A School Improvement Success Story:
A Qualitative Study of Rural School Leadership, Culture, and the Change Process

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This dissertation titled

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A Qualitative Study of Rural School Leadership, Culture, and the Change Process

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Abstract

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A School Improvement Success Story: A Qualitative Study of Rural School Culture, Leadership, and the Change Process

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Due to the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind federal legislation, school districts that do not meet federal and state achievement standards must engage in a strategic planning process that is intended to improve instruction and raise district test scores. Even after engaging in such efforts for multiple years, few districts in Southeastern Ohio have been successful in transforming school buildings to substantially increase student achievement and meet the federal requirements. This is especially true for districts with substantial Economically Disadvantaged and Student with Disabilities populations.

This phenomenological case study focused on one successful school, South Elementary. The researcher investigated the processes used by school personnel in transforming the school from a low achieving to a high achieving organization, as measured by state accountability standards. The central questions of the study included: What changes have occurred in organizational leadership, culture, and practices in this rural Southeastern Ohio school that have led to its improved academic performance?

- How is organizational leadership provided at the school? What changes in leadership have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?
• What are the shared values, beliefs, and customs that guide the school? What changes in culture have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

• What school practices have changed? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

Results of this study are organized in three categories: leadership, culture, and practices. The six themes developed from the data collected include collective responsibility, rural sensibilities, continuous improvement mindset, positive and professional staff relationships, collegial practices, and commitment to effective practices. Overall, the findings suggest that the culture of the external environment and fidelity to the Reading First program and the Ohio Improvement Process influenced this rural leader’s implementation of school improvement initiatives. Over time, the principal was able to sustain the improvement strategies and embed the practices into the school culture.

Information from this research study provides a deeper description of the educational successes experienced in the targeted school and illuminates how the change affected the transformational components of the organization. Results of this study can be used to inform recommendations for the target school and other similar rural school districts who are engaged in improving achievement at the school level for students of at-risk populations.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Southeastern Ohio educators who work tirelessly to improve educational outcomes for the students in our region. Their dedication and passion for teaching are a true inspiration to us all.
Acknowledgments

With heartfelt gratitude, I would like to acknowledge the support that I have received on the long journey to completing this dissertation. Although there are too many to thank to name them all, I would like to acknowledge my family, my dissertation committee members past and present, my writing support group, the South Elementary participants, and those that have provided both prodding and encouragement along the way.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

School districts in Southeastern Ohio that have not met Adequate Yearly Progress standards as defined by the Ohio Department of Education and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001) are required to develop and implement strategic improvement plans in order to increase student achievement in reading and mathematics. In order to support Ohio’s Local Education Agencies (LEA’s), the Ohio Department of Education has developed the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) that is based on research in the area of organizational change (Barr, 2008). In addition, the regional State Support Teams have been providing technical assistance and professional development for districts engaged in the OIP process. Best practices in continuous improvement have been identified in the literature in regards to the leader’s role in creating a learning system that improves outcomes for the organization (Bennis, 2015; Bolman and Deal, 2003; Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014; Fullan, 2003; Heifitz, 1994; Howley & Howley, 2007; Lezotte, 1991; Lezotte & Snyder, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2009; Yukl, 2002), the leader’s role in managing change strategies to implement the system (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014; Connolly, James, & Beales, 2011; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Heath & Heath, 2011; Kotter, 1996; Reeves, 2006; Schlechty, 2001), and the leader’s role in maintaining a continuous improvement culture within the organization (Banathy, 2001; Beabout, 2012; Burrello & Reitzug, 1993; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Schein, 2010; Senge et al., 2000). Although some rural school districts in Southeastern Ohio have engaged in such improvement efforts for multiple years, few
districts have been successful in transforming school curriculum and instruction processes to substantially increase student achievement and consistently meet these federal requirements.

This case study will focus on a Southeastern Ohio rural school that has been successful in improving student achievement. The researcher investigated the processes used by the school building faculty in transforming the school results from a low achieving to a high achieving organization, as measured by state and federal accountability standards. Chapter one provides a background for this case study, the significance of the study, the research questions, the theoretical framework that guides the research, the limitations and delimitations of the study, and the definition of terms used in this document.

**Background of School Reform and Rural Education**

Although there has been a long established call for improvement in education (Gardner, 1983) and for reduction in achievement gaps (Coleman et al., 1966; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2001), recently there has been a renewed emphasis for these improvements by scholars who are concerned about the effects of globalization on the world economies and the status of the United States as a world leader (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Friedman, 2006). Darling-Hammond (2010) explained that countries around the world are redesigning their school systems to meet the needs for employment in the twenty-first century. In addition, she warned that unless American schools change to meet these new demands our citizens will be left behind. In response to the warnings of global
competition, there has been a renewed call for improving education to meet the demands of the twenty-first century economy. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (2012) allocated federal funds to states for innovation and improvement. These grants, called Race to the Top funds, were then distributed to school districts based on a competitive application process. The need for innovation was given a high priority because of the concerns about competition and the role of education in preparing our citizens for the new economy. In a study by Battelle for Kids (2012), researchers examined high performing school systems that sustained improvements in countries around the world. They identified the top five performers and studied school districts in Finland, Hong Kong, California, Ontario, and Singapore to determine what factors drive student success in these school systems. The researchers at Battelle for Kids identified six common strategies that fell into three broader categories of focus. In the area of learning, they identified early education and personalized instruction strategies. In teaching, they identified teacher selection/quality and focus on learning objectives. In conditions of success, they identified education linked to economic growth and cultural values as successful strategies for high-achievement.

In the United States, the main driver for school improvement initiatives and school-based strategies that close the gap for disaggregated subgroups has been the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. According to the requirements of this reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the school districts in the United States will improve results to educate 100% of the nation’s students at the proficient level in reading and mathematics. Advancement
towards these goals is funded and monitored through the requirements of this law. Studies have found mixed results on academic achievement since its implementation (Center for Education Policy, 2007; Commission on No Child Left Behind, 2007; National Council on Disability, 2008; Zhang, 2008). As a result, the new reauthorization of ESEA called the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA, 2015) continues the requirements for school improvement, but provides more flexibility to the states in designing accountability requirements for schools. In a study that focused on rural perspectives of NCLB, Zhang (2008) found that although districts reported improvements in English Language Arts and Mathematics since the implementation of the NCLB requirements, these districts continued to report sizeable achievement gaps for students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students. In addition, the rural educators considered the implementation of the Reading First program and school improvement plans required by NCLB as important or very important contributors to student achievement. However, districts that reported improvement in English Language Arts and mathematics achievement felt that NCLB only somewhat or minimally contributed to these achievement gains. More importantly, rural districts reported that district policies and programs that were unrelated to NCLB were important or very important contributors to the achievement gains for their students. In a study by Phelps (2009), the researcher reported that using achievement scores to measure school and district effectiveness “is tantamount to holding them accountable for the Socio-Economic Status of the community: unadjusted scores of student achievement say little about school quality” (p. 49). His research findings confirmed the strong relationship between socioeconomic
status of the students to academic achievement, but also found that the combination of district and school characteristics were also contributors to student achievement.

In addition to the challenges of measuring school effectiveness, school districts have identified a number of challenges in the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 that have caused varying levels of frustration (Yettick, Baker, Wickersham & Hupfield, 2014). These include the provision of supplemental educational services, the maintenance of the supplement-not-supplant rule, and the completion of the general reporting and compliance requirements. Although both urban and rural schools identified the preceding factors from NCLB as implementation challenges, rural schools identified five additional challenges that were not identified by their non-rural counterparts (Yettick et al., 2014). These NCLB components included inadequate pre-pupil and baseline funding, insufficient program staffing, the need for flexibility, lack of regional services, and insufficient professional development.

Inefficient measurements of effectiveness and obstacles for meeting the requirements of NCLB aren’t the only challenges faced by schools trying to meet the high expectations for achievement and gap reduction. Schools must also determine what framework or theory of effectiveness they will use for implementing improvement practices. In a recent research study, Scheerens (2015) organized the use of theory in educational effectiveness research into three categories: school antecedents, school ecology, and school leadership, policies, and organization. He further explains that a rationality paradigm is the mainly used basis for educational effectiveness where education is seen as “a contextualized production process, using the well-known context-
input-process-output model” (p. 17). He also outlines two alternative theories for explaining school effectiveness; schools as loosely coupled systems, and system dynamics. Although there are many school effectiveness research theories, most school improvement approaches are identified from research that uses a rationality paradigm. In one nationally recognized approach, Lezotte (1991) outlines a framework that is based on school level factors that incorporate seven correlates of schools that effectively meet the learning needs of all students. These correlates are: a safe and orderly environment, a climate of high expectation for success, instructional leadership, clear and focused mission, opportunity to learn and student time on task, frequent monitoring of student progress, and home-school relations (Lezotte, 1991).

In Ohio, the department of education has implemented the requirements of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 using achievement assessments, attendance, and graduation as the measures of effectiveness. In addition, the ODE requested some exceptions to these measures through a waiver process. The ODE submitted the first request for a waiver of the federal requirements for the 2012-13 school year and was approved to evaluate schools using both an achievement measure, the Annual Measurable Objectives, and a measure of student growth, Value Added Measures, to meet NCLB requirements (Ohio Department of Education, 2014). Each year, the target for the Annual Measurable Objectives increases dramatically to again reach the 100% level of achievement that is required by law (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). School districts and buildings that do not meet the requirements for all students and targeted disaggregated subgroups suffer the consequences of not meeting these federal and state
accountability standards. These include transferring students to effective districts, providing supplementary educational services to students, replacing the school staff, and converting the school to a charter program (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). Because of the link between socioeconomic status and student achievement, the Ohio Department of Education included a second measure of district and school effectiveness in the 2012 and 2014 NCLB waivers.

A value-added assessment system was identified in order to measure the progress that students made on entering the district, school, and classroom for the targeted school year. This system allows for the evaluation of what has been added to student learning by the educational system. Because these methods make the adjustment for student background, value-added measures are seen by many researchers and practitioners as a valid way to measure school effectiveness even though there is disagreement about the limitations of the current methodologies (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008; Mortimore & Sammons, 1994; Peng, Thomas, Yang, & Li, 2006; Ross, Stringfield, Sanders, & Wright, 2003; Ross et al., 2008; Sanders, 2004; Saunders, 2000; Schagen, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Yin, 2006; Tymms, 1999). Ohio adopted the Education Value-Added Assessment system (EVAAS) that is now used for accountability at the district, school, and classroom levels. Although this model is a more equitable way for measuring the effectiveness of a school, there are critics who caution about methodological issues associated with this value-added model. Even though there have been major advancements in using value-added as a school effectiveness measure, many researchers still have concerns about its use as a sole measure for classroom, school or district effectiveness (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008;
In order to meet the demands for measuring and improving the effectiveness of our educational systems and for addressing the cautions of using one measure to make determinations of school success, the Ohio Department of Education used two measurement systems to meet NCLB requirements. In order to recognize schools that are meeting these high achievement standards with typically low achieving subgroups of students, the Ohio Department of Education included a School’s of Promise awards program in its ESEA waiver (Ohio Department of Education, 2014). To qualify for this award, a school district must have seventy-five percent of the all students, ethnic/racial minority students, and economically disadvantaged students subgroups meeting proficiency in reading and mathematics on state assessments. In a 2012 report, Hagelskamp and Distasi built upon a previous study by the Ohio Department of Education reporting on questions of replicability and sustainability of the programs identified as Schools of Promise. The researchers took an in depth look at nine successful high-poverty schools from a diverse geographical sample and identified eleven key attributes that participants deemed essential for producing high academic achievement in their high-poverty schools. These attributes and practices include:

1. Principal’s lead with a strong and clear vision for their school, engage staff in problem solving and decision making and never lose sight of their school’s goals and outcomes.
2. Teachers and administrators are dedicated to their school success and committed to making a difference in their student’s lives.

3. School leaders provide genuine opportunities and incentives for teachers to collaborate and teachers say that collaboration and sharing best practices are key to their effectiveness.

4. Teachers regard student data as clarifying and helpful, and they use it to plan instruction.

5. Principals and teachers have high expectations for all students and reject excuses for academic failure.

6. School leaders and teachers set high expectations for school discipline and the behavior of all students.

7. Schools offer students nontraditional incentives for academic success and good behavior.

8. Students feel loved and challenged.

9. While parent and community support can be an asset, principals and teachers do not see their absence as an unsurmountable barrier to student learning and achievement.

10. School leaders and teachers seek to continuously improve practices and student achievement.

11. Each school tells its own story of change and improvement, yet some commonalities exist. (p.3-4)
Included in this report, is one rural high poverty school from the Southeastern Ohio region.

River Valley Middle School in Gallia County, Ohio received Ohio’s School of Promise award in 2009 and later received a designation of “Excellent with Distinction” in Ohio’s accountability system. At the time of the award, River Valley was the only middle school on the list to that point. In the school profile developed for the study, the researchers identified four elements that the participants reported as contributing to the high achievement in the school. These include extended class periods of eighty minutes, collaboration in teacher-based teams, a broader view of the learning environment that included support personnel, and students as owners of their education (Hagelskamp & Distasi, 2012). Hagelskamp and Distasi (2012) emphasized in their report that “None of the schools examined here followed the exact same path to high achievement. The diverse stories of these nine schools provide encouraging evidence that change is possible and can occur in different ways” (p. 4). Sharing evidence of each school’s journey with other schools can be motivating and influential for their individual paths.

Global, federal, state, and local expectations and requirements for educational effectiveness affect the ways that school districts approach their own school improvement journeys. Each journey is unique, but when we provide the opportunity for each successful school to speak about their journey in their own words and images, we gain more evidence that the journey can be accomplished.
Significance of the Study

Research that includes a description of the successful rural school environment could help to close the research gap associated with this topic, provide an additional story of a successful journey, and assist other schools in reflecting on actions for their own improvement efforts. Burke (1994) explains that examples of significant and successful organization change are exceptional. “Most organization change is not significant or successful. Organization improvements do occur, even frequently, and do work, but large-scale, fundamental organization change that works is rare” (p. 11). Although there are many reasons this occurs, Burke (1994) highlights three main explanations. First, it is very difficult to create deep cultural change in an organization. Second, successful organizations especially have a hard time creating an urgent need to make significant change. Finally, we have limited knowledge about how to plan and implement successful change.

So, the main question is how did they do it? How have rural Southeastern Ohio schools improved performance on state achievement standards? What factors were involved in the change? Answers to these question could give us information about the processes that were used to make a case for change, implement a plan, and transform the school to improve results.

Research Question

This case study focused on a rural school in Southeastern Ohio that has been successful in improving student achievement. The researcher investigated the processes used by the school building faculty in transforming the school from a low achieving to a
high achieving organization, as measured by state and federal accountability standards. Information from this research study provides a deeper description of the educational successes experienced in the targeted school and illuminates how the change affected and was affected by the transformational components of the organization. The central questions include:

What changes have occurred in organizational leadership, culture, and practices in this rural Southeastern Ohio school that have led to its improved academic performance?

Sub Questions:

1. How is organizational leadership provided at the school? What changes in leadership have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

2. What are the shared values, beliefs, and customs that guide the school? What changes in culture have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

3. What school practices have changed? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

Theoretical Framework

Both Interpretivism and Organizational Change theory were used to inform the design of this research study and the data analysis procedures. Interpretivism was used as a lens for documenting the perspectives of the participants and the telling of the change journey story. Using the Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Organization Performance and Change as an heuristic device, the researcher analyzed the relationships between the
external environment, organizational leadership, and organizational culture in this school’s change from a low achieving to a high achieving organization (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014).

**Interpretivism.**

Patton (2002) explains that there is no consensus among researchers about how to classify the large variety of theoretical and philosophical perspectives that inform qualitative inquiry. Choosing a perspective for a study depends on how you decide to look at the issue, analyze the information, and the goal of the research (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). For this qualitative inquiry, the answers to these questions seem to align best with an interpretivist approach. In interpretivism, reality is socially constructed so that it can be described and represented through the diverse perspectives of a group. Through this inquiry, truth is constructed but the meaning and the search for patterns takes a more important role in the research. Ultimately, the goal of the research is to tell the story of this meaning through trustworthiness and authenticity (Butin, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). Although the meaning of the journey is the primary focus, there is also a need to combine the story with an approach for structuring the meaning of the school story.

**Organizational theory.**

The Burke-Litwin Causal Model of Organization Performance and Change was developed by Warner Burke and George Litwin in the late 70’s and 80’s while the pair were collaborating on organizational change projects for Citibank and British Airways (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014). Through Litwin’s prior work on organizational climate and
the collaborative consulting work, the researchers developed an open systems model for analyzing any organization’s performance and change elements. In this model (see Figure 1) the external environment box functions as the input dimension, ten throughput dimensions are identified as primary functions in the organization, and individual and organizational performance is identified as the output dimension. These elements include the external environment, mission and strategy, leadership, culture, structure, management practices, systems and policies, work climate, task requirements and individual skills and abilities, individual needs and abilities, and individual and organizational performance (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014).

*Figure 1. Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change (Burke; 2014).*
A feedback loop is located on the outside of the boxes in order to connect the input and the output dimensions. Arrows for the feedback loop go in both directions to illustrate that the external environment effects the organizational outcomes and vice versa. The arrows within the model are intended to show the most important linkages with the boxes arranged from top to bottom in the order of importance for organizational change (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014).

These twelve drivers of change are

1. **External Environment** – “Forces or variables outside the organization that influence or will shortly influence organizational performance” (p. 230);
2. **Mission and Strategy** – Mission is the organizations purpose and strategy is how the mission will be accomplished;
3. **Leadership** - Direction provided by a senior executive or others throughout an organization in “persuasion, influence, serving followers, and acting as a role model, and we do not mean command and control, domination, and serving edicts instead of followers” (p. 231);
4. **Culture** – The norms that an organization conforms to (both explicit and implicit) and the values that are believed;
5. **Structure** – “structure refers to the arrangement of organizational functions (e.g., accounting, manufacturing, human resource management) and operational units (e.g., the western region, customer service for product x, Goddard Space Flight Center within NASA) that signify levels of responsibility, decision making authority, and lines of communication and
relationships that lead to the implementation of the organization’s mission, goals, and strategy” (p. 232);

6. Management Practices – The behaviors that managers apply to implement the organization’s strategy;

7. Systems – “policies and procedures that are designed to help and support organizational members with their jobs and role responsibilities” (p. 233).

8. Climate – The perceptions of a group in a work unit;

9. Task Requirements and Individual Skills and Abilities – “the degree to which there is congruence between the requirements of one’s job, role, and responsibilities and the knowledge, skills, and abilities (competence or talent) of the individual holding the job” (p. 234);

10. Individual Needs and Values – “the extent to which one’s needs are met on the job” (p. 234);

11. Motivation – Aroused feelings such as achievement, affiliation, and power that are directed towards goals;

12. Individual and Organizational Performance – The individual, group, or organizational outcomes and results of the throughput dimensions in response to the external environment (Burke, 2014).

In addition to the top down arrangement of the boxes in the model, there are two dimensions that are arranged in order of importance for change: the transformational factors and the transactional factors. At the top of the model, are the transformational
elements that include the External Environment, Mission and Strategy, Leadership, Culture, and Individual and Organizational Performance (see Figure 2) (Burke, 2014).

*Figure 2.* Transformational Factors, Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change (Burke, 2014).

Burke (2002, 2014) explains that Mission and Strategy, Leadership, and Culture respond directly and most immediately to the dynamics of the External Environment. He also explains that Leadership is the conduit between the central purpose and strategy of the organization, and the culture that represents and reflects the organization’s actions.

