 50% or higher) or Targeted 40 schools receive an additional bonus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>IMPACT Rating</th>
<th>Bonus</th>
<th>Add-on if You Lead a High Poverty School</th>
<th>Add-on if You Lead a Targeted 40 School</th>
<th>Total Possible Annual Bonus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Highly Effective</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>Highly Effective</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2015-16 Final School Leader IMPACT Report

How are Student Outcome Goals scored?
For goals that require school-level data for scoring, administrators at these schools provide this data to central office. Centrally tracked metrics are scored using data provided by the Office of Instructional Practice, the Office of Data and Strategy, and the Office of the Chief of Schools.

Goals are scored at the end of the year on the following four-point scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example Metric: % of students at proficient</td>
<td>X%</td>
<td>Y%</td>
<td>Z%</td>
<td>Student performance did not achieve Level 2 target OR assessment not approved or completed OR score not validated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the SRI, i-Ready, and Agile Mind assessments, at least 80% of students enrolled as of the beginning-of-year (BOY) testing window and at least 80% of students enrolled as of the end-of-year (EOY) testing window must be assessed. If this threshold is not met, the highest possible score for the goal will be a 2.

What should I do if I have a question about my report?
Please contact the IMPACT team at 202-719-6553 or impactdps@dcs.gov.

What should I do if I would like to appeal my IMPACT rating?
Pursuant to 5-EDCMR 1306, any District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) employee who receives a performance rating of "below average" or "unsatisfactory" may file an appeal with the Chancellor of DCPS. Only school leaders whose final IMPACT rating is Minimally Effective may file an appeal to the Chancellor. Your appeal must be filed within thirty (30) days of your receipt of the contested evaluation, but no later than October 13th. Appeals to the Chancellor must be filed with DCPS via the IMPACT database. You can access the IMPACT database at http://impactdps.dc.gov. Your login information is your dcs.gov email address and password. All appeals will be reviewed by the Chancellor or her designee(s). DCPS will provide a written response to all appeals.

You may be able to file a grievance pursuant to the Collective Bargaining Agreement between DCPS and the Council of School Officers. Your grievance must be submitted within ten (10) workdays of your receipt of this notice. You or your union representative must submit your grievance in writing to DCPS Labor Management and Employee Relations, 1200 First Street, NE, 10th Floor, Washington, DC 20002.