Using an organizational change model can help to make the complexity of an organization more manageable, can make the aspects of an organization’s activities more visible, can provide a common language for discussing the organizational components, and can provide an order for the importance of components to assess (Benjamin, Naimi,
The corresponding boxes of the Burke-Litwin model can help guide the researcher in asking the right questions, gathering appropriate information, and searching for deeper meaning about each organizational component and the interconnections of the transformational factors within the system (Boone, 2012; Benjamin et al., 2012; Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014; Martins & Coetzee, 2009; Oterkiil & Ertesvåg, 2014). In addition, the model guides the understanding of organizational change as a complex system of interdependencies that must be understood and monitored in order to implement and sustain successful change initiatives.

Organizational development theories and models can be useful in helping to diagnose the nature of the required change in an educational organization and can help educational leaders develop the understanding of what systemic actions to take to make needed improvements (Burke, 1994; Burke, 2002; Oterkiil & Ertesvåg, 2014).

In using both interpretivism and organizational theory as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study, the researcher described the meaning of the journey to high achievement through a systems model of complex interrelationships. Looking at school change through the transformation components of the Burke-Litwin model allows us to make meaning of the connections between the pressures of the external environment, the school leadership processes, the cultural aspects of the organization, and the school achievement results.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this qualitative case study include the role of the researcher as the instrument, the descriptive nature of the results, and the limited sample size included...
in the study. Although the methodology will not allow for the generalizability of the research results, the findings will provide insights to consider for schools that are traveling a similar journey.

In this qualitative study, the researcher plays the role of the measuring instrument. Patton (2002) explains “The credibility of qualitative methods, therefore hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing fieldwork” (p.14). As the researcher for this study, I believe that my background experiences and education have provided me with the qualities needed to provide the trustworthiness, the authenticity, and the credibility that is required (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007).

Because the results of this qualitative case study are descriptive in nature, it is specific to this rural Southeastern Ohio school. The reader is left to determine how the results may be transferred to other populations. In addition, this case study focuses on a deep description of one school site and is not an analysis of all successful rural schools in the region. The lessons learned should be reviewed carefully and should be applied cautiously to other settings and circumstances.

The delimitations include the focus on a high poverty, rural district in Southeastern Ohio, the exclusion of the student and community perspectives, and the narrow descriptions of school improvement and school success. These specific decisions regarding the research site and focus allow a deeper analysis of the case study subject and clearly define the context of the findings.

Research has found a direct connection between achievement and the level of poverty found in a school system (Coleman et al, 1966; Phelps, 2009). In addition, rural
school districts in Southeastern Ohio have a higher percentage of students in poverty than the suburban and urban districts in the region (United States Census Bureau, 2010). For this study, I have chosen to focus on schools that are in a specific geographic region with specific demographic characteristics. Therefore, the results will not be generalizable to other school faculties from other contexts. I have also chosen to exclude the perspectives of the students, parents, and community members from the site that is selected. I am instead focusing on the perceptions and experiences of the staff and administration of the selected site.

The last delimitation, focuses on the decision to select the Ohio Department of Education Local Report Card indicators as the measure of a successful school. There are a variety of research studies that define effective school results and identify the characteristics of school communities that are successful (Banathy, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2011; Howley & Howley, 2007; Senge et al., 2000; Lezotte, 1991; Lezotte & Snyder, 2010). This research study, however, will adopt the grading system used by the Ohio Department of Education and its definition of school academic success. This study will focus instead on the research in the areas of organizational culture, leadership, and change.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this qualitative case study.

*Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*: The federally required method for measuring the academic performance of specific subgroups of students. This measure is used to
evaluate whether groups of students are making progress towards 100% proficiency in Reading and Mathematics (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

*Annual Measureable Objective (AMO):* The method used by the Ohio Department of Education to measure the amount of gap closing in academic performance of subgroups of students on the state achievement assessments in Reading and Mathematics for third grade through high school (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

*Gap Closing:* The decrease in the disparity of academic achievement scores between the total population and subgroups of students (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

*Interpretivism:* A method of inquiry in social science where reality is interpreted as socially constructed through the diverse perspectives of a group. Through this inquiry, truth is constructed but the meaning and the search for patterns takes a more important role in the research (Butin, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002).

*Local Education Agency (LEA):* The individual public or nonpublic school district or community school that is operating in the state of Ohio (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

*Ohio Improvement Process (OIP):* The four stage method used in Ohio in place of federal sanctions required by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) of 2001. The four stages help districts to identify needs, develop a focused plan, implement and monitor the plan, and evaluate the effectiveness of the plan (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).

*Organization Change:* A difference in performance created from the interaction of external and internal factors (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014).
Organization Culture: The pattern of shared basic assumptions and beliefs learned then integrated into the organization by a group as it solves problems presented by the external environment (Schein, 2010; Senge et al., 2000).

Ohio Teacher Evaluation System: The system used in Ohio to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers. This system uses both a teacher performance measure and a student growth measure in equal parts to determine a final summative evaluation rating; Accomplished, Skilled, Developing or Ineffective (Ohio Department of Education, 2015).

Performance Index (PI): A method of measuring a district for each student’s level of proficiency on all state tests taken in grades three through ten. “The percentage of students scoring at each performance level is calculated and then multiplied by the point value assigned to that performance level (Advanced=1.2; Accelerated=1.1; Proficient=1.0; Basic=0.6; Limited=0.3) (The Department of Education, 2014, p. 47).

Reading First: A program that focused on research based practices in early reading instruction. Through a Reading First grant, districts received support to apply these best practices through professional development and instructional materials into kindergarten through third grade classrooms (U.S. Department of Education Programs: Reading First, n.d., para. 2).

School Improvement: An increase in measures of student academic achievement and student growth as measured by Ohio’s Local Report Card indicators of Achievement and Progress (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).
Student achievement: Student performance in Reading and Mathematics as measured on the Ohio Achievement Assessment and the Ohio Graduation Test (Ohio Department of Education, 2014).
Chapter 2: Key Literature Review

In this age of accountability, with legislative imperatives such as President Obama’s Race to the Top (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012), President George Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), school districts are under more and more pressure to raise academic achievement levels and close achievement gaps for all students in the system. This is a difficult task for many of our nation’s schools and an even tougher job for our school districts in rural Southeastern Ohio.

In order to improve student achievement in these school communities, it is important to understand the critical elements and interrelationships of educational leadership, organizational culture, and organizational change processes. This chapter reviews the literature that is essential for understanding school improvement in rural communities. This review will provide an analysis of the key research on the rural school environment, school leadership, school culture, and the change process.

The Rural School Environment

In Improving the Yield of Rural Education Research: An Editor’s Swan Song, Coladarci (2007) recommends that studies involving rural education should determine the justification of a rural perspective by describing the rural context of the research, making comparisons to non-rural investigations, making a rural argument for the research and questions, and drawing on other disciplines that can inform the work. This section will provide a review of the research regarding the definition and context of the rural setting,
the importance of studying this setting, and the research and implications for school improvement initiatives.

**Definitions of rural.**

In *Hollow Folk* (Sherman & Henry, 1933), the authors provide a description of rural life as deficient culturally, economically, and educationally. Although the rural schools described in the book appeared to be the same as others they had seen in their own communities, Sherman and Henry (1933) characterized the achievement of rural children differently, as deficient. When confronted with objections about their perspectives, they denied that looking at learning from a rural perspective would make a difference.

A city child with kindergarten training probably knows more details of nature and nature’s ways than these children of the hills. Their senses have not been trained for careful observation. Their future mental growth would be simpler if they had learned to observe birds and flowers carefully and note the signs of the passing seasons. One must know the relationships between objects before one can comprehend the symbols of objects. (p. 130).

Now as in the past, there are a variety of different ways that rural people and rural education have been defined and described in popular culture, the media, and research. Some define rural as a locality, others as an idyll social representation, and others as just a state of economic or social development.

Most commonly in research, rural is defined using federal or state government standards such as the definition in the United States census (United States Census...
Bureau, 2010), the National Center for Education Statistics locale code (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), or the Ohio Department of Education’s typology of Ohio school districts (Ohio Department of Education, 2014). The Ohio Department of Education (2014) defines two types of rural school system typology codes: 1 Rural - High student poverty and small student population, 2 Rural-Average student poverty and very small student population (Ohio Department of Education, 2014). In addition to geographic and economic descriptors, rurality is often understood in popular media to be descriptive such as the locale of either a backward and uneducated group of inbred wildlings (Sherman & Henry, 1933; Surface, 2014) or an idyllic rural countryside of small villages and the simple life (Brown & Cromartie, 2004; Halfacre, 2004). Negative images associate rural populations with peasantry, cultural and political backwardness, and a lack of intelligence or education (Gorski, 2006; Halfacre, Champion, & Hugo, 2004; Sherman & Henry, 1933; Surface & Theobald, 2014). Surface and Theobald (2014) believed that the denigration of rural people is a part of our culture. They explained that “By defining rural residents as backward, by defining rural schools and rural school professions as second-class, our culture legitimates rural outmigration and promotes the idea that successful people reside in urban/suburban places” (p. 5). Some of the idyllic representations are very positive and linked with the physical characteristics (e.g., the fresh air, the natural environment, and the beautiful landscapes), the struggle against globalization and capitalism, and the sustainability of life through agriculture (Halfacre et al., 2004). In response to defining rural as a developmental step in the economic process, Halfacre et al. (2004) argued that “we must move away from
considering the rural as necessarily ‘residual’ and see it instead as an integral part of such settlement systems” (p. 285). Brown and Cromartie (2004) also argued against defining rural as just the reorganization of population and economic processes in a postindustrialist society. The authors offered a more comprehensive way to describe rurality.

A multidimensional approach for conceptualizing rurality that reflects economic, institutional, and cultural realities, alongside standard ecological criteria based on population size, density, and accessibility. (p. 269)

These authors believed that researchers and policy-makers need a more comprehensive definition that extends past looking at rural as one position in a rural-urban dichotomy. Researchers instead need to look at rurality as a variable that needs to be considered in rich context in order to inform research and policy making.

**Importance of rural education.**

In Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests, Wood (2008) explained that the trends in rural population have been moving downward for the last fifty years. Further, he stated that although there have been some gains during this period in attractive locations, people that have been born in rural areas in the great plains, the south, and the northeast have been leaving their communities. In response, researchers have advocated for small communities to use shared resources, invest in their schools, and use school resources to improve the rural communities (Longo, 2007; Morse, 2004; Surface & Theobald, 2014; Wood, 2008). In Why Rural Matters 2013-2014, researchers
outline “the priority policy needs of rural public schools and the communities they serve” (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014, p.1).

Data from the report concluded that in the 2010-11 school year 9,765,385 public school students attended rural public school districts which accounts for over 20% of the public school population in the United States (Johnson et al., 2014). The national average of rural public elementary and secondary schools in the United States is a little less than 33%. The largest rural enrollments are found in just four states: Texas, North Carolina, Georgia and Ohio. In a gauge of how important rural education is to the overall state educational system, Ohio ranked as Very Important on a four rating scale from Crucial to Unimportant. Johnson et al. (2014) described socioeconomic challenges in rural communities as a strong and consistent threat to high academic achievement levels. The indicators of this threat include the percent of adults with a high school diploma, the adult unemployment rate, the median household income, the percent of students who are Title I eligible, and the students eligible for free and reduced lunch. In this study, Ohio ranked socioeconomic issues as a Serious challenge to rural education. In addition, Ohio ranked the need to address policy as Crucial in addressing rural educational issues (Johnson et al., 2014).

**Rural school improvement.**

As early as 1922, Cubberly complained about changes in education in general and specifically about the rural school problem. He felt that rural schools were inefficient and rural communities were experiencing a social problem that rural schools were ill equipped to handle.
The situation calls for educational insight and leadership of a higher order, and for reorganization of rural education under some authority of larger jurisdiction and knowledge than that of the district—school trustee. (p. 95)

This policy of reorganization would involve the consolidation of small one room schoolhouses into several larger county districts. In the present day, rural schools are still experiencing challenges in education. However, the remedies advocate for a return to small schools, collaboration with the community, and the education of place (Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005; Sobel, 2004; Surface, 2014; Surface & Theobald, 2014).

Surface and Theobald (2014) outlined the many benefits of rural education including the small school size, knowledge of individual students by school staff, and less competition for student leadership roles. The authors believed that building on these and other community assets show hope for improving education and life in rural communities. In addition, they noted the academic achievement benefits of small school size. These include student and teacher attachment to the school, social bonds between staff, students, and parents, promotion of social integration for minority students, the academic achievement for students in poverty, and a higher rate of college graduation. In contrast, a study of nine rural schools that received federal School Improvement Grants found specific barriers to school improvement for those in rural locations (Rosenberg, Christianson, Angus, & Rosenthal, 2014). These challenges include remote locations, large geographical boundaries, teacher recruitment and retention barriers, and limited parent involvement in school based activities.
In another study by Starr and White (2008), researchers found that the rural context posed distinct challenges for school principals. The principals in the study identified these challenges as policy and practices designed for all schools regardless of context, the deterioration of working conditions, and the amplification of barriers that face schools in other contexts. Starr and White (2008) determined that “small rural principals are turning to each other and their communities for support and collaboration” and “leadership is increasingly viewed as a collective community responsibility in an environment of diminishing and more tightly controlled resources” (p. 10).

Another way that rural educators can improve achievement is through the connection of classrooms and communities through place-based educational activities (Sobel, 2004).

Place-based education might be characterized as the pedagogy of community, the reintegration of the individual into her homeground and the restoration of the essential links between a person and her place. (p. ii)

In his book, Sobel (2004) explained that collaborations can occur between the school faculty and the community that focus on economic development and preservation of the environment in order to meet curriculum standards, improve business in the community, and provide real-world experiences for the students. In addition, Berry (2005) explains that maintaining local knowledge is important because the work of rural areas helps us to sustain our nation’s population. The loss of agricultural expertise could have a profound effect on how we feed populations in urban and suburban areas.
**Rural poverty.**

One additional challenge in rural school districts of Southeastern Ohio, is the high percentage of students in poverty. Jensen (2013) explains that students in poverty are at high risk of not graduating from high school and that school teachers and leaders must engage students experiencing poverty in the academic and social school activities in order to meet their needs. He identified seven engagement factors that have a high correlation with student engagement tied to poverty. These factors are 1. The physical, mental, and emotional health of students; 2. The quantity and quality of vocabulary; 3. The engagement of students to put in effort and energy; 4. A positive mind-set about learning; 5. Cognitive capacity for learning; 6. Strong and secure relationships; 7. Coping with stress levels. These factors when present, have a positive effect on engaging students in poverty in order to improve achievement levels.

In contrast, there are studies that find some interventions for improving education for rural students in poverty are not helpful or sufficient (Gorski, 2006; Morsy & Rothstein, 2015). In a recent study by the Economic Policy Institute (Morsy & Rothstein, 2015), the researchers claim that school based strategies are insufficient for closing achievement gaps for students living in poverty. They identify five characteristics that depress student achievement: parent activities that impede child development, children living in single parent households, unpredictable and irregular parent work schedules, inadequate health care both preventative and primary, and the effects of lead exposure and absorption in the blood stream. The researchers believe that a focus on school improvement efforts on students and teachers does not sufficiently close achievement
gaps. Instead these efforts should work in concert with community efforts to reduce socioeconomic disadvantages.

Gorski (2006) complained that the widespread use of Ruby Payne’s A Framework for Understanding Poverty “frames poverty as a deficit among students and parents and draws on racist and classist stereotypes” (p. 1). He explained that her work portrays poverty as a single mindset when in reality there are many different experiences. In addition, he feels that she fails to consider commonalities such as inequity in educational programs, lack of access to high quality health care, and inadequate housing options. Like Sherman and Henry (1933) and Cubberly (1922), this framework portrays people in poverty as deficient and in need of an outside intervention instead of as oppressed and in need of equalizing government policies and practices.

Organizational and School Leadership

In order for any organization to compete successfully in the new global economy, the members must understand the leadership qualities needed in a climate of constant change and international challenges. Warren Bennis (2015) argued that the first change needed is to transition from hiring managers to finding leaders.

- The manager administers; the leader innovates.
- The manager is a copy; the leader is an original.
- The manager maintains; the leader develops.
- The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people.
- The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.
- The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective.
• The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why.

• The manager has his eye on the bottom line; the leader has his eye on the horizon.

• The manager imitates; the leader originates.

• The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it.

• The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his own person.

• The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing (p. 366)

Bennis (2015) believed that twenty-first century leadership can be best characterized as leadership for managing the dream. The tasks for such leaders consists mainly of communicating the organization’s vision and developing a metaphor for the vision that will endure. This section on leadership analyzes the literature in general organizational leadership, effective school leadership, and leadership in the rural context.

**Organizational leadership.**

Looking at the business literature, there have been many theories on leadership where the type or activities of leadership depend on the context of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003), the qualities of the leader (Collins, 2001; Yukl, 2002) or the work that needs to be completed (Bennis, 2015; Heifitz, 1994; Kotter, 1996; Yukl, 2002). Bolman & Deal (2003) offered four perspectives for looking at an organization to understand how it is currently functioning and what can be done to improve the organization. These four frames are structural, human resource, political and symbolic. Each of these frames suggests a leadership view that requires specific skills and processes depending on the context of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2003).
First in the structural frame, the leader focuses on design and implementing the structural aspects of the organization. A structural leader is an analyst and an architect. They are knowledgeable about all aspects of the business, they rethink relationships between structure and strategy, and they focus on implementation. Another perspective is the human resource leadership. In this frame, the leader is a catalyst and a servant. This leader believes in the people and communicates his belief system to them. The leader is visible and accessible, and empowers others. Political leadership is a frame where the leader is an advocate and a negotiator. The political leader is a realist who assess the distribution of power and interests, builds connections with stakeholders, and tries to persuade, negotiate or even coerces when necessary to get what the organization needs. The last frame is the symbolic leader who acts as a prophet or a poet. This leader inspires others through action, uses symbols to set the stage for change, communicates the vision, and tells stories to connect the vision with the audience. Bolman and Deal (2003) explain that ideally leaders would use all four perspectives in leading an organization through identifying and building on their strengths or developing a team to compensate for weaknesses.

Bolman and Deal (2003) state that “all good leaders must have the right stuff—such qualities as vision, strength, and commitment that are essential to leadership” (p.339). Trait theories of leadership describe the types of attributes or behaviors that make a good leader. Some examples include authoritative leadership, autocratic leadership and laissez-faire leadership. In Good to Great, Jim Collins (2001) studied organizations that sustained high performance and found what he called Level 5 leaders. He described a Level 5
leader as one that “Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will” (p. 20). These leaders are ambitious but he found that their focus was foremost on the institution and not themselves. In order to be a level 5 leader one must also embody the traits of the other four levels: 1. highly capable, 2. contributing team member, 3. competent manager, 4. effective leader (Collins, 2001, p. 20). Yukl (2002) describes three additional types of trait leaders: charismatic, transitional, and transformational.

Charismatic leadership theories include a foundation from the ideas of sociologist Max Weber but have been refined by other researchers. The basis of the theory is that a leader with charisma emerges during a social crisis with an innovative solution that seems attainable and attracts followers (Yukl, 2002). Although early versions of the theory maintained that charisma is about the leader’s attributes, recent research determined that the context of the situation plays a role in addition to attributes. Transactional leadership focuses on the exchange process where the leader motivates followers by convincing them that actions will be in their self-interest. Transformational leaders may also have a charismatic approach and appeal to self-interests but tend to appeal to the moral values of their followers (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003). According to Bass, the leader transforms and motivates followers by (1) making them more aware of the importance of the task outcomes, (2) inducing them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization or team, and (3) activating their higher needs. (Yukl, 2002, p. 253)
Yukl (2002) proposes a set of actions for transformational leaders that include building a new vision or strengthening an old one, explaining how the vision can be accomplished, being optimistic and positive, expressing confidence in the followers, using symbols to reinforce the values behind the vision, leading by example in day to day interactions, and empowering followers to carry out actions.

Contingency theories of leadership explain how leader traits or behaviors are either enhanced or diminished by situational variables. These theories include the path-goal theory, the multiple linkage model, leader substitute theory, LPC theory, normative decision, and cognitive resources theory. Yukl (2002) found that these theories do not provide leaders with many guiding principles because of the variety of variables that can be encountered. However, he believes that these insights gained from contingency theories can be useful: use more planning for complex tasks, consult with people who have relevant knowledge, provide direction to people who work independently, provide more direction and communication when there is a crisis, monitor closely when a task is important or a staff member is unreliable, provide coaching to new and inexperienced staff, and support people who are doing stressful work. Heifetz (1994) proposed a framework for looking at situations that would help leaders identify variables in a task and provide guidance for adaptive work. He identified three situational types that require leaders to determine if the problem definition is clear or unclear, if the solution and implementation requires learning, who has the primary responsibility for the work, and the kind of work required. Leadership in Type III situations requires adaptive work and a learning strategy.
School leadership.

In *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse: How to Support and Sustain Educational Innovation*, Schlechty (2001) explains that

To make the change that will ensure that schools can meet public expectations and become places where most students are successful and all students are more successful than they were, leaders must attend to structural and cultural change.

(p. 175)

He believes that transactional leadership that focuses on procedural and technological change is insufficient and that transformational leadership is the key to developing successful achievement in schools. Others (Tobin, 2014; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) believe that it takes both specific leadership behaviors and organizational management skills to improve schools and increase academic achievement.

In *School Leadership that Works* (Marzano et al., 2005), the researchers identified twenty-one responsibilities of a school leader that are correlated with student achievement. The results of the factor analysis determined that all of the identified responsibilities are important for incremental change in school processes and practices. These behaviors assist leaders in applying solutions that are known and have worked in the past. However, only seven of the responsibilities studied were important for transformational change. These responsibilities include knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; optimizing or inspiring and driving innovations; intellectual stimulation regarding most current research; change agency or challenging the status quo;
monitoring and evaluating school practices; flexibility or adapting leadership behavior to the situation; and operating from a strong set of beliefs and ideals.

In a study by Sun and Leithwood (2012), the researchers identified eleven transformational school leadership practices. They found that two practices, “Building Collaborative Structures” and “Providing Individualized Support” had significant but small effects on student achievement (p. 22). Conclusions of the study indicated the need to study transformational school practices in the context of the leader’s work and the determination that some practices make a larger contribution to student achievement than others. In a meta-analysis of three types of principal’s trait leadership styles, researchers found a large effect of transformational leadership on the commitment of school staff and that as the transformational leader behaviors increased the staff commitment increased (Aydin, Sarier, & Uysal, 2013).

Instructional leadership is an additional theory that describes the dimensions and functions of effective school leaders (Hallinger, 2005). The three dimensions of instructional leadership are identified as “Defining the School’s Mission”, “Managing the Instructional Program”, and “Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate”. Hallinger (2005) further explained that the instructional leadership research indicates that effective leaders perform the following functions:

- creating a shared sense of purpose in the school, including clear goals focused on student learning;
- fostering the continuous improvement of the school through cyclical school development planning that involves a wide range of stakeholders;
• developing a climate of high expectations and a school culture aimed at innovation and improvement of teaching and learning;
• coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student learning outcomes;
• shaping the reward structure of the school to reflect the school’s mission;
• organizing and monitoring a wide range of activities aimed at the continuous development of staff; and
• being a visible presence in the school, modeling the desired values of the school’s culture. (p. 13)

Hallinger (2003) found conceptual similarities and differences between instructional leadership and transformational leadership. He reported that the similarities between the two approaches were more significant than the differences and that a link between the type of leadership and the school context could provide an effective approach for improvement. In addition, Darling-Hammond and Rothman (2011) identified instructional leadership behaviors in high-performing global educational systems identified in Finland, Ontario, and Singapore. Principals in these schools are recruited for their knowledge of curriculum and instruction, their ability to provide support and guidance to teachers, and other leadership attributes.

In a review of the evolution of leadership theories, Stewart (2006) states “it is imperative that educational leaders support their theories with empirical evidence that supports student achievement. Moreover, it is necessary to collectively determine the purpose of school leadership and to make changes in our school systems that positively impact student learning” (p. 24). In addition to theories focused on leadership style
behaviors that improve academic achievement, researchers have studied the importance of the moral and ethical dimensions of school leadership (Camron-McCabe, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005).

In *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Fullan (2003) argues that we have a moral responsibility to transform our schools at the system level to improve academic achievement for students.

Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society. (p. 29)

Fullan (2003) explains that leaders can accomplish this by making a difference at the individual, school, regional, and societal levels through focused moral purpose. In addition, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2005) believe that twenty-first century leaders need to use ethical paradigms to lead democratic schools. The ethical paradigms that they identify include the ethic of justice, the ethic of critique, the ethic of care, and the ethic of the profession. The researchers advocate for using a multiparadigm approach to decision making that holds the best interests of the student at the center of professional decision making.

*Rural context.*

Unlike principals in urban and suburban settings, rural school principals are not able to delegate managerial responsibilities and must balance the unique expectations of the rural community with the mandates of state and federal requirements. Woodrum (as
cited in Howley, Pendarvis & Woodrum, 2005) explained that the rural school principal is a kind of generalist who must complete a variety of transactional tasks such as maintaining relationships with families and community, acting as liaison between the school faculty and health agencies, or preparing paperwork for state or federal requirements. In this way, the principal brings into the school the rural values of independence and self-reliance. However, this leaves little time or energy for transformational initiatives. These researchers (Howley et al., 2005) explained that one main responsibility is for the rural school principal to understand and respond to the culture of the local rural community. The socioeconomic, the cultural, and the political context can affect the type of leadership and leadership behaviors that will work for a rural principal. L. Johnson (2007) studied the use of culturally responsive leadership practices in high poverty, high challenge schools. These practices “affirm students’ home cultures, increase parent community involvement in poor and culturally diverse neighborhoods, and advocate for change in larger society” (p.49). This type of leadership assists principals in changing practices at the school level, as well as empowering the principal and others to make transformational change in school culture and in society as a whole through resisting or challenging the status quo.

**Alternative views.**

Other research focuses on this aspect of leadership as subversive, as resistance to the current status (Johnson, L., 2007; Theoharis, 2007), or as changing the way we view school culture and leadership (Cambron-McCabe, 2006; Howley, 2007). Culturally responsive and social justice leaders fight to bring about changes in school practices that
make the educational environment more responsive to the needs of all constituencies in the school community. L. Johnson (2007) found that leaders who incorporate culturally relevant practices “challenge the status quo of inequitable assessment practices, incorporate students’ cultural knowledge into the school curriculum, and work with parents and community activists for social change in the larger community” (p. 55). Theoharis (2007) argued that to go beyond what he described as typical “good leadership” principals must become social justice leaders. Principals must provide leadership that enacts social justice and provides equitable schools. Theoharis (2007) found that by enacting these resistance practices, school administrators were able to increase student achievement, improve school structures, improve staff capacity, and strengthen the school and community.

Other researchers found that traditional views of school structure and leadership constrain the progress that can be made in the educational environment (Camron-McCabe, 2006; Howley & Howley, 2007). Camron-McCabe (2006) explained that using organizational theory to describe school leadership does not allow us to transform school results. A different kind of school leadership is only possible if we change our paradigm from a bureaucratic and industrial perspective to viewing school systems as a living organism with the ability to change, grow, and create. Through this paradigm, school leaders will become able to embody the values of justice, respect, care, spirituality, and equity. L. Johnson (2007) explained that in critical theory, leadership comes from the direction of the group and the leader is performing the directive actions that are collective in nature. The administrator uses critical theory to examine how the school institution and
beliefs of the rich or socially accepted support the current structures and school order. The critical theory leader would then confront the status quo and intervene to promote social justice practices.

**Organizational Culture**

In *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Schein (2010) explained that the concept of culture is not just a way to represent norms and values, but instead conveys the concept of its elements which consist of the structural stability, the depth of the understandings, the breadth of the coverage, and the patterning and integration of the cultural elements into a larger paradigm or whole. He defines culture using the understanding of these elements.

The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 18)

In this section, the analysis of key literature focuses on the elements of organizational culture, research on effective school culture, the relationship between leadership and culture, the relationship between culture and the change process, and the interaction between the larger culture and school culture.

**Elements of culture.**

Instead of viewing culture as something abstract and unknowable, Schein (2010) explained that culture can be studied as something observable and that leaders can
through careful analysis, discover the essence of the culture in an organization. In order to observe and analyze culture, researchers must study the three levels of culture. First, artifacts such as the visible products of the group must be collected or observed. Schein (2010) explained that although these artifacts are easy to observe, they are difficult to decipher and require researchers to dive into a deeper level of analysis. The next level requires researchers to inquire into the espoused beliefs and values of a group through speaking with the members of the organization. An inquiry into the beliefs and values can lead to a deeper understanding of contradictory or unexplained artifacts and behavior. In order to acquire a deeper level of understanding, a researcher must then go to the third level to identify the basic assumptions that underlie the culture of the organization.

In addition to the levels of culture, Schein (2010) explained that along with understanding the different levels of culture, researchers must also understand the interactions between subcultures that exist within the organization. He found that there are at least three generic subcultures that exist within every organization: the operator subculture, the engineering/design subculture, and the executive subculture. In addition, organizational cultures operate in a context that includes macrocultures that influence how an organization evolves. Schein (2010) explained that in order for an organization to be effective, these subcultures must be in alignment with each other.

Another element of culture that must be understood is the content of culture or how cultural assumptions help the organization perform. Schein (2010) explained that the content dimensions of culture come from the issues that organizations face “(1) survival in and adaptation to the external environment, and (2) integration of the internal
processes to ensure the capacity to survive and adapt” (p. 73). These external sets of problems can be studied through shared assumptions of the following elements: mission and strategy, goals, means, measurement, and correction. The way an organization deals with external survival issues influences the internal integration of the group. Internal problems of the group include creating a common language, defining group boundaries, developing relationship norms, developing norms of rewards and punishment, and explaining the uncontrollable events. Processes for dealing with both external and internal problems occur simultaneously within the organization.

Other important assumptions included in culture are assumptions about reality, truth, and information; assumptions about time and space; and assumptions about human nature. Schein (2010) explained that one of the most important categories of culture are these assumptions about reality. These assumptions can exist at the group and individual levels and they depend on shared language, context, and consensus by the group. The way a group conceptualizes reality has a strong influence on the conception of time which is necessary for avoiding uncertainty and anxiety within the organization. In addition, assumptions about relationships help an organization create social order by managing the meaning of interactions. Schein (2010) concluded that “Culture is deep, wide, complex, and multidimensional, so we should avoid the temptation to stereotype organizational phenomena in terms of one or two salient dimensions” (p. 156).

**School culture.**

In the nineteenth century, the United States system of schooling was designed to produce workers for the industrial age. This system was designed to transmit the culture
to students from a variety of backgrounds, act as an autonomous agency separate from other agencies, provide education to students from first grade through eighth and into high school, focus on the basics, organize to present information to students through teacher presentation, and use textbook based resources confined within the classroom. Banathy (2001) argued that school systems need a revolutionary change of culture from this industrial model in order to be successful in the twenty-first century information/knowledge based economy. This new culture for educational organizations has been viewed as an innovative social system that fosters organizational learning (Banathy, 2001; Dweck, 2006; Higgins, Ishmaru, Holcombe, & Fowler, 2012; Senge et al., 2000) and as a system that fosters a continuous improvement philosophy (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Thornton, Shepperson, & Canavero, 2007; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004).

In *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who cares About Education* (Senge et al., 2000), the authors explained that schools need to become organizations where staff have greater autonomy to act on their knowledge, draw their own conclusions, and risk failure in order to build the capacity for success in the future. The researchers believe that these skills are the ones that are developed in learning organizations. Dweck (2006) found that one important element that will facilitate a learning culture is a growth mindset. With this mindset, leaders believe that the outcomes for a school and students are not fixed by ability, but can be improved through effort and practice. Senge et al. (2000) outlined the following key disciplines of organizational learning: 1. Personal Mastery, the practice of communicating a coherent
image of the result you want to create in your life; 2. Shared Vision, the focus on mutual
purpose in an organization; 3. Mental Models, the reflection on your attitudes and
reflections as well as those around you; 4. Team Learning, the skills of group interaction
such as dialogue and discussion; 5. Systems Thinking, the understanding of
interdependency and change in order to achieve common goals. In addition, researchers
have found that organizations that learn “are able to disseminate information, problem-
solve, experiment, and analyze their own and others experiences” (Thornton et al., 2007,
p. 50). In contrast, Collinson (2010) found that when schools work to maintain the status
quo a school can become a “stuck system”. In this type of organization she found leaders
that “hold narrow perceptions of learning, suppress inquiry and self-examination, rely on
a culture of dependency and distrust, and exercise minimal reaction to parental pressure
and state policies” (p. 214). Collinson (2010) further explained that becoming a learning
organization depends on the leader’s understandings of learning and the leader’s abilities
to help the staff of a school organization learn in ways that benefit the school.

Professional Learning Communities are school groups that focus on assisting the
organization in learning ways to ensure that all students are learning in the educational
environment. The development of these groups centers on three main ideas: ensuring that
students are learning, building a culture of collaboration, and focusing on results (DuFour
et al., 2005). Zmuda et al. (2004) found that developing the school as a learning system
leads to a continuous improvement process that enhances the school environment and
improves the educational outcomes for students. Although organizational learning that
consists of high levels of psychological safety and experimentation have been found to be
important for high performance in schools, Higgins et al. (2012) argued that other elements such as a strong sense of accountability must also be present. They contend that leadership that reinforces learning and holds members accountable is another essential element needed for high performance.

**School culture, leadership, and the change process.**

Schein (2010) found that culture in organizations generally comes from three sources: 1. the leaders who founded the organization; 2. the learning experiences of the members as an organization evolves; and 3. new members or new leaders of an organization. He explained that leaders use six primary embedding mechanisms and six secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms to teach members how to think, feel, and behave. The primary tools include: what leaders pay attention to; how leaders react to emergencies; what leaders directly model and teach; how leaders reward and punish; and how leaders hire and promote employees. The secondary tools include environmental and symbolic structures and events that reinforce the leader’s values and beliefs. Researchers have found that leaders can understand and influence school culture (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Reeves, 2006; Wagner, 2006) and that building a learning culture is essential for high performance (Beabout, 2012; Burello & Reitzug, 1993; Seashore, 2009; Shachar, Gavin, & Shlomo, 2010).

Wagner (2006) argued that school leaders need to understand and enhance the culture of schools in order to improve school outcomes. In addition to student achievement, Wagner (2006) found that the culture of a school affects staff satisfaction, community support, and parent engagement in the school community. In order to assess
and understand school culture, he proposed that leaders use a school culture tool that assesses important elements such as professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-efficacy. Reeves (2009) explained that “policy change without cultural change is an exercise in futility and frustration” (p. 92). He found that there are four essentials for leaders to consider in making lasting cultural changes: explicitly define and communicate what will not be changed, recognize and implement personal changes in leadership actions, use the right tools to make change in your school district, be willing to complete all tasks and believe that every job in the school system has value.

If leadership actions are not in congruence with the culture of a school, the changes that school leaders attempt to implement can be met with conflict, manipulation, and resistance (Beabout, 2010; Burello & Reitzug, 2001; Shachar et al., 2010). Beabout (2010) concluded that turbulence, or the forces that have the potential to impact a school’s results, must be at a moderate degree and structures for collaborative processing must be in place in order for sustainable change to occur. Shachar et al. (2010) found that educational reforms can be in conflict with the principal’s values and beliefs, that change agents in the school system must understand organizational and instructional culture, and that it is critical to build support groups within and outside the school system. They suggest that implementation of a change in policy or practice must be viewed by how it aligns with the current culture of the targeted school. Burello and Reitzig (2001) also found that leadership must respond to the context of the school and the member’s beliefs in order for change to be regarded as positive.
Researchers have also found that there is an interaction between the impact of the leader’s vision and actions, the values of the community, and the views of the school faculty in the development of school culture (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Woodrum, 2004). Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) found that leadership acts by a principal influenced school culture and that the school’s culture influenced the principal’s leadership. They found that it is even likely that the school culture has a greater impact on the principal than the principal has on the school culture. In addition, the larger societal culture has an impact on the culture of the school. Woodrum (2004) studied the impact of Appalachian culture on the implementation of school reform efforts and the culture changes that affect student outcomes. He found that the mission of No Child Left Behind was in conflict with the values and beliefs of the Appalachian culture. Woodrum (2004) explained that the accountability reforms prepare students for “vastly different lives from the ones they presently lead, often at great distances from their communities and families” (p. 9). Compared to Non-Appalachian families, these rural families find themselves in the middle of two competing cultures; one that values technology, a broader curriculum and far-reaching opportunities; and one that values interdependence, family unity, and opportunities of place.

Organizational Change

Burke (2014) explained that there is presently a need for greater understanding of organization change because the current external environment is changing more rapidly than our organizations.
Organizations change all the time, each and every day. The change that occurs in organizations is, for the most part, unplanned and gradual. Planned organization change, especially on a large scale, affecting the entire system, is unusual—not exactly an everyday occurrence. Revolutionary change—a major overhaul of the organization resulting in a modified or entirely new mission, a change in strategy, leadership, and culture—is indeed rare. (p.1).

Change has been described as being systemic and systematic (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Kotter, 1996; Schein, 2010; Reeves, 2009), planned or unplanned (Burke, 2014), and evolutionary or revolutionary (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014; Schein, 2010). Other researchers focus on describing the importance of context or culture in change (Schein, 2010; Connolly et al., 2011), the roles of the leader and members (Kotter, 1996; Seashore, 2009), the level of change: individual, group, and system (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014), and the strategies for implementation (Hermann, Dragoset, & James-Burdumy, 2014; Kotter, 1996; Reeves, 2009); overcoming resistance (Heath & Heath, 2011; Kegan & Lahey, 2001, Kotter, 1995, Kotter, 1996), and sustaining change over time (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006).

**Change theories.**

Burke (2014) in an overview of the history and foundations of organization change, explained that organizations act as systems and that these systems change in much the same way as living organisms. Organizations like living systems operate with patterns, structure, and process. In this way, an organizations and its change can be viewed as an open system with inputs, throughputs, and outputs.
Change in an organizational system can then be planned or unplanned, evolutionary or revolutionary, and can occur at the individual, group or organization levels (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014). Burke (2014) explained that unplanned change occurs on a regular basis and can positively or negatively impact the outputs of the system. Planned change, however, to be successful must be developed with a knowledge of organization systems and the elements of change. One aspect that needs to be understood is that change can occur in a gradual or evolutionary way over time, or it can occur in a transformational or revolutionary way. Burke (2014) explained that it is helpful to think about these two types of change occurring at an individual, group or system level. At each level, change occurs as a process described by Lewin that progresses with unfreezing, moving, and refreezing (Burke, 2014). Schein (2010) elaborated on this process by adding details to Lewin’s initial stages: 1) Unfreezing, motivation for change, includes disconfirming the status quo, creating anxiety or unrest, and providing psychological safety to overcome anxiety; 2) Moving, learning new concepts, includes identifying role models and looking for solutions and trying them; 3) Refreezing, internalizing what was learned, includes incorporating learning into identity and into relationships. Evolutionary and revolutionary change can occur at all three levels and a change in one level can have interactions across the other two levels (Burke, 2014).

Although evolutionary change is occurring in the organization every day, major or planned revolutionary change does not happen easily. Kotter (1996) summarized an eight stage process that works to overcome barriers in making transformational change.
• Establishing a Sense of Urgency – examining the external environmental realities and discussing potential crisis or opportunity;
• Creating the Guiding Coalition – putting a group together to work as a team and lead change;
• Developing a Vision and Strategy – directing the change by forming strategies that lead to the vision;
• Communicating the Change Vision – using different methods to communicate the new vision and further developing strategies;
• Empowering Broad-Base Action – removing obstacles, changing systems and structures, and encouraging innovation and risk taking;
• Generate Short-Term Wins – planning for improvement, creating wins, and rewarding workers;
• Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change – changing systems, structures and policies that don’t fit, hiring people who can implement the change, and reinvigorating the process;
• Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture- creating better performance, articulating the connections between new behaviors and success, and ensuring leadership development and planning leadership succession. (p. 21)

Kotter (1996) developed these sequential steps in the change process as a pathway to overcome the main barriers to successful change at a system and group level. Kegan and Lahey (2001) found that resistance to change at the individual level was connected to an individual’s subconscious goals and could be addressed through uncovering a member’s
competing goals and assumptions about reality. In addition, Heath and Heath (2011) concluded that in order to overcome resistance to change in a school district, a leader must understand the conflicts of interest that occur when we think about change. To do this, a leader must do three things for the members: provide direction to the rational side, motivate the emotional side, and shape the path to change.

School improvement.

School principals are central to successful school improvement in their role as both a catalyst for change and an agent of support for teachers during the change process (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Researchers have found that planned revolutionary change in school performance requires that a leader must understand the journey to school improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2011), the process for planning and implementing change (Reeves, 2009), the elements for sustainability (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006), and effective strategies for improvement (Hermann et al., 2014).

Hallinger and Heck (2011) found that in order to successfully change school performance, school leadership practices should correspond to one of the four sequential stages of the school improvement journey. These approaches to leadership are “(1) coming out of special measures, (2) taking ownership, (3) developing creativity, and (4) everyone a leader” (p. 4). In addition, they concluded that the relationship between leadership practices and improved learning capacity is “one of mutual influence or reciprocity” (p. 22). At the beginning of the journey when the academic capacity is weak, principal leadership practices are essential. Then, when academic capacity is improved collaborative leadership is able to sustain the change.
In the initial stages of school improvement, the principal as the school leader becomes the catalyst for change (Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Reeves, 2009; Seashore, 2009). Reeves (2009) identified leadership practices for improved results. These practices include: Creating the conditions for change – assessing the culture and readiness for personal and organizational change; Planning Change- identifying the change focus, selecting a team, and building team capacity; Implementing Change- ensuring implementation, gaining short-term wins, and building community support; and Sustaining Change- maintaining excellence and supporting teacher leadership. Although the researcher above identified the assessment of culture as a practice in school improvement, Connolly et al. (2011) found that the way that school leaders implement change is conditioned by their perspective of organizational culture. These perspectives on culture can include the view of culture as an external reality, an interpretation, as organization, as competing subcultures, and as a process. In addition, Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) argued that the lack of sustainability in school improvement rests with practitioners not taking the political, historical, and longitudinal aspects of change into consideration. The researchers identified forces that interfere with sustaining school improvement. These forces include waves of reform, leadership succession, student and community demographics, the generation of the teachers, and school interrelationships. In order for change to be sustainable, the researchers advocated for establishing an informed theory or strategy of change that focuses on deep learning for all students.
Alternative views.

In contrast to the leadership practices for school improvement, the federal
government has identified school practices that they believe lead to improved results for
schools. Hermann et al. (2014) studied implementation of the practices by low-
performing schools that have adopted the four school intervention models required by the
federal School Improvement Grant programs. The four change models are
transformation, turnaround, restart, and closure. The researchers found that on average
schools adopted 20 of the 30 practices, no school systems adopted all of the practices,
and almost every school reported adopting a different combination of practices. The most
commonly adopted practices were “(1) using data to inform and differentiate instruction,
(2) increasing technology access for teachers or using computer assisted instruction, (3)
providing ongoing professional development that involves working collaboratively” (p.
18).

Wrigley (2011) criticized the school improvement paradigm and research on
school leadership. “They suffer from a failure to look critically at the current nature of
schooling and the relationship between school systems and society, or to explore what
kind of education might help to bring about a desirable future” (p. 65). He argued that
school change should focus on social justice and the development of democratic
leadership. Elements of this paradigm would empower marginalized students to become
members of society by exploring new ways of managing learning, teaming to plan social-
constructivist approaches to learning, connecting curriculum to real life, building
relationships that allow students to have a voice in learning and countering the effects of the impoverished or oppressed community members.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter, the key literature was presented on the effects and interactions of the rural context, organizational leadership practices, organizational culture, and organizational change on the school improvement practices of high achieving schools. The literature reveals that the pressures of the external environment require a school organization to develop a system of continuous improvement that embeds organizational learning into the culture of the educational environment. In order to accomplish this change, transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership practices need to be engaged according to the context of the school faculty’s values, beliefs and shared assumptions. Leadership in context is both the catalyst for change and the agent of support in the school improvement process.

Contrarian literature advocates for a different approach or paradigm that focuses on the social culture and incorporates critical theory and social justice practices. In these perspectives, leadership comes from grassroots resistance to the culture of inequity or from the group’s permission for leadership practices from the administrator. The product of change is social justice and equity in opportunity which then leads to improved academic performance.

Given the continuing struggle to meet the high expectations of state and federal requirements, illuminating and sharing the story of a successful school journey with the
details of these interacting elements, makes this phenomenological case study an important and relevant contribution to the school improvement research.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction and Purpose

This chapter describes the methodology that was used in completing this phenomenological case study focused on a rural Southeastern Ohio school's ten year journey to improved academic achievement. Included are the description of the research questions, the research design, the site selection, the study participants, the data collection, the data analysis, the credibility of the design, and the limitations and the delimitations of this methodology.

The purpose of this study is to share the story of a Southeastern Ohio school system that has been successful in meeting state and federal requirements for improving academic achievement with students in Reading and Mathematics. The research questions center around the educational leadership, organizational culture, and practices of the school system during the change process.

Research Questions

Information from this research study can help to provide a deeper description of the educational successes experienced in the targeted school and can help to answer questions surrounding this educational change. The central questions include: What changes have occurred in organizational leadership, culture, and practices in this rural Southeastern Ohio school system that have led to its improved academic performance?
Sub Questions:

1. How is organizational leadership provided at the school level? What changes in leadership have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

2. What are the shared values, beliefs, and customs that guide the school faculty? What changes in culture have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

3. What school practices have changed? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

Research Design

This phenomenological case study uses a qualitative approach to inquiry which will provide the potential to gain detailed knowledge about the rare example of a successfully changed organization and the potential for new information in the areas of needed research. A qualitative study requires the researcher to begin with a perspective, assumptions, or a worldview, and to develop questions or predictions about a social issue or phenomena (Creswell, 2007). These research questions then direct the researcher to collect data regarding this issue or phenomenon, to analyze the data for themes or patterns, and then to generate findings that can be used to extend the literature or advise an action (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). In addition, Glesne (2006) explains that “qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes” (p. 29). A qualitative approach was selected because the questions presented in this case study align with a postpositive tradition and
this approach enhances the researcher’s ability to capture in rich description the individuals’ point of view in the context of their every day school lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

**Phenomenological case study.**

A phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry was chosen in order to describe the experiences of the teachers, principal, and other educational leaders that participated in this Southeastern Ohio school’s journey through the change to a high performing organization. Patton (2002) explains that a phenomenographic approach “is a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (p. 104). Phenomenology has a long history as a philosophical approach and has a variety of perspectives for use as a methodology (Dowling, 2007). This particular approach was chosen in order for the researcher to develop descriptions of the educators lived experiences individually and to develop a “combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2007, p. 16). Using this interpretive practice requires the researcher to “Bracket” or suspend beliefs in order to understand how the experience of becoming a high performing school became an objective reality for the educator’s in this school building (Holstein & Gubrium, 2007).

In combination with phenomenology, a case study approach was used in this research in order to provide insight into the elements surrounding a school’s transformation from a low achieving to a high achieving organization. Stake (2005) explained that a case study is not a methodology but a choice for the subject of the study.
In addition, Glesne (2006) stated that the case is a “bounded integrated system with working parts” (p. 13). For this dissertation, the focus was on an instrumental case study where the phenomenon is examined to provide insight into the issue of improved academic achievement at the school level. In an instrumental case study, “The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). In this research study, the case, or system to be studied will be the targeted improved school which will provide insight into the organizational culture, educational leadership, and practices surrounding improved student academic achievement at this site. The working parts of the system being the teachers, principal, and educational leaders who have experienced the described phenomenon and the transformational components of the school organization.

**Site Selection**

This phenomenological case study requires the selection of both a shared experience and a bounded system to study. In order to answer the central research question, the researcher selected a school faculty in rural Southeastern Ohio that has improved student achievement at the school level over a five year period from 2010 to 2014. The site selection focused on a group of veteran educators that have been employed at the school building for the five year period and the specific case of improved school achievement. Improvement in this school system is defined as a positive change in the designation on the school performance index and a rating in the value added scores of above expected growth.
A school faculty in rural Southeastern Ohio was chosen because of the unique culture of the region and because of the need for school improvement. Rural Southeastern Ohio school systems are the focus of this study because of the need for more information about the rural school culture and the need for improvement in academic achievement for students in poverty (Hagelskamp & DiStasi, 2012; Herrmann, Dragoset, & James-Burdumy, 2014; Holey, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005; Gardner, 1983; Jensen, 2013; Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014).

**Sampling strategy.**

For this research, the purpose was to understand the school culture, educational leadership, and improvement processes present in a school in rural Southeastern Ohio that has increased academic achievement over a five year period. Choosing this specific school building faculty required an intensity sample using the purposeful sampling approach. Marshall and Rossman (2011) describe intensity sampling as involving “information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (p. 111). This study required that the researcher choose an excellent and rich example of the case, but not a highly unusual case. Patton (2002) states that “Extreme or deviant cases may be so unusual as to distort the manifestation of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 234).

Therefore, a building in a Southeastern Ohio school district was chosen that met the specific characteristics of the school performance identified in the case definition. The building was chosen from rural Southeastern Ohio in State Support Team (SST) Region 16. The Ohio Department of Education has developed sixteen regional support centers that provide professional development and technical support to school districts in
the implementation of the Ohio Improvement Process tools. These tools are used by school districts to improve instructional practices and student performance by using a five step continuous improvement process. School districts in the following counties are provided support through SST 16: Athens, Gallia, Hocking, Meigs, Perry, and Washington. A school level faculty from one of these counties was selected that has an Above Expected Performance Index, grade A or B, and has shown positive change in the Performance Index in the past five years. The chosen school system also has an overall Value Added score at the above average, grade A or B, rating, and subgroup scores with at least an average rating, grade C or above. Both the Performance Index and Value Added measurements used by the Ohio Department of Education were selected to include the academic achievement and the academic growth expectations set through the federal ESEA waiver.

**Report card review.**

In a review of the 2013-2014 district report cards, there are currently sixty-nine school buildings in twenty-four school districts that met the location criteria for this study. Performance Index grades ranged from B to D with a low score of 82.3 points. Of these sixty-nine school level buildings, only eleven met the criteria established for a high performing school with improved performance over the past five year period and an above average Value Added rating. These eleven schools had a grade of B for the Performance Index and scores that ranged from a high of 107 points to a low of 97.3. In order to narrow the selection, the researcher eliminated four school level buildings that were located in city school systems and five school level buildings that experienced a
downward trend in the Performance Index in the 2013-2014 school year. This left two school level buildings that met the location and academic achievement criteria. The final case, South Elementary, was selected from these two school level buildings because of the larger gain in Performance Index points; 6.2 compared to 2.7 for the Indian River school. Table 1 provides information from the chosen schools 2013-2014 Local Report card. The district and school names are substituted with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Table 1.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Black Diamond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>South Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged %</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White %</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Index Points</td>
<td>97.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Index Grade</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase from 2009-2010 to 2013-2014</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Added – Overall</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Added – Gifted</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Added – Students in the Lowest 20%</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Added – Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The school district selected is defined by the Ohio Department of Education in their district typology as code 1 Rural - High student poverty & small student population. The researcher used a peer review process as an external check of the sampling results. Sampling criteria and evidence from selected districts was reviewed and peer input was collected.

**Participants: Rapport and Access**

The participants for this research were chosen from the school site selected as meeting the criteria for this study. Again, the participants were chosen using purposeful sampling. An initial meeting was arranged with the district superintendent through a phone call to the district office. In this face to face meeting, the researcher informed the district leader of the purpose of the study, the role of the participants, the research methods, the procedures to maintain confidentiality, and how the findings will be used. The superintendent was provided with a copy of the teacher consent form, and a draft schedule for the initial interviews. An opportunity to ask questions was provided before the request for the final approval. Once superintendent approval was received, one teacher from each grade level, the school administrator, and any other leaders identified by the principal were contacted to participate in one-on-one interviews. The interviewees were identified from a list of all teachers that have been employed in the school system from the 2010 through the 2014 school years. The final selection of participants in the study was chosen to ensure that each individual experienced the transformation to a high achieving school in order for the researcher to compose a description of a common
understanding (Creswell, 2007). The final list of participants was reviewed with the building principal.

**Informed consent.**

After the list of teacher’s had been finalized, participants were invited to an informational session and were provided with an oral explanation, written materials explaining the study and their commitment, and an opportunity to ask questions or have concerns addressed. Once they had the opportunity to consider the information provided, they were free to sign their written consent to participate in the study. The information provided emphasized that participation was voluntary and that there was no compensation or school consequences for their participation decision. The consent letter included:

- An explanation of the study, it’s purpose, and the role of the participant;
- The voluntary nature of the participation;
- The risks or discomforts that may be experienced due to participation;
- The individual and societal benefits of the research;
- The number and length of the interviews;
- The types of documents and artifacts to be collected;
- The process for the confidentiality of the original interview files and the protection of each participant’s identity;
- The contact information for questions, concerns, or complaints.

Once each teacher made the decision to sign consent and participate in the study, they were provided a copy of the invitation letter to keep for their personal records. These
procedures ensured that the participants had enough time to have their questions answered, that the risk of coercion or excessive influence was minimized, and that participants had access to the researcher for answers to their continuing questions or concerns at all times during the research. Patton (2002) explains that “Protection of human subjects’ procedures are now an affirmation of our commitment to treat all people with respect. And that is as it should be” (p. 271).

**Confidentiality of records and identity.**

In addition to gaining participant consent, maintaining confidentiality of interview records and participant identity procedures were used to ensure that the people who agreed to participate in the study were protected. School employees may be reluctant to share information that might be perceived as negative or unflattering to the employer (Glesne, 2006). In order to minimize the risk for these participants and protect any sensitive information, the researcher maintained the documents and audio tapes without personal identifiers and kept a master code list of pseudonyms, the interview documents, and the audio files in a locked cabinet located in a secure office. In addition, confidentiality was respected by not sharing or discussing with district leaders, school leaders, or other outside contacts the contents of what has been seen or heard. Glesne (2006) explains “Participants have a right to expect that when they give you permission to observe and interview, you will protect their confidence and preserve their anonymity” (p. 138).
Data Collection Procedures

A phenomenological case study requires an in-depth inquiry into a shared life experience that fits the criteria of a specific bounded system. Interviewing as a data collection method aligns well with the themes that are consistent with using a phenomenological approach. These themes include participants making meaning of their experiences, researchers understanding participants experiences from a subjective point of view, transforming the experience into textual evidence of the essence of the experience, and others understanding of the contextual meaning of the experience (Seidman, 2013). This in-depth phenomenological inquiry was conducted using interviewing and a review of documents and artifacts. In order to answer the central research question, both of these techniques were used to collect data in order to understand the leadership, culture, and practices of this rural Southeastern Ohio school system that has improved performance on state achievement standards. The use of these data collection methods have allowed the researcher to check for consistency among the data and have strengthened the credibility of the results.

Primary data source: Interviews.

In order to answer the central research questions, a standardized interview with a semi-structured interview approach was employed. As Seidman (2013) explains,

As a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people’s ability to make meaning through language. It affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of communication and collaboration. Finally, it is deeply satisfying to researchers who are interested in others’ stories. (p. 13)
This type of approach allowed for questions to be developed through the lens of the Burke-Litwin Model of Organization Change while maintaining flexibility (Burke, 2002; Burke, 2014). The interview guide included eight open-ended questions that incorporate the three-interview series model as outlined by Seidman (2013). The questions cover the context of the teachers’ history with the district, the details of the change experience, and the teachers’ reflection on the meaning of the experience (Seidman, 2013). The following are the final revised questions in the order that they appeared on the interview guide:

1. Tell me about yourself, your education, and experiences?
2. How did you become a teacher (principal/leader) in this elementary school?
3. What do you believe makes this school successful?
4. How did the school improve academic achievement in reading over the past five years? In mathematics?
5. Tell me about your experiences with leadership at this school. Has it changed in the last five years?
6. What makes working at this elementary different from other schools? What do the staff have in common?
7. Given what you have told me about your experiences here, what does it mean for your teaching practice?
8. What do you think will help you continue to achieve success at your elementary?
9. Is there anything you would change?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Once the semi-structured interview questions were refined, the researcher used a peer review process as an external check of the content of the interview questions. Peer feedback was collected and was used to revise the questions before they were piloted with an educational leader from a regional school district. The final questions were then used in the one-on-one interviews.

The researcher developed and used a guide to interview a veteran teacher at each grade level, the school principal, and two other school leaders. Individual interviews with the teachers and administrator allowed for self-reflection into leadership practices, school culture, and the change process. Each interview was be scheduled for approximately 45 minutes with an opportunity for a follow-up date. The interviews were audio taped then transcribed by a paid professional using the following directions:

- Transcribe the words verbatim from the recording;
- Include punctuation in order to include intonation of sentence fragments, sentences, and paragraphs;
- And include verbal signals made by the participant.

In addition, field notes were taken for documenting significant points or themes, body language, and further questions to consider. While data was being collected through interviews and field notes, the researcher continued to engage in a reflexivity process to monitor the subjectivity of the data that was being obtained. Reflecting upon one’s own thoughts and decisions in the process of doing research puts the interpretations in context for the researcher, the participants, and the reader (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002; Watt, 2007). In a study of her own practice, Watt (2007) learned that her presence
in the interview room resulted in an active interaction that led to a negotiation of knowledge that was dependent on the context of the interview, the participant’s experiences, and the interviewer’s background experiences. In order to understand this element of the interview, the researcher used an interview guide to strengthen the credibility of the interview process and the research findings. Member checking was performed a week after the interviews and participants were provided with written copies of the transcripts for further review.

Secondary data source: Document review.

As a secondary source of data, documents and artifacts were collected from the chosen elementary school. Archival records regarding organizations and programs can provide rich information on their own and can be a source of support for information obtained in the interview process (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) also explains that “documents prove valuable not only because of what can be learned, directly from them, but as stimulus for paths of inquiry that can be pursued only through direct observation and interviewing” (p. 294). School building and teacher level documents that provided a record of school improvement processes were collected. Other documents that were collected include Building Leadership Team and Teacher Based Team meeting agendas and minutes, school vision and mission statements, and pages from the building website. In addition, field notes taken during the interview process were used as a source of data for this study. Merriam (1998) describes limitations for the use of documents in a qualitative study. These include that the documents are not specifically produced for use in research, they can be
fragmented, and it may be difficult to determine the authenticity of the documents that are found. Because of these limitations the documents and artifacts were used as a secondary source of information to support or contradict findings from the interview data. All documents will be assessed for authenticity through member checking with the principal and other educational leaders.

Data Analysis and Representation Procedures

Using a phenomenological approach to research, requires an aligned approach to the analysis of the data. Researchers acknowledge that there are many resources for determining the steps and procedures to use in this analysis (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) explains that determining which guidelines to apply requires skill from the researcher.

Because each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used will be unique. Because qualitative inquiry depends, at every stage, on the skills, training, insights, and capabilities of the inquirer, qualitative analysis ultimately depends on the analytical intellect and style of the analyst. (p. 433)

In order to identify the essence of the phenomenon under study, an effort was made to pay close attention to aligned procedures that are required of the researcher as the primary instrument for data analysis. The researcher has chosen a modified and simplified version of the Steve-Colaizzi-Keen method as explained by Creswell (2007):

- Create and organize files for data
- Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes
- Describe personal experiences through epoche
- Describe the essence of the phenomenon
- Develop significant statements into meaning units
- Develop a textural description, “What happened”
- Develop a structural description, “How” the phenomenon was experienced
- Develop the “essence”
- Present narration of the “essence” of the experience; in tables, figures, or discussion (p. 156-157).

A report of the analytical procedures was completed as well as observations of the process by the researcher.

**Data analysis: Managing, coding, and classifying.**

Interview transcriptions, field notes, and document evidence were organized using files and computer folders by interview. All information was clearly labeled and defined as interview transcriptions, interpretations, or document evidence, and was separate from analysis notes and descriptions. Organization of data occurred simultaneously with data collection and reflection in order to manage the information as it was obtained (Glesne, 2006).

A demographic folder was developed to include information regarding the specifics about the school’s geographic location, enrollment, staffing, local report card, and leadership details. A description of the case was then developed using information about the site demographics, the social setting, the participants and their described experiences in coming to the school site. A subjectivity file was used to collect
information from field notes and reflections. This information was used to reflect on the researcher’s personal experiences with school faculties engaged in improvement processes, and the educational leadership and culture of successful school sites.

**Coding.**

Files created for each teacher and educational leader interview were prepared for coding along with field notes and documents. Saldaña (2013) explained that “coding is the transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (p. 5). The coding process included both first-cycle and second-cycle processes using first descriptive then structural a priori codes. This was followed with a more in depth process for identifying themes and patterns.

In the first-cycle coding, the data was read through two times first using descriptive codes and then using the structural a priori codes. During the first reading, the researcher summarized in a word or phrase to identify the topics that were discussed or in the interviews. This Descriptive Coding approach best aligns with a phenomenological methodology because “These types of questions suggest the exploration of participant actions/processes and perceptions found in the data” (p.61). Descriptive codes were written in the right margins of the transcripts and other documents during the reading. After initial coding was completed, the codes were compared and sorted into initial categories. The second reading in first-cycle coding was completed using structural a priori codes developed from the theoretical framework, the interview guide, and the literature review. These Structural codes were developed in a coding manual to define
and organize codes. These codes were then marked on the transcripts and then organized in a frequency chart for further analysis.

Saldaña (2013) explained that “The primary goal during Second Cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of First Cycle codes” (p. 207). During this phase, Focused Coding was used to categorize the codes developed in the first cycle by similarity and theme. This process also allowed for codes to be merged together, renamed, and dropped. Once this was completed, the categories were organized and outlined to provide a visual representation of the findings. Throughout the first and second cycle coding processes, the researcher completed analytical memos that were included in the process where appropriate and assisted in the development and organization of the second cycle categories.

**Classifying.**

Once data saturation was established, themes and patterns from the coding process were identified and information comparing the school system with the larger theoretical framework and the organization development research was conducted (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). The researcher also actively searched for disconfirming results. Negative case analysis was conducted and was used to refine the researcher’s hypotheses. Themes and patterns were interpreted by the researcher and answers to the central research questions for the specific school building faculty were developed and communicated in the results section of the report. The researcher engaged in a peer review process throughout the analysis to gather
reactions to the coding system, the data categories, the analysis reports, and the initial research findings.

**Data representation: Interpreting and representing.**

Finally a research narrative was written that provides an in-depth description of the school and the experiences of the participants. Interpretations of the research findings include information about what details were focused on and what was missing, as well as confirming evidence for the interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). Research findings were presented in tables and figures as well as in a written translation of the lived experiences in the targeted school system.

**Credibility**

Validity in qualitative inquiry is focused on the researcher.

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument. The credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork... (Patton, 2002, p. 14)

Qualitative researchers, therefore, must be able to identify credibility techniques that will help them design a research plan and strategies that support the research findings.

Patton (2002) explains that the credibility of a qualitative research study depends on the inquiry elements of rigorous methods, the credibility of the researcher, and belief in the value of qualitative research. Qualitative methods for gathering data must be systematic and must produce high quality information. The qualitative researcher must have the appropriate training and experience, and must be able to present themselves as
credible. There also needs to be an acceptance and appreciation for more naturalistic, inductive, and holistic ways of thinking (Patton, 2002).

**The researcher.**

I have been a resident of Southeastern Ohio for over 45 years and I have worked as an educator in the rural school districts for over 29 years. Through my studies, I have obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood/Special Education, Master’s degrees in Child Development and Educational Administration, and licenses in teaching and administration. As a special education teacher, I worked in a small high-poverty, rural district that struggled to meet federal and state achievement requirements. I participated on the building and district leadership teams to plan and implement goals strategies and action steps for improvement. This inspired my passion for studying best practices in school improvement and moved me towards providing guidance to districts at the county and regional levels. In addition to classroom teaching, I have worked as a county curriculum coordinator, a director of preschool services, a director of special education, and a regional school improvement specialist.

Although my education and experience have prepared me to be the instrument of this research, I have no vested interest in the study outcomes, have not worked previously at the site for the study, and am approaching the study with a neutral stance (Patton, 2002). Although every effort will be made to eliminate bias from the study, my experiences may have an influence on how I interpreted or analyzed the data from the field. I have been involved in the implementation of the Ohio Improvement Process in a number of regional districts and have some understanding of what has been successful
and unsuccessful. In addition, engaged in reflexivity during the data collection and analysis phases in order to self-reflect on my neutral stance and how my experiences affected what I observed, heard, and interpreted from the field.

Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011) explain that researchers must follow a set of procedures to ensure the credibility of the qualitative study. They urged researchers to perform fieldwork for a prolonged period of time, to share data and interpretations with research participants, to gather data from multiple sources using multiple methods, and to discuss their findings as they emerge with critical friends (Marshall & Rossman, 20101). Creswell and Miller (as cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2011) list the following techniques for ensuring credibility in a qualitative research study:

- Triangulation
- Searching for disconfirming evidence
- Engaging in reflexivity
- Member checking
- Prolonged engagement in the field
- Collaboration
- Developing an audit trail
- Peer debriefing

In order to ensure credibility of a qualitative inquiry, the researcher included these techniques in the study design for implementation during the research.
**Triangulation.**

Patton (2002) explains that triangulation in qualitative research is based on the premise that no single source or method can adequately answer a complex research question. Researchers can triangulate with “multiple data sources, observers, methods, and or theories” (p. 556). Using at least three sources or methods can reveal different aspects of reality, eliminate errors, and strengthen confidence in the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For this study, triangulation of sources was used to check the consistency of different data sources using the same method. The researcher used multiple interviews, documents, and field notes in order to improve the credibility of the results.

**Disconfirming evidence.**

In order to ensure credibility, a researcher must also actively search for disconfirming results. Negative case analysis is a “conscious search for negative cases and unconfirming evidence so that you can refine your working hypotheses” (Glesne, 2006, p. 37). The researcher consciously looked for this evidence during the first and second coding cycles. Information about this process and the findings was included in the analytical memos and the interpretation of the results. The researcher considered alternate explanations and the search for disconfirming evidence has helped in the development of the themes.
**Reflexivity.**

Reflexivity is another credibility technique the researcher used to monitor subjectivity and to reflect on the research process and the data that was obtained. Potter (Glesne, 2006) describes three ways that a researcher can exhibit reflexivity:

1. Inquiry into and discussion of decisions affecting the research process: How the setting is chosen, how access is achieved, how the researcher presents self to participants, how data are recorded, etc.
2. Inquiry into and discussion of the methods used, accompanied by concerns and questions regarding the data collected and interpretations made.
3. Inquiry into and discussion of one’s biases and perspectives. (p. 125)

Patton (2002) explains that reflexive questioning can also be triangulated to ensure credibility. The researcher asked questions of herself, of the participants of the study, and of the audience for the research. Reflexivity helped the researcher add a sense of voice and perspective to the qualitative findings that strengthens credibility.

**Member checking.**

The researcher also included the participants of the study in another credibility technique called member checking. Member checking requires that the researcher share the data collected such as interview transcripts and field observations with participants to ensure that he or she is collecting accurate information. The researcher shared interview transcripts with members for reactions, corrections, or further insight into the research topic (Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).
Prolonged engagement.

Prolonged engagement in fieldwork and persistent observation provides rich data that can help to strengthen the credibility of the research study (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Extended time at the research site will help the researcher develop trust with the participants, learn the culture of the setting, and check out any hunches or hypotheses that might develop (Glesne, 2006). Working with people over an extended period of time can also help a researcher to dispel misinformation or distortions that have been presented (Creswell, 2007). Collaboration with participants in the research study develops with the trust created in prolonged engagement and the member checking techniques.

Audit trail.

Marshall and Rossman (2011) explain that an explicit description of the data collection and analysis provides an audit trail for increased credibility. Glesne (2006) also suggests that “an outside person examines the research process and product through ‘auditing’ your field notes, research journal, analytical coding scheme, etc.” (p. 38). An audit trail and an external audit of the researcher’s records through peer review was also used to strengthen the credibility of the qualitative study findings.

Peer debriefing.

Peer debriefing is another method that was used in order to establish credibility for this study. In peer debriefing or review, the researcher makes arrangements for other knowledgeable colleagues to provide reflection and input on the research process and findings (Glesne, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Colleagues were contacted to
provide reactions to the coding system, the data summaries, the analysis reports, and the drafts of the research findings. Lincoln and Guba (Creswell, 2007) describe the role of the peer reviewer as a “‘devil’s advocate’, an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks the hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher’s feelings” (p. 208). Peer review added credibility to this research study through an external check of the research process.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations of this qualitative case study include the role of the researcher as the instrument, the descriptive nature of the results, and the limited sample size included in the study. In order to address these limitations, the researcher has included credibility strategies throughout the research process and has alerted the reader to the limits of the sample size and the limited application of the results to other school sites in the region. The delimitations discussed include the focus on a high-poverty, rural district in Southeastern Ohio, the exclusion of the student and community perspectives, and the narrow descriptions of school improvement and school success. The researcher has provided reminders to the reader throughout the process on the context for the research findings and has outlined the parameters for consideration of the results.
Chapter 4: The Story

Introduction

This phenomenological case study focused on the South Elementary School in the Black Diamond School District in Southeastern Ohio. The South Elementary School community has been successful in transforming the school from a low achieving to a high achieving organization, as measured by the indicators on the local school report card. The central questions used to investigate this phenomenon included:

What changes have occurred in organizational leadership, culture, and practices in this rural Southeastern Ohio school that have led to its improved academic performance?

Sub Questions:

1. How is organizational leadership provided at the school? What changes in leadership have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

2. What are the shared values, beliefs, and customs that guide the school? What changes in culture have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

3. What school practices have changed? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

In this chapter, the results of this study have been used to develop the story of the transformation as told by the faculty of South Elementary and supported by documents collected regarding school processes and observations reported in field notes. The interview participants included the elementary principal, a veteran teacher from each
grade level in Kindergarten through sixth grades, the literacy coach, the curriculum coordinator, and the Title I teacher. Field notes and school documents were used as secondary sources to support the experiences and perceptions shared by the study participants. The story is organized around the central questions and the themes that emerged from the research.

The school.

The Black Diamond Local School District is a small rural district located in a Southeastern Ohio county. The school district is composed of the Black Diamond High School and South Elementary both located on the same campus. The consolidated campus was established in 1993 and brought students in Kindergarten through eighth grades from four local communities to a new comprehensive campus. In the 2013-2014 school year, the Black Diamond school district served approximately six hundred students with about three hundred and seventy-five students attending South Elementary. Transformation to a high achieving school occurred in the 2005-2006 school year. Over the ten year period, there has been a significant increase in the reading proficiency scores at the elementary school level. In addition, the school Performance Index has increased 6.2 points from 2010 to 2014 which has earned South Elementary a B grade on the 2013-14 School Report Card.
Table 2.

*Reading Proficiency Scores* (Ohio Department of Education, n.d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>2005-06</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd Grade</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Grade</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th Grade</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Grade</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The drive to South Elementary takes you from the highway to a two lane drive that passes through one small town included in the school district. Closed storefronts display black and yellow signs that cheer on the local team and celebrate the successes of the student athletes. The winding road takes you past the hills and fields, the sheds and falling barns, and the small houses and trailers inhabited by the families of the Black Diamond school system. As you come around a corner, you encounter the football field with signs of school spirit and the small school campus that serves both the high school and elementary students.

**The participants.**

The elementary school entrance is located at the far end of the campus and is monitored by the school principal and other office or school staff. As in other aspects of the school operations, the faculty collaborate to ensure that all aspects of work at the school are accomplished. The faculty that were chosen to participate in the interviews quickly volunteered to share their experiences and perspectives as expected by their
building principal. The participants included the principal Miss Molly, the grade level teachers and three other teacher leaders in the school community.

Miss. Molly, the school principal, began her career at Black Diamond school district in 1988. Miss Molly was a “hometown girl” that graduated from the local high school. She was hired into the district as a traveling librarian until she moved to the consolidated school building in 1993. In 1996, she decided to pursue her teaching degree and was hired as a fifth grade teacher when she completed her program. After teaching for two years, she decided to pursue her principal’s license and was hired by the district as the building administrator in 2005. Along with her principal responsibilities, Miss Molly was also assigned the position of District Coordinator of the Reading First Ohio grant during her first year in this administrative position.

Miss Alice, the Kindergarten teacher, has been teaching for fourteen years in her position at South Elementary. She started her career in a special needs preschool and spent a short time working for Job and Family Services before being hired into the Kindergarten position. Although she lives in a neighboring school district, she likes her job at Black Diamond and said that she would not consider changing school districts to be closer to home.

Miss Joy, the first grade teacher, found her job at South Elementary looking for positions online. Miss Joy has a teaching degree with a minor in Spanish and completed her student teaching experience in Puerto Rico. During her tenure at Black Diamond, she has had four different positions. Even though Miss Joy’s hometown is over two hours away, she has only taught at South Elementary and is just beginning her fourteenth year
of teaching. She is from a small town and likes that type of atmosphere as well as the staff here at South Elementary.

Miss Ava, the second grade teacher, graduated from Black Diamond High School in 2000 and attended a local university. She graduated with a degree in early childhood education then worked at children’s services as a case worker and community services worker. She started her career at South Elementary as a reading specialist for three-quarters time through the Reading First grant. She has continued her education while working and has completed her reading endorsement and her leadership endorsement, Miss Ava is currently completing a master’s degree in administrative leadership.

Mr. Brandon, the third grade teacher, has taught one year at preschool and ten years at South Elementary at the third grade level. He grew up in Southeastern Ohio and attended schools in the surrounding community. He wanted to teach at a small school so he applied at Black Diamond and was hired in a three quarters time reading position.

Miss Betty, the fourth grade teacher, was born and raised in California but moved to the area after she was married in 1995. As a member of the community, she worked at South Elementary as a teacher’s aide while she completed her bachelor’s degree. After she completed her coursework, Miss Betty student taught at South Elementary and was hired into the fourth grade position. She has taught at the fourth grade level for eighteen years in the Black Diamond school district.

Miss Cherie, the fifth grade teacher, started her career in the Black Diamond school district and has taught here for twelve years. She began her career in sixth grade science and then taught the same group of students through their fifth, sixth, seventh and
eight grade years. Miss Cherie has now been in her fifth grade position for four years and loves teaching language arts. She grew up in the area and feels like she has a connection to the students.

Miss Lacey, the sixth grade teacher, has taught at South Elementary for twenty-two years and has been in the same room at sixth grade for all but one year. She graduated from a neighboring high school and has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a master’s degree in the art of teaching. Her husband graduated from Black Diamond High School and they live together within the district.

Miss Jacey, the former curriculum coordinator, taught for seven years at South Elementary before becoming the resource coordinator and data manager of the Reading First grant in 2005. Before coming to Black Diamond, she worked in preschool classrooms at other schools in Southeastern Ohio. After completing her master’s degree in curriculum, instruction, and technology, she became the curriculum coordinator for the district. Although she has worked in other agencies for the past couple of years, she still maintains a presence at Black Diamond as the part-time federal programs coordinator.

Miss Julie, the Title I teacher, has thirty-two years of experience in a variety of positions at schools in Ohio and in Washington state. She grew up in Southeastern Ohio and returned to teaching at South Elementary as a second grade teacher. When the position opened up four years ago, she moved to Title I reading.

Miss Sally, the literacy coach, has been at Black Diamond for fourteen years. She taught first grade for her first three years at South Elementary before moving into the literacy coach position. She now has taken on the role of district test coordinator as well
as other jobs as needed. She graduated high school from a neighboring district and has now completed her master’s degree. She only needs to complete one last class to obtain her principal’s license.

**The change initiative.**

This transformation story begins in 2005 as two major changes came to South Elementary in the Black Diamond School District. The first was a change of leadership. The principal of the elementary school was hired as the new superintendent of the district and a new principal was selected to lead at the elementary level. The second change that occurred was the award of a large federal grant that focused on improving reading at the Kindergarten through third grade levels. Leadership with this new reading initiative fell to the newly hired principal, Miss Molly.

In the summer of 2005, the Ohio Department of Education awarded the Black Diamond Local School District a Reading First Grant worth more than $1.4 million dollars. The original grant was a three year commitment, but South Elementary was granted additional years due to the success of the reading program through 2011 (Table 3).
Miss Molly accepted the Principal’s position and the District Coordinator position for the Reading First Ohio grant awarded to Southern Elementary at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year. The Reading First program was a huge undertaking for Miss Molly as a first year principal.

But as-as a first-year principal, I had to come in and change every aspect of reading instruction here at South Elementary, every aspect. Within the first two months of school, I had provided eight different PD [professional development] pieces of new- I mean we brought in technology with DIBELs and hand held Palm Pilots. It was amazing to watch unfold. So, we completely restructured reading. Every teacher at South Elementary, Kindergarten through third grade received intense professional development in the five components of reading. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)
During the summer of 2005, two other South Elementary teachers moved from the classroom to take on responsibilities with the Reading First grant. Miss Sally took on the role of Literacy Coach and Miss Jacey took the responsibility for the Resource Coordinator and Data Manager positions required by the grant program.

And when they received the Reading First grant, I was in the original grant to be the resource coordinator and the data manager. So, I was hired as the data manager. So that was my first experience out of the classroom. That started in July of 2005 is when we started training for that. Let’s see. We learned a lot about assessment and research-based reading instruction which was an eye-opener for all of the teachers and myself. We – I was a part of a trio of people that were hired to work together. The principal in the experience was one of the members of the trio. (Jacey, interview, October 8, 2015)

In addition to the original trio, six other teachers identified the Reading First grant as one of the drivers for the transformation to a high achieving school. These teachers identified the switch to the Reading First program and adherence to its guidelines as a reason for their continued success. Specifically, they identified the extensive professional development, instructional grouping strategies, assessment protocols, and program structure as practices that continue to have an impact in 2015. A closer look at the experiences and perceptions of the interviewed teachers reveals five themes in the areas of school leadership and school culture that emerge as a result of the transformation that occurred from these initial decisions in 2005. In addition, the teachers shared what they believe are the effective instructional practices that have led to their success.
School Leadership

In 2005, three South Elementary teachers stepped out of their classroom roles and took on school management and instructional leadership responsibilities for the Black Diamond Local School District. The trio worked together to lead the implementation of the Reading First Grant with Miss Molly taking on the building administrator and lead grant roles. In 2015, when asked about leadership experiences at South Elementary, the participants spoke first about their own responsibilities for leadership at the school and then their experiences with Miss Molly, their building administrator. The teachers spoke about leadership as a collective responsibility taken on by the principal and the entire South Elementary staff.

Theme 1: Collective responsibility.

Principal leadership and teacher leadership worked hand in hand to improve academic achievement for the students of South Elementary School. This theme highlights the principal leadership practices and the principal characteristics that participants identified as having a positive influence on the success of the identified school. In addition, the teachers identified the leadership responsibilities that they carry and how these responsibilities are shared among the staff.

Principal leadership.

The principal and teacher interview data identified several educational leadership practices that are exhibited by the principal of South Elementary, Miss Molly. These leadership practices include defining a shared vision and mission, practicing the ethics of care and justice, and managing the instructional program of the school. These leadership
practices are discussed here in the order of the frequency that they were cited in the interviews.

In the interview with Miss Molly, the principal identified two areas of passion that drove her desire to become the principal of the building and continue to drive the mission of South Elementary school. These priorities are supported by all eleven of the interviews of teachers and educational leaders at South Elementary. The first area was the need to meet the health, physical, and social emotional needs of the students attending the school. The second was the commitment to improving academic achievement through the implementation of the Reading First practices. In addition, Miss Molly identified “work ethic” surrounding these two priorities as the single most important factor in the success of South elementary.

During the principal interview, Miss Molly spoke about her work in developing partnerships with outside agencies in order to provide services to families and meet the needs of the children who attend the elementary.

I have worked very hard to develop partnerships with outside agencies. I have a very, very good rapport with Diamond County Children’s Services, with two of the mental health agencies in the county. I work very close with all three agencies to get services for our families. It impacts kids because when these agencies become involved some of them get more of their needs met. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)

She also provided some examples of how the staff have carried out this same commitment to students and their needs.
We had a family that their house burned down on Sunday. Monday morning, I decided I had better get an email out to ask for monetary donations. But in the meantime I could hear them. “Well I’m going to go get shoes tonight. I’m going to go get pants tonight. I’m going to go get toiletries tonight.” Just caring, caring about kids and, um, not only the education of them but making sure that they’re safe at night. You know it’s not uncommon for me to have a teacher in my office crying because she’s worried about a child. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)

Although Miss Molly credits this to her luck in surrounding herself with good people, she identifies the process that she uses during her interview procedures to identify people who have the qualities for carrying out the mission of South Elementary.

Molly: I pride myself in knowing who fits here. That’s very difficult in a 45-minute interview, let me tell you. So, normally what I do if I think they might be a fit, I take them on a tour of the building and get them talking. Get them chitchatting.

Interviewer: So, what are you looking for?

Molly: Work ethic, number one. Work ethic has to be there…number two, how do you feel about working with teams? What’s their compassion? …and the bottom line is, do they have a passion for teaching? Everyone doesn’t have a passion for teaching. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)

This focus on working hard to meet the physical, health, social-emotional, and academic needs of all children was also identified by the teacher and educational leader interviews.
Although an official vision and mission was posted on the bulletin board in the main office, the data collected from the interviews at South Elementary identified a slightly different focus lead by Miss Molly, the school principal.

Table 4

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<th>Frequency of Interviews</th>
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<td>SWH – Staff work</td>
<td>SC-SV Shared vision</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Alice - p.11 When we need to do something, we get it done. P.13 …I just think we are all working hard to help our children become successful. Joy-p.2 …there isn't a staff member here who wouldn't do everything in their power to help our children succeed. Lacey-p.4 …we work really well together…we put the kids first. p.6 …we all put forth effort into doing everything. Sally-p.3 Everybody's really dedicated and here for the students. p. 8 We're going to do what's best for the kids that are here. Betty-p.9 Have one goal which is the kids and their success, meeting their needs.</td>
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The commitment to improving the academic achievement of the students at South Elementary through implementation of the Reading First program practices is the second element of the leadership strategy, defining and sharing vision and mission. Nine of the eleven educators interviewed identified the Reading First grant and the implementation of the reading practices as a major contributor to school success. As the district coordinator of the grant, Miss Molly made a commitment to implementing the program with fidelity and championed the program with South elementary staff and educators outside of the school building. Through her leadership, the school has continued to sustain the practices even without the funding stream.

And I said as long as I’m building principal, it’s going to be sustained. It’s not about the money anymore. We can continue this process without the funding. The other schools didn’t, for whatever reason. And I think it’s actually because of change in administration. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)

As the administrator of the building, Miss Molly shares her commitment to student success by sharing the mission of working hard to meet all of the needs of the students who attend South Elementary.

Another important leadership strategy identified by the participants at South Elementary, is the use of the ethics of care and justice in making decisions or solving problems. Seven of the eleven educators interviewed felt that no matter what decisions were made at the school, they could trust that these ethics were used in determining the best actions to take.
…she cares about the kids. Sometimes at staff meetings when she’s telling you what you have to do – she may not agree with it, but she tells you, and you may not agree with her. But, at the, you know, the end of the day, she cares about her kids. She cares about her staff. (Brandon, interview, October 28, 2015)

Because of the use of these ethics in making decisions, the educators at the school accept the directions that are given to them by their principal. As an example, when the participants were chosen to be interviewed all nine teachers did not hesitate to volunteer because they trusted the decision by the principal to participate in this research study.

The third leadership strategy identified by the participants of the study was the principal’s management of the instructional program at South Elementary. Miss Molly was identified as the district coordinator of the Reading First grant and provided professional development in the implementation of the reading strategies required by the grant. In her position, she also monitored the implementation of the strategies through the compliance system required by the grant for continuation of funding.

…so we completely restructured reading. Every teacher at South Elementary, Kindergarten through third grade, received intense professional development in the five reading components. It was intense. I mean, we had end-of-practice sheets, which they took into practice. They had to reflect on it, turn them back in. There were 18 indicators that had to be met for us to continue the grant. The grant was supposed to be a three-year grant and we actually received funding from them for six years. We were very successful. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)
In addition to the reading program, Miss Molly discussed her involvement in the building improvement process and the decisions surrounding the changes in the math curriculum. Three of the ten educators who participated also indicated that leadership and monitoring of the instructional program by the principal was a contributor to school success at South Elementary.

Another important factor in the area of principal leadership identified by the participants were the characteristics displayed by the administrative leader. Teachers identified Miss Molly as very open, honest, caring, and understanding. One teacher felt that she was a very good listener and worked with her staff to develop plans of action. Another teacher described her as someone that cannot be pressured into giving in to all teacher requests.

…our current administrator is very supportive. She will get you what you need, but she’s not wishy-washy. And you just can’t go in there and you’re going to get anything you want. So, but she’s very supportive, (Betty, interview, November 4, 2015)

In addition, Miss Molly exhibited a number of important leadership qualities identified by the participants such as being optimistic and positive, having confidence in her followers, leading by example, and promoting a positive climate. Six of the ten teachers and educational leaders interviewed spoke about their positive feelings for their principal, Miss Molly.

I love our principal. She’s amazing. She’s always open. (Brandon, interview, October 28, 2015)
Finally, there were no negative characteristics identified by the interviewees nor were there any problems or issues identified with the current school leadership at South Elementary.

**Shared leadership practices.**

When asked about the experiences with leadership at South Elementary eight of the ten teachers interviewed discussed their own responsibilities with leadership at the school. Leadership roles included the grade level Teacher Based Team facilitator, evaluation team membership, Local Professional Development Committee chairperson, coaching, activities leader, team leader, union president, summer school head teacher, data manager, literacy coach, district test coordinator, Resident Educator mentor, and Professional Intern mentor. These eight teachers discussed their own contributions to the school in these leadership positions.

I’m the second-grade team facilitator, TBT facilitator. I am the chairperson for the Literacy Committee, Literacy Night Committee. I’m on LPDC Committee….As far as TBT, I’m responsible for keeping everybody on track, kind of coming up with the agenda, and then if people get off-task, I’m kind of, “Hey let’s get back to here”. (Ava, interview, October 22, 2015)

Most of the leadership positions identified by the participants involved working with teams or mentoring teachers who were new to the school or to the profession.

It was clear from all eleven interviews as well as the document analysis that leadership at South Elementary is a collective responsibility. Some teachers expressed the need for all teachers to take a leadership role at the grade level team. Some grade levels
rotate the responsibility every year so that each teacher takes a turn as the facilitator. One teacher expressed her feelings about all of the Teacher Based Team leaders.

…we definitely have good leaders, like I said I know my team leader and getting to serve on the second grade team last year that team leader, and from just talking to everyone at staff meetings or professional development. You know, it’s easy to get the feel that they all have a great leader as well. (Joy, interview, October, 22, 2015)

Whether a teacher was leading a grade level Teacher Based Team or had a position as a district leader such as the union president, all teachers interviewed had positive personal experiences in leadership as well as positive experiences with the school leadership.

**School Culture**

Each school building has a unique culture that can enhance or inhibit academic achievement at the school level. The data from this study indicate that there are four themes that describe the culture at South Elementary; rural sensibilities, continuous improvement mindset, positive and professional relationships, and collegial practices. The elements of these four themes work together to create a positive school environment that facilitates the mission of the school and the effectiveness of the leadership. Miss Molly explained that she feels consistency in maintaining this atmosphere will help the school to continue to achieve success.

I think that when I retire they need to seriously look at a couple of the young ladies here that are in the building, that have been here throughout all of this, that are working on their degrees in administration. Because it’s all about the
atmosphere and the climate; you know that. Somebody else might come in here and the climate might be gone. I mean, the climate could be hurt in a week. You know that, and you’ve probably seen it. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015.

At South Elementary, the development and maintenance of these four cultural themes have enabled the improvement in academic achievement. In addition, the culture of the rural community has been integrated into this rural Southeastern Ohio school to the benefit of its community.

**Theme 2: Rural sensibilities.**

Miss Molly, the school principal, identified herself as “a hometown girl” who graduated from Black Diamond High School and married her “childhood sweetheart”. In her ten years as principal of South Elementary, she has developed a culture that incorporates the rural sensibilities that she and other school staff have grown up experiencing. These rural sensibilities include a rural background experience, expectations for a strong work ethic and student focus, experience with the effects of poverty, strong school and community pride, and familial and congenial relationships in the community. These elements of culture have been enhanced through Miss Molly’s hiring practices and the initiation of staff who do not share a rural background.

**Rural background.**

Ten of the eleven participants in this study identified a rural background as one of the elements of shared experience at South elementary. The teachers interviewed either grew up in the Southeastern Ohio area or have spent their adult life calling this area their home.
I know a lot of history from the families that come through. I’m teaching kids that from parents that I went to school with and graduated with. So, I kind of have a background of what the kids are coming from. And I think that has helped a lot, and most people who work here are very familiar or live within the community or small communities. (Ava, interview, October 22, 2015)

Others identified small communities or small schools as the element that helps South Elementary be successful. The rural background and small size help the teachers know each student and family, and helps the staff relate to what they are experiencing. In contrast, Miss Molly did not feel that a rural background or experience with poverty was the most important factor in school success.

You know, you would think that having an understanding of people that live in poverty, and you know think that, you know prior experiences working in a rural district would help. But what I have found for the most part is any teacher that comes here regardless of their background, embrace these children. It’s amazing. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)

She believes that the right amount of compassion and passion for teaching helps you to understand the rural background and experience of living in poverty. Whether you come from a similar background or later embrace the rural background as a member of the school community, this element is identified as an important component of the school culture.
Work ethic and student focus.

Another rural sensibility that was evident at South Elementary was the presence of a strong work ethic. All participants that were interviewed spoke about this phenomena. Alice gave an example of how everyone works hard together when assessments need to be completed.

…just everybody gets along so well. Everybody tries so hard. Everybody pulls together. When we need to do something we get it done. …If we need testing done, it’s hard to test in Kindergarten because we don’t have kids going here or there. They’re all in there all day. It’s very hard… so we’re pulling our OU fellows. We’re pulling our aide that we share amongst the three of us. …anyone is always willing to help meet any deadline or…not even a deadline. If someone’s free, they’ll say, “Do you have any kids? Do you want me to do their learning rings?” (Alice, interview, October 22, 2015)

The strong work ethic is focused on meeting student needs and includes these elements: sharing a mission, ensuring student learning, focusing on results, and feeling a strong sense of accountability.

There is strong evidence that the principal and teachers of South Elementary share a mission for serving students in their community. Participants spoke about the dedication to helping students in poverty that need food, clothing and shelter as well as mental health and social emotional supports.

There are very many staff members who go above and beyond the school day that would not take credit for things that they do outside of their teaching…they’re
more like social workers too, not just teachers. I’ve always said we wear many hats as a teacher. You know, we play doctor, counselor, social worker, case worker, I mean multiple roles. And I think there are many here who do that, not just a very few. (Ava, interview, October 22, 2015)

In addition, interviewees spoke about the effort and time that teachers put into planning lessons, implementing instruction and intervention, and assessing student learning.

Lacey, the sixth grade teacher explained that her team meets at lunch and they talk about students and they plan lessons. All day long they put kids first.

The staff of South Elementary know that much of the work that is being done during and after the school day is to ensure that every student is learning. The principal and teachers talked about tracking student growth through a system of assessments, instruction, and intervention that is analyzed for effectiveness and adjusted for improvement during monthly Teacher Based Team and Building Level Team meetings. During the TBT meetings, the teachers bring data sheets that have a learning target and the assessment results for every student by level of achievement and instructional need (Advanced, Benchmarked, Targeted, Intensive). At the meeting, the teachers make instructional plans for ensuring that all students meet or exceed the learning target. Sally, the Literacy Coach, and other teachers spoke of all of the opportunities that students are given to learn such as the 90 minutes of reading instruction, 30 minutes of intervention, tutoring, before and after school clubs, and the homework help.

In addition to ensuring student learning, the participants spoke about how the staff at South Elementary focus on the results of the benchmark assessments and the state test
results. Comparisons are also made to how their school performed against other local schools and state results.

And when I, we just finished the end of nine weeks and I noticed that this year my students’ scores were higher than last years. So, I think that repetitive and reteaching until they hit mastery has really helped a lot. (Joy, interview, October 22, 2015)

Miss Molly, the school principal, also identified one of her teachers as the highest scoring for his grade and subject in the region. She explained that South Elementary has been identified as a School of Promise and as Distinguished for its high academic achievement.

The final element of this theme is the strong sense of accountability expressed by seven of the eleven study participants. Miss Molly explained that teachers and students at her school take responsibility for learning and that “when you walk around the halls at South Elementary, you will see every teacher instructing, every student, for the most part, engaged in their learning” (interview, October 28, 2015). Miss Molly explained that she talks with the staff in meetings about being accountable for their time at school.

They know what they are supposed to be doing. … We talk about the schedules. You know, we talk about the schedules. We talk about…that’s when things happen to children, when they are not attended. You need to be there or, you know, you are missing this many minutes of instructional time or this many hours of instructional time in a year if you’re five minutes late. (Molly, October 28, 2015)
Other teachers spoke about how the elements of Reading First made both teachers and students accountable for learning.

…we had intervention for all students, not just the kids who were in the lower score ranges. We had kids at the top of the scale and they were still getting intervention; so it was great to move your kids. And it also helped teachers become-take ownership of their students because it wasn’t, like, the special-ed student or the gifted student or whatever labeled student. It was everybody’s students. (Jacey, interview, October 8, 2015)

This strong work ethic with a focus on meeting student needs is a rural sensibility that helps all students at South Elementary regardless of socioeconomic background or academic achievement level.

*Addressing the effects of poverty.*

Even though teachers feel a sense of accountability for all students at the school, nine of the eleven participants acknowledged that a majority of the families at South Elementary struggle with the effects of poverty.

…we have a lot of students with a lot of needs. I think sometimes people don’t realize things that kids have to go through. They come in talking about things you would never imagine them saying. I remember last year a little boy came in and said-came in and said his uncle had raped another girl in the class’ aunt. I mean that’s how the day started. And it was just—and it was almost matter of fact like he didn’t even know that this was wrong. There’s drugs in the family. There’s kids who come to school filthy. I think we’re on, like, the free and reduced is
somewhere near 80%...mom’s being abused…illnesses…parents in jail… (Betty, November 4, 2015)

Three of the participants discussed poverty at Southern Elementary as a particularly rural challenge that was qualitatively different than what is experienced in the city or the suburbs.

I center my lessons around things that I know the kids need, that they have not received at somewhere else. I know they, some of my kids have never been-I know in the past never been to a mall. I mean it’s just, we’re, some of our kids don’t get out. …more than most of our kids are impoverished… kids that need background knowledge… (Lacey, interview, October 22, 2015)

Because of their in depth knowledge of poverty and how it effects the children in this region, the teachers have developed strategies for addressing the effects. Teachers prepare lessons with background knowledge and experiences that students lack, Miss Molly works with outside agencies to provide services to families, and teachers develop strong relationships with students and families.

Seven of the eleven participants identified strong relationships with students and families as a part of life at South Elementary school. Jacey and Brandon talked about the connections that they made with students in elementary that carried through high school and into life after school.

And one of my former students used to cry every day and run to the door, and I used to have to tackle her, keep her there. She was going to quit school. She was pregnant. …she sends me messages all the time, “If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t
be in school.” And she just graduated from ultrasound-technician school, and she has a job in Columbus. And every time-like once a month, she sends me a message to tell me, you know, how much of a difference I made in her life… So that-that keeps you going because you hear the success stories. (Jacey, interview, October 8, 2015)

Other teachers spoke about how their relationships with students help to counter some of the activities that parents are involved in that can impede the student’s success.

We just try to meet that, meet each kid’s needs, I guess. … I mean, I think we’re family. …some of the kids I think do make, they look up to us because some don’t have good home lives, or they don’t have good role models or…So sometimes that helps that a kid wants to learn. (Cherie, interview, October 28, 2015)

Addressing the social emotional needs of students, developing strong relationships with students and families, and preparing experiences to meet the needs of students are all ways that teachers in South Elementary accept the challenges that are presented by their students of poverty.

School and community pride.

Another element in the area of rural sensibilities that teachers discussed was the school and community pride they felt working in the Black Diamond Local School District and community. They felt that teachers and students developed an attachment to the school. Many of the participants either graduated from Black Diamond High School or moved to the community to live and work.
I’m just blessed to work here. It’s just, it’s a great school. I’ve had a lot of friends that say, you know, as I’ve mentioned I’m not from around here, my family’s hours away. And they keep asking, “Why are you there? Why do you stay? Why don’t you teach somewhere where you’d get more money, or you know they have more things, or the families have these resources, you know?” There’s nowhere else I’d rather be. This is, this is where my heart is. This is where I’m supposed to be. I found it for a reason and, and I couldn’t be happier. (Joy, interview, October 22, 2015)

Four of the participants explained that some people in the area look down on the school district or feel they are more elite than the people at South Elementary. Some described feeling more motivated to make a difference because of the feeling of being an underdog.

…being in the community [of other schools] you just get the sense that they think they’re more elite than other schools. …they think it’s negative. I mean it brings, you know, morale down sometimes. But, our scores are better than other schools, so we did that. (Lacey, interview, October 22, 2015)

Positive feelings about the school and community, the sense of an underdog image, and the community connections in the school contribute to the unique culture of this rural school building.

Familial and congenial relationships.

In addition to the sense of school and community pride, eight of the eleven participants discussed the strong social bonds that they felt with fellow staff members, students, and the families that they have served. Many of the school staff characterized
their colleagues as family or friends. Miss Molly recounted a time in her life that she turned to the school staff for understanding and comfort.

I just think that we’re a family. I mean, we are a family. …I think about that a lot. …I lost my husband three and a half years ago. I did. It was horrible. …And, I came back to work immediately. I took, like, a week off. And-and I think part of that was I just needed to be here. And-and for whatever reason…I think it’s part of we’re a family. I knew they cared. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)

Cherie talked about the change in her experience working with a team at this school as opposed to other experiences.

And me and my team now are very close. We talk about everything. You know, inside and out of school. We talk at home. We talk here. I mean it just makes …your self-esteem even as a person built so you feel better. So that in turn helps the kids…I’m probably doing a better job teaching. (Cherie, interview, October 28, 2015)

Five of the teachers interviewed talked about how the families in the community were their friends and four veteran teachers discussed how they have worked with the same families for generations of students.

I love the kids here. They’re awesome. I’ve met so many families and they’re still my friends. I’ll see them in Krogers …”There’s Miss Alice” (Alice, interview, October 22, 2015)
So you know everybody, you know all the kids and all the families. I’ve taught their parents. …I’ll probably teach their kids because I’ll be here another 18 years… (Lacey, interview, October 22, 2015)

Whether the teachers described the staff and community as families or as friends, the relationships that are built within the school and throughout the community contribute to the unique culture that is linked to the rural nature of the school environment.

The rural sensibilities of a shared background experience, a strong work ethic with a student focus, a call to address the effects of poverty, pride in the school and community, and positive staff and community relationships work together to create a unique aspect of the school culture at South elementary. The best of the rural cultural characteristics are incorporated into the school building through the actions of the staff and through the leadership of the principal, Miss Molly.

**Theme 3: Continuous improvement mindset.**

Another aspect of culture found at South Elementary was the identification of a continuous improvement philosophy that consisted of a focus on professional development and teacher learning, a problem solving approach to working on barriers to improvement, and an acceptance that change is inevitable. Nine of the eleven participants interviewed spoke about the professional development requirements of the Reading First grant and the continued focus on teacher learning in the school district.

…teachers go to a lot of professional development. If it’s not held on our campus, they’re sent to the Kindergarten conference or the first grade conference. That’s a priority. I manage the Title I money, and I know for a fact that a lot of districts put
all their money into salaries, but we put our money not just in salaries-we also use our
money to send teachers off the campus to go to PD sessions. They continue to
look at reading and go to reading PD, but they also have focused on math in the
last few years. (Jacey, interview, October 8, 2015)

Other teachers spoke about how there is always room for improvement in teaching and
that they are always learning from one another. Jacey, the curriculum coordinator also
talked about the variety of committees that focus on improving instructional practices.

They-they have a math committee, and they have always had a language arts or a
literacy committee that looks at what our practices are and if there’s any way to
improve it. They also re-meet regularly as TBT’s and they meet monthly as a
BLT, their teacher leaders do. And they always talk about the educational need or
what trends they’re seeing with students. (Jacey, interview, October 8, 2015)

In addition, six of the eleven participants spoke about the approach to problems they use
at South Elementary. Julie described that the main difference between the approach used
here and other places is the care for students that is first and foremost when approaching
an issue. When students have a problem, Julie explained that teachers communicate, “I do
care about you, you know. Let’s see what we can do to fix this problem” (Julie,
interview, October 28, 2015). Others explained that teachers are looking for ways to find
solutions and pilot options to solve problems that arise. Finally, two of the participants
described that the staff accepts that changes are going to happen and that they will be able
to manage whatever comes their way.
…they would change things on me, like, two days beforehand. But you just need to suck it up and do it and just be there for them. Understand that their life is changing every single day. …Every program at ODE has changed I don’t know how many times and it’s changing daily. And you just have to say, “I know as much as you do. When I find out more information, I’ll let you know.”” (Jacey, interview, October 8, 2015)

The abilities to accept change as it comes, to problem solve in a caring atmosphere, and to adopt a continuous improvement philosophy have become part of the culture at South Elementary that has facilitated the journey to increased academic achievement.

**Theme 4: Positive and professional relationships.**

Another aspect of the culture found at South Elementary are the positive and professional staff relationships that were portrayed by the study participants. The educators interviewed outlined the positive staff characteristics, the high expectations that staff have of themselves and their students, the strong student-teacher relationships, and the positive feelings that staff have for students at the school. The evidence indicates that the staff characteristics and interactions play an important part in the development of the culture in the school building.

**Staff characteristics.**

In addition to identifying the staff at South Elementary as family and friends, all eleven of the participants shared positive feelings about the educational staff. Some of the positive characteristics that were shared included a willingness to help others, caring and
honest interactions with colleagues, knowledge in the content areas they teach, and a passion for the teaching profession.

I don’t see the pretending and faking and any of that here. I think everybody’s honest and very, very real… and I think we collaborate. Like I said, I would like to have more common planning time, but when we do have our TBT meetings, and everybody brings something to the table. (Julie, interview, October 28, 2015)

Eight of the eleven participants also identified the high expectations that staff have of themselves and others as part of the culture at South Elementary. One teacher, Ava spoke about how her high expectations affected her teaching practice.

I am ambitious. I have high expectations for myself. I am a perfectionist and I hate when I am not able to do something, so I just continue to try until I can get it. (Ava, interview, October 22, 2015)

Another teacher spoke about how the principal, Miss Molly, is different than other principals she has worked with because she follows through with things that need to be accomplished.

…when I worked under the person before, people would just do whatever they wanted. They would leave anytime they wanted. …she has something that needs to be done there’s a deadline or, you know, or doesn’t tolerate people not bringing, turning things in. …she gives us direction. (Cherie, interview, October 28, 2015)
These positive staff characteristics including the presence of high expectations foster a positive environment at South Elementary which helps the staff work together effectively to serve students.

*Strong student/teacher relationships.*

These same staff characteristics foster productive relationships between students and teachers as well. Seven out of the eleven participants described strong positive relationships between teachers and students at South Elementary. Some teachers said that they treated the children at school as if they were their own sons and daughters. Others talked about how they strive to foster these strong connections.

…as a teacher, I want to have the best bond I could have with my students, and I want students to know that I care… I treat my students as if they are one of my own children. I’m 100% sure that if you asked the other staff or students of the past when they do right and they do amazing, I’m the biggest cheerleader in the world. But, when they do wrong and they know they did wrong, I’m going to hammer… (Brandon, interview, October 28, 2015)

In addition, six of the eleven participants described the love they have for the students at South Elementary and described the students themselves as great, awesome, caring, and deserving of a quality education.

Although some teachers described past relationships with teachers and community members in other schools as negative experiences, none of the eleven participants interviewed described negative experiences or negative characteristics of the staff or students at South Elementary. One teacher said that he felt the positivity may be
beginning to slip, and worried that this may affect the relationships teachers have with other staff members. However, overall, the positive feelings and strong relationships enhanced the culture in the school.

**Theme 5: Collegial practices.**

One important element of both the Reading First program and the Ohio Improvement Process was the requirement to work in teams. At South Elementary, team work has been formalized through the District Leadership Team, Building Leadership Team, and the Teacher Based Team processes. Other teams within the school setting included the literacy team, the math team, and the evaluation team. Participants also spoke about team learning experiences that were a part of the work at their grade level.

The evidence indicated that the staff collaboration on teams, the shared responsibility of leadership, team learning, and the extensive dialogue and discussion between team members are elements of collegial practices that enhance the culture of the school.

All eleven participants interviewed described ways in which they collaborated with colleagues at South elementary. These collaborations included speaking with students’ prior teachers for suggestions, team meetings once or twice a week, working with bus drivers and lunch staff, formal team meetings such as Teacher Based Teams (TBT) and Building Leadership Teams (BLT), and working with administration.

One of the things I truly feel is everyone is very tight-knit here. Everyone is close. We’re able to go and talk to previous teachers, I mean if we have a concern about a child and we get--we’re able to go back to their previous teacher and say, “Hey did you notice this?” and if they did, “What works? What doesn’t work? What
have you tried? Do you have any suggestions?” (Ava, interview, October 22, 2015)

Participants described the collaboration as an equitable exchange among colleagues. They valued the fact that no one treated anyone at school as above another’s status. This was also evident in the way that leadership was shared among the staff members. Alice spoke about taking the responsibility of her turn as TBT leader.

…it’s just kind of extra work that I didn’t want. I think everyone should have a turn to be leader. So, I wasn’t going to be that one that just did it forever. So, I passed that torch on after a couple of years… (Alice, interview, October 22, 2015)

In addition, six of the eleven participants spoke about the team learning and the dialogue and discussions that staff member’s experience. Sometimes teams participated in professional development together and sometimes a member of the team would attend a workshop and bring information back to the grade level. At the grade level team meetings, team members would talk about individual students, the schedules, professional development, and the TBT goals and plans.

…and TBT conversations that happen. You know, they bring up things that they learned at PD sessions or conferences that they went to. …when they go to conferences, most of the time they’ll come back to a staff meeting and share what they’ve learned from a conference. (Sally, interview, October 28, 2015)

All eleven of the educators interviewed at South Elementary described these collegial practices as an indicator of their positive experiences working in the school building.
Team processes, shared leadership and staff interactions enhanced the experiences of the staff that worked in the building.

**Theme 6: Commitment to Effective Practices**

When asked what they contributed to the academic success at South Elementary, nine of the participants interviewed named the Reading First grant program as the element that most affected the journey to a high achieving school. Specifically, the principal and teachers named the instructional practices and the assessment monitoring systems that were developed that helped them change how they were implementing academic instruction.

**Instructional practices.**

The Reading First grant program required that the school district implement an uninterrupted 90 minute reading block with students in grades Kindergarten through third. In addition, students were required to participate in 30 minutes of intervention daily as part of the program. Participants in the study identified these requirements and others as contributing to academic improvement. Other elements of the instructional program included the implementation of the Common Core standards, the instruction in the five components of reading, the changes in math curriculum, and the home support for student instruction.

During the 90 minutes of reading instruction, teachers were taught to implement the Common Core reading standards and the five components of reading. Ava spoke about how she implemented these requirements in her classroom.
The school is a Reading First school, so everything that was required or tested on as far as the third-grade guarantee was all Reading First. So that’s something that we’ve done since Reading First. The 90 minutes of reading instruction and the intervention. …We do guided reading groups here, which is wonderful because it works on the kid’s level. We also group the students in reading based on their DRA levels. So, what’s suited for one group might not be suited for another group, but we’re working towards the group’s needs not necessarily the whole entire class as a whole. (Ava, interview, October 22, 2015)

Brandon spoke about how the teachers have incorporated this same structure for the math instruction. He noted that the math period is about 60 or 70 minutes and incorporates an intervention period as well. Other teachers talked about re-teaching, the use of the reading series, incorporating different learning styles, differentiation, and second chance grading practices.

Six of the eleven participants interviewed described the structured intervention programs, the before and after school programming, and the small intervention groups as contributors to improved academic achievement.

Because that allows us to focus on each individual student and their specific strengths and needs. We also have after-school programming, we offer tutoring to our kids. …So, those students are moving around in much smaller groups which really, really helps, you know, that the teacher to student ratio being smaller. …and then we get to have an even smaller group in the afternoon for the intervention piece. Which is even better because again the group gets smaller.
And we can really target those needs for 30 minutes. (Joy, interview, October 22, 2015)

These instructional and intervention practices were not only implemented in grades Kindergarten through third grade but were adopted by teachers in the upper grades as well.

**Assessment and results.**

Another component of the Reading First program was the requirement for a balanced formative and summative assessment system. Seven participants interviewed identified these assessments and looking at school outcomes as contributors to improved academic performance. Three participants also indicated the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System was a contributor. Formative assessments that were used included the Developmental Reading Assessment, flashcards, worksheets and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills. Some of these measures were also used as summative assessments as well as the Ohio Achievement Assessment. Teachers described how these assessments have become a regular part of their instruction.

…we do some quizzes at the end of the unit or we recently did an end of nine weeks test which assessed everything we’ve been working on. This time it was counting to 100, filling in the random missing numbers, counting by tens, basic addition facts for those kids. So, we’re constantly assessing those sometimes using flashcards, sometimes manipulatives, sometimes paper pencil. (Joy, interview, October 22, 2015)
Miss Molly, the school principal, also cited the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System as a teacher assessment that has helped improve performance and outcomes.

…using the OTES rubric. It’s a lot more involved. It’s a lot more reflection. So, I think that it has helped teachers be more prepared, number one. And I think the whole thought that no longer—if you have a continuing contract, you can still lose your job if you’re ineffective. (Molly, interview, October 28, 2015)

During a visit to the school, Miss Molly pulled out the horizontal drawer that contained all of the OTES files and indicated that she has a lot more data on teachers than she has had in the past.

With Miss Molly’s leadership, the teaching staff at South Elementary has made a commitment to the instructional, intervention, and assessment practices that grew from the requirements of the Reading First Grant. These practices are cited by the staff as important practices that have contributed to the improved academic achievement at South Elementary.

**Barriers to success.**

When asked what might hinder improved academic performance at South elementary, the participants indicated that the extra paperwork, the new staff members hired, a principal retirement, and the lack of technology would be barriers to further improvement. Ten of the eleven educators explained that the time it takes to complete paperwork has increased and that this is detrimental to the amount of time that can be used preparing and implementing instruction.
We’re teachers for a reason. We hate all that stuff. We hate it. We hate filling this out. “Didn’t we just fill this out? Yeah we did a month ago; Fill it out again.” Of course our goals are to help the kids read better, help the kids recognize the numbers better, help the kids, help the kids… But, all this other stuff I feel is just getting in the way of that sometimes. (Alice, interview, October 22, 2015)

Four teachers indicated that the turnover of Intervention Specialists was holding them back and two were worried about the lack of technology in the district with more and more of the testing being implemented online. Finally, four of the participants were emotional about the possibility of their principal retiring.

Ava: I’m trying to get Miss Molly to stay. She’s wanting to retire, and I don’t want her to retire. She’s been principal since I started. She’s the one, Molly that hired me. I think I wa—that was her second year as principal when I started, so—

Interviewer: How do you think it would change if she left?

Ava: I’m s-s—I’m afraid to think that far. I don’t want to think that far because she’s something familiar to me and I feel comfortable going in and asking her things. And I’m afraid that whoever gets in there is not somebody who’s going to be open and willing to listen. (Ava, interview, October 22, 2015)

Although these barriers may need to be overcome in the future, the instructional and assessment practices indicated by the participants are evidence that the staff at South Elementary have the tools needed to improve academic success in this rural Southeastern Ohio school building.
Summary

This phenomenological case study explored the leadership, culture, and practices of the South Elementary school in its journey to improved academic achievement. This chapter presented the results of eleven interviews, document analysis, and field observations collected at the South Elementary school campus. The six themes that were identified are supported by specific examples of observations, documents, and interview quotations that were obtained during the data collection process. The majority of evidence was collected during principal, teacher, and educational leader interviews completed over a month’s time on four different visits to the school building. Appendix D displays the themes, categories, codes, frequencies, and quotation examples extricated from the data collected. The themes that emerged from the data include Theme 1: Collective Responsibility, Theme 2: Rural Sensibilities, Theme 3: Continuous Improvement Mindset, Theme 4: Personal and Professional Relationships, Theme 5: Collegial Practices, and Theme 6: Commitment to Effective Practices.

Although each theme is listed separately, there are many connections between themes that integrate the phenomenon into a whole. Theme 1 describes the evidence that there is a sense of ownership at South Elementary that includes the students, families, principal, teachers, and other staff that interact to operate the school. Theme 2 highlights the rural nature of the school setting and how the characteristics of this rural background are incorporated into different aspects of the school operations. Theme 3 illuminates how the optimistic and ambitious attitudes of the South elementary staff culminate in a continuous improvement philosophy that helps the school to improve results. Theme 4
and 5 describe the relationships in the school and how these relationships help staff to work together to achieve school goals. Finally, Theme 6 describes the effective practices that have been adopted by the staff through the implementation of the Reading First Grant, the Ohio Improvement Process; and the professional learning that has occurred to improve instructional practices.

The participants of this study provided information through the data collection process surrounding the phenomenon of improved academic performance at a rural Southeastern Ohio school. The data collected provided valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of the participants who are veteran staff members at South Elementary. This important information indicates the significance of sustained leadership, the embrace of rural ethics, and the development of a positive collaborative culture in the journey to improved academic achievement.
Chapter 5: Research Findings and Implications for Future Research

This phenomenological case study examined the perceptions and experiences associated with improved student achievement over a ten year period at the South Elementary School. The research focused specifically on the transformational factors of the external environment, leadership, culture, and resulting organizational performance associated with this phenomenon. Results of the research are used in this chapter to describe the essence of this school’s transformation experience and for providing implications for the field, further research, and policy development. The research questions that directed the study are listed below:

What changes have occurred in organizational leadership, culture, and practices in this rural Southeastern Ohio school that have led to its improved academic performance?

Sub Questions:

1. How is organizational leadership provided at the school? What changes in leadership have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

2. What are the shared values, beliefs, and customs that guide the school? What changes in culture have occurred? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

3. What school practices have changed? How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

Data was collected from interviews of the building administrator, seven veteran teachers, and three educational leaders at South Elementary. In addition, field notes and
documents were used as secondary sources to support the evidence collected in the interviews. Data analysis was completed through multiple readings, primary and secondary coding, and the development of themes that emerged from the process.

This chapter provides a review and discussion of key findings aligned to the questions of the study and a discussion of the emergent themes presented. In addition, a discussion of the implications for the field, further research, and policy recommendations are included. This chapter is organized by the research questions and the themes that emerged from the study, then the implications are presented.

**Research Questions and Connections to Themes**

In order to understand the story of improvement at South Elementary, research questions were developed that aligned with the transformational components of the organizational change literature. The theoretical framework for this study and the related literature led to the organization of the research into two broad categories: leadership and culture. The following research findings are aligned to these two categories and are developed into themes for discussion.

**1. How is organizational leadership provided at the school?**

Although, the South Elementary school district presented with a typical organizational chart that has a principal in the leadership position and teachers organized in grade level teams, a deeper examination highlighted some clear differences from the school organization prior to 2005. Theme 1, Collective Responsibility, provided evidence that organizational leadership was not just provided by one person. In 2005 when the Reading First grant was obtained, a principal was hired into the school district but a trio
of educators was also hired to provide leadership for the organization and implementation of the grant. Three teachers stepped into these leadership positions and have been providing direction to the school’s operations with the principal taking the lead in the management of the school processes and the principal, literacy coach, and data manager/curriculum coordinator taking the lead for academic improvement. In addition, a variety of leadership positions, as well as teacher teams, were created to manage and lead a number of instructional aspects of the school. Some of the teams were a result of the Reading First implementation others resulted from implementation of the Ohio Improvement Process and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant. Teachers led the grade level teams, the content area teams, and the extended learning opportunities. The study results show that leadership at South Elementary is a shared responsibility. Teachers see themselves as leaders of the school and step in to take responsibility.

What changes in leadership have occurred?

Over the years since 2005, many changes have occurred in the state requirements and the programs that affect the operations of South Elementary. Principal leadership and the other major leadership positions have remained consistent since 2005, but teacher evaluation procedures, educational standards, and assessment requirements as well as many other aspects of school operations have changed dramatically since Miss Molly became principal at South elementary. In addition, the veteran teachers of the school district have taken on more responsibility for leadership and some are preparing to eventually apply to replace Miss Molly as the principal of the school. With the development of shared leadership practices and personal professional development of
school staff, the school is on a path to continuing the changes in leadership practices that have been developed since 2005.

**How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?**

Although the South Elementary school had a principal in the leadership position prior to 2015, the Reading First grant put Miss Molly in a more prominent position of instructional leader for the school. She maintains responsibility for leading major professional development initiatives, adoption of school curricula, and monitoring of the assessment and results system. The Ohio Teacher Evaluation System has also made her responsible for monitoring the competence of her teacher’s practices and the results of their teaching. In addition, the teachers in the school district are leaders at their grade level, leaders of the content teams, and are responsible for the results of students in their classroom, the grade level, and the school. This collective responsibility for leadership has also created a shared responsibility for academic performance in the school.

2. **What are the shared values, beliefs, and customs that guide the school?**

Four themes emerged from the study related to the culture of the South Elementary School: Rural sensibilities, continuous improvement mindset, positive and professional staff relationships, and collegial practices. First, the data analysis indicated the presence of what is described as rural sensibilities that guided the operations of the school. These included experience with a rural background, a strong work ethic, addressing the effects of poverty, school and community pride, and familial and congenial relationships. These guiding values and beliefs seemed to stem from the rural
community environment but were also reinforced by the hiring practices and the reward system of the principal, Miss Molly. Figure 3 is an illustration of this relationship.

Figure 3. Southeastern Ohio Rural Values, Beliefs, and Customs.

As Miss Molly hired teachers based on the values and beliefs that she had learned from her rural experience, she reinforced those shared elements and the community reinforced them as well. Teachers who did not embrace these shared values and beliefs tended to leave quickly for other job opportunities.

The next theme, a continuous improvement mindset appears to be the result of the professional development and assessment requirements of the Reading First grant originally, then as reinforced with the Ohio Improvement Process and the Ohio Teacher
Evaluation System. Evidence from the research indicates that the staff at South Elementary are invested in participating in professional development and teacher learning experiences, implementing a problem solving approach to removing barriers, and accepting the inevitability of changes in local and state educational programs. Many of the initiatives that they have embraced use a “plan, do, study, act” process that was designed to establish a continuous improvement approach to education.

The third theme identified in the area of culture was the presence of positive and professional staff relationships. During the interview process, the educators at South elementary discussed their positive feelings about the teachers in the school, the characteristics of these teachers, and the evidence of high expectations that these teachers held towards themselves and their students. Many of the participants stressed that their colleagues were not only good teachers, but good friends or family members. When teachers were new to the district, they said they felt instantly welcomed into the caring and comforting environment of South Elementary.

The final theme in this area, collegial practices, was evident in the collaboration of teachers on the grade level teams, Teacher Based Teams, and content area teams. Teachers worked together to assess students, plan instruction and intervention, and share professional learning,

What changes in culture have occurred?

Although there hasn’t been a change in the rural aspect of the South Elementary School setting, it was evident from the study that the continuous improvement mindset and the positive and professional relationships have been developed by Miss Molly and
reinforced by the implementation of the educational program initiatives. In advancing the
shared mission of working hard to meet the physical, social-emotional, and academic
needs of students, she has developed a culture of care and academic improvement into the
operation of the South Elementary School. This culture has been reinforced by the
successes the staff have experienced with the Reading First Grant, improved academic
achievement, and the changes in teacher evaluation. When strategies for adapting to new
situations are successful, they often are incorporated by the reinforcement of the leader
into the culture of the organization over time (Schein, 2010).

_How have these changes influenced the school’s academic performance?_

All three of these areas, the rural sensibilities, continuous improvement mindset,
and positive and professional relationships have influenced the academic performance of
the school. Miss Molly has been able to use the appropriate aspects of the rural culture of
the area to enable the reinforcement of behaviors that are conducive to improved
academic performance. A strong work ethic, the ability to understand the effects of
poverty, the pride in the school community, and the deep relationships that are developed
all have a positive impact on the motivation and effort required to improve performance.
In addition, the continuous improvement philosophy and the” plan, do, study, act”
process provide the methods for looking at current procedures and results in order to plan
and adjust for more effective implementation. Finally, the development of a positive
climate through the hiring practices and initiation of new staff, provides for an
atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration in the school setting.
3. What school practices have changed?

Driven by the requirements of the Reading First grant, the staff at South elementary have completely changed reading instruction and the processes that are used to improve academic achievement for the students at the elementary school. The staff have implemented a system of an uninterrupted 90 minutes of reading instruction as well as a dedicated 60 to 70 minutes for math instruction in the building. In addition, an intervention period for both reading and mathematics has been incorporated in the schedule. The staff have implemented a change in instruction to incorporate the teaching of the Common Core standards and the five components of reading instruction. Teachers work in teams such as the grade level Teacher Based Teams, the building level Building Leadership Team, and the academic content teams for literacy and mathematics.

In addition, the teachers have developed a balanced system of formative and summative assessments that allow them to know how students are learning at all times. Results of these assessments are analyzed at Teacher Based Team meetings where instructional plans are developed around instructional goals. Teachers collaborate with team members and with others such as the prior grade level teachers, and the instructional leaders in the building to continually improve their instructional methods. Teachers work together to ensure that the all assessments are completed and students receive the instruction that is required regardless of achievement level. Extended learning opportunities have been developed to provide homework help and additional tutoring for student who struggle.
How have these changes influenced the school’s improved academic performance?

Academic achievement at South elementary has improved over the last ten school years as measured by the state indicators in reading, the performance index, and the value added growth measures. The change in instructional methods, the dedication of a specific instructional period, and the development of small instruction and intervention groups has allowed teachers to target instruction on the specific skills in reading and math at the individual student level. The use of assessments and the continuous improvement cycle allow teachers a realistic look at how students are performing with the instruction that has been provided. This allows teachers to make adjustments in their instructional methods, reteach a specific skill, then assess to see if any improvements were made in academic achievement.

Finally, the central question of this research study asks, What changes have occurred in organizational leadership, culture, and practices in this rural Southeastern Ohio school that have led to its improved academic performance? The answer to this question involves the integration of all of the previous elements into a complex series of interconnected relationships. These elements are affected by the external environment and the two major changes that came into play in the 2005-2006 school year, the hiring of the new principal and the granting of the Reading First program. The following illustration was created as a visual to highlight these complex interactions.
Figure 4. South Elementary Transformational Factor Interactions.

The six themes illustrated above in the school leadership, school culture and school outcomes categories represent the changes that have occurred in these elements at South Elementary. The elements are affected by the external environment and the interactions between the school leadership and the school culture. Finally, the five themes represented in the leadership and culture elements affect the school outcomes: commitment to effective practices and improved academic achievement. The use of multiple procedures such as triangulation, the search for disconfirming evidence, and member checking as described in Chapter 3, helps to support the credibility of these research findings.

Interpretations

As an educator working in Southeastern Ohio over the past twenty-nine years, I have had the opportunity to observe the implementation of school improvement
initiatives as a teacher, an administrator, and as an educational consultant. Most of these initiatives are the result of poor performance on the local report card and the opportunity to implement an effective program through grant funding. When these change initiatives have been successful in improving academic achievement, it is usually in a small increment or it is short lived. If the building administrator leaves the position or the grant funding has ended, the momentum switches to a different subject, a new program, or another philosophy. In order to understand the essence of the phenomenon at South Elementary, a bracketing of this experience was required. The use of epoche allowed me to focus on the analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the faculty at South Elementary and allowed me to find a new perspective I had not experienced prior to the study.

The story of South Elementary is different. Although the beginnings were similar with new leadership, low performance, and grant opportunities, the practices and outcomes have been sustained over time. This appears to be a result of the leadership provided by the principal, Miss Molly, her tenure in the position, and her insistence on sustaining the effective practices introduced with the change initiatives. In particular, I believe the rural culture and background of the faculty, the implementation of effective practices, and Miss Molly’s leadership skills have had a unique influence on this phenomenon.

The main difference I see is the way that Miss Molly’s rural background influenced her leadership and in turn this influenced the culture at South Elementary School. Although, I have worked with Southeastern Ohio principals who are serving in
the buildings they attended as students, Miss Molly has a unique way of capitalizing on
the positive aspects of the rural culture. The most powerful appears to be an unwritten
mission in the school building; to do whatever it takes to meet the needs of students. Miss
Molly models hard work and dedication and rewards those that also have this strong work
ethic. In addition, Miss Molly builds a positive and collaborative climate in the school
building. This atmosphere is welcoming to all who enter the school and enhances the
performance of her school faculty. She sustains this climate through hiring and promotion
practices, modeling of essential characteristics, and attention to the actions that align with
this mission.

Another difference is Miss Molly’s relentless pursuit of the effective
implementation of the Reading First and Ohio Improvement Process practices. The same
hard work and dedication is evident in this area as well. As the instructional leader of the
building and the district coordinator of the grant, Miss Molly implemented each program
with fidelity as it was intended. Again, the larger cultural elements of hard work, familial
relationships, and personal innovation enhanced Miss Molly’s ability to implement and
sustain the effective practices. Over the ten year period, Miss Molly has been able to
integrate these elements into the school culture.

The rural context, strong work ethic and commitment to effective practices led by
Miss Molly, the school principal, demonstrate the essence of the experience at South
Elementary. This journey to high achievement is unique to South Elementary and the
faculty that have worked under Miss Molly for the past ten years.
Implications for the Field

Although this story is unique to this particular school and context, the experiences can hold implications for schools in the region, and for the field of education. In answering the research question for this phenomenological case study, six themes have been identified that illustrate the changes that have occurred at South elementary over the ten year journey to high academic achievement. These findings suggest implications for other schools that may be considering similar change initiatives. The following is a discussion of the relationship of these findings to the literature review.

1. Leadership is essential to the success of a change initiative. Kotter (1996) outlined an eight stage process that assists leaders in overcoming barriers to change at a group or system level. The first theme, collective responsibility, incorporates the second step of the process “Creating a Guiding Coalition” as well as a late step “Empowering Broad-Based Action”. At the very beginning of the implementation of the Reading First Grant, a trio of teachers were hired to lead the new initiative. Then, during the change process structures and systems were changed to allow the grade level teams to implement the new instructional strategies.

2. A system of shared leadership practices can help sustain a change initiative. In addition to the leadership strategies described above, the principal at South Elementary was able to establish grade level leaders in the Teacher Based Team facilitators as well as teacher leadership in content area teams and extended learning programs. Hallinger and Heck (2011) outlined four stages
of the school improvement journey that required specific forms of leadership approaches. The researchers found that the last stage of the journey calls for an “everyone a leader” approach to sustain the change. This approach was evident at South Elementary as all eleven participants described their own leadership responsibilities when asked to describe their experiences at the school.

3. Leadership must be sustained over a period of years for the change to become a part of the school culture. Schein (2010) explained that culture in an organization can come from new leaders of an organization or new members. These new leaders use a variety of tools over time and use a variety of mechanisms to teach members how to think feel and behave. The cultural themes of rural sensibilities, continuous improvement mindset, positive and professional staff relationships, and collegial practices were established at the time of the hiring of Miss Molly and the implementation of the change initiative. The interviews provided evidence that Miss Molly reinforced these strategies through direct modeling and teaching, and her hiring and promoting practices. After ten years, these themes have become a part of the culture at South Elementary through the use of these embedding mechanisms.

4. Incorporating the enhancing aspects of rural culture into the school culture can have positive effects on school outcomes. The theme rural sensibilities highlighted the importance of how rural Southeastern Ohio culture impacted the leadership characteristics of Miss Molly and the culture at South
Elementary School. Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) found that leadership influenced school culture and the larger societal culture has an impact on the culture of the school as well. In addition, Surface and Theobald (2014) believed that capitalizing on the benefits of rural education can improve the academic achievement outcomes of the students in these schools. The evidence suggests that Miss Molly, the elementary principal has incorporated the strengths of the rural setting into the implementation of the change initiative.

5. Positive relationships and a collegial atmosphere can have positive effects on school outcomes. Evidence collected during the interviews supported the idea that a culture of collaboration and collegiality can help to improve student academic achievement. Wagner (2006) explained that the culture of a school affects staff satisfaction, community support, parent engagement, and student achievement outcomes. The themes of positive and professional relationships, and collegial practices support the idea that the incorporation of these elements in the culture of a school can have positive outcomes.

6. Incorporating best practices into the culture of the school can have positive effects on school outcomes and can continue the cycle of improvement. South Elementary School’s implementation of the Reading First grant and the Ohio Improvement process helped to foster a continuous improvement philosophy, and teacher and organizational learning. Two themes, the continuous improvement mindset and commitment to effective practices are evidence that
the teachers embraced both the best practices that they were learning and the process for continuing to improve. Senge et al. (2000) explained that in order to improve outcomes, schools need to become organizations that foster these skills that are developed in learning organizations.

7. Overtime, the school can become a learning organization that can sustain culture in the face of leadership change. Thornton et al (2007) explained that organizations that learn are able to analyze their own experiences and information to problem solve in order to benefit the school. The themes of collective responsibility and continuous improvement mindset are supportive evidence that South Elementary has become a learning organization that can sustain the current culture and the legacy of their principal, Miss Molly. Two of the participants who have been an integral part of the leadership team are preparing for the principal’s eminent retirement and the change of leadership.

These seven implications listed above provide insight into South Elementary school’s journey from a low achieving to a high achieving organization. These insights can be used to guide additional change initiatives in the South Elementary School, the Black Diamond Local School District, and similar districts in the Southeastern Ohio region.

**Future Research and Policy Development**

The results of this phenomenological case study suggest that there are other related areas to be explored such as additional case studies of Southeastern Ohio schools, rural school leadership in general, and sustaining rural school change initiatives. Each of these areas can be explored using a quantitative or qualitative approach to more fully
analyze the factors that affect these areas. In addition, the results of this study could have implications for policy development at the federal and state level surrounding school improvement requirements.

Additional qualitative case studies of success in other rural school districts in Southeastern Ohio or other parts of the state, or a focus on the perceptions of parents and community members in this school could support the findings in this district and provide a richer picture of the effects of leadership and culture on school improvement outcomes. A quantitative look at the perceptions and experiences of this school or others could also provide information that could lead to more questions for deeper study. Since this research focused on the transformational factors related to organization change, further study of the transactional components may also provide support for the findings and information about other elements that were integrated into the school improvement process for South Elementary or other schools in the region.

More information about the effectiveness of leaders with rural backgrounds in the rural school setting could provide information that would be helpful for principal preparation programs, selection of rural principals, and retention of effective leaders. Questions that arise from this research include: Are educators with rural backgrounds more effective in rural schools than their suburban and urban counterparts? How do rural school principals use the rural culture to enhance school outcomes? And, how do we prepare rural school principals to understand the larger rural school culture and how it effects school improvement initiatives?
Sustaining change initiative outcomes is an additional area for further research. Some change initiative programs provide a bump in academic achievement in the short term, but seem to have reduced effects in the long term. Additional research that explores the relationship between rural culture of the school and its effects on sustaining outcomes or the rural leadership in change initiatives would be beneficial to schools in our region as well.

Finally, information from this study as well as future research in areas listed above could help to drive changes in federal and state policy related to school improvement requirements. These recommendations might include: 1. School improvement initiatives may have different requirements for schools in rural contexts; 2. An analysis of school culture may assist in tailoring the requirements for an individual school building; 3. Best practices specifically for rural leadership could be included in the school improvement requirements. Overall, a recommendation would be to provide the flexibility to school buildings in the implementation of school improvement initiatives that work best for their context and school culture.

Final Thoughts

The results of this phenomenological case study at South Elementary in Southeastern Ohio will have an impact on my work with schools in the region and has provided me with an invaluable experience for future work as a researcher. The six themes that described the findings for this study are important insights that can guide my work as Director of Curriculum in my current school district. Although there are differences in the larger culture of my current community and the school cultures that I
work with, I can use what I have learned from South Elementary in working with the District Leadership Team, the Building Leadership Team, and the Teacher Based Teams at my school. I will be mindful about capitalizing on the enhancing aspects of the school and community culture, and intentional about building collegial relationships and collaborative practices when working with the faculty.

Finally, assuming the role of researcher allowed me to develop my observation, interviewing, and listening skills. The openness of the participants and their willingness to share their perceptions, emotions, and experiences with me was a truly humbling experience. The bracketing of my experiences helped me to look at school improvement and the change process with an open mind. I feel that this experience has helped me to mature as a researcher and has prepared me for the future work in supporting our Southeastern Ohio schools in the pursuit of academic excellence.
References


doi:10.1002/sres.424


Battelle for Kids (2012). *Six Drivers of Student Success: A look inside five of the world’s highest performing systems*. Columbus, OH: Author.


Center for Education Policy. (2007). *Answering the question that matters most: Has student achievement increased since No Child Left Behind?* Washington, DC: Author.


Ohio Department of Education. (2014). *Ohio ESEA Flexibility Request*. Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Education.


Appendix A: Approval Letter from Institutional Review Board

The following research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(-ies):

- 5
- 7

Project Title: A School Improvement Success Story: A Qualitative Study of Rural School Leadership, Culture, and the Change Process

Primary Investigator: Sandra Ungar Cionch
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Krisanna Machimes
Charles Lowery

Department: Educational Studies

Office of Research Compliance Staff
Rebecca Calle, AAB, CIP
Shelley Rex, BS
Robin Stack, CIP

Approval Date: 9/29/15
Expiration Date: 9/28/16

This approval is valid until the expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond the expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your approved application. Any additions or modifications to the project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.

IRB approval does not supersede other regulatory requirements, such as HIPAA, FERPA, PPRA, etc.

Adverse events/unanticipated problems must be reported to the IRB promptly.
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Title of Research:

Researcher: Sandra U Clonch

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
My name is Sandy Clonch and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Administration Program at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. I’m conducting research as part of my dissertation to complete my program. This study is being done to investigate a Southeastern Ohio rural school that has been successful in improving student achievement. My research will focus on the processes used by the district and building community in improving scores on the achievement and Value Added measures of the Local Report Card. The central question is: What changes have occurred in organizational leadership, culture, and practices in this rural Southeastern Ohio school that have led to its improved academic performance?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to schedule a one-on-one interview for approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to answer a series of questions regarding your background, your experiences in your school building, and your reflections about the process.

You should not participate in this study if you have not worked in this building from 2010 to 2015, if you are uncomfortable being audiotaped, or if you are uncomfortable reflecting on your own professional practice.

Your participation in the study will be completed after an interview of approximately 60 minutes and a follow-up one week after you have received the interview transcript. No follow up will be conducted after 60 days of the initial interview. You do not have to agree to the follow-up to be a part of the study.

Risks and Discomforts
Few risks or discomforts are anticipated from your participation in this study. However, you may feel reluctant to share information that might be perceived as negative or unflattering to your employer. If you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can choose not to answer or choose to stop participating in the study. Your participation is voluntary and you can decide to withdraw at any time.
Benefits

Although there may be no individual benefit, this study is important to the educational community because it will describe your school’s experiences with a school improvement process that resulted in high performance. In addition, the findings of this study will add to the knowledge base for other schools that are attempting to increase achievement and growth for students in their buildings.

Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms assigned to interview audio tapes and transcripts. A master code list and the interview materials will be kept in a locked cabinet in an office that is locked when I am not present. Only the interviewee, the researcher, her advisor, and her committee will have access to the interview data. The master code list will be destroyed one year after the research is completed in August of 2017.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the investigator Sandra Clonch, sclonch@alexanderschools.org, 740-698-8842 or the advisors Dr. Charles Lowery, lowery@ohio.edu, 740-593-4484; Dr. Krisanna Machtmes, machtmes@ohio.edu, 740-597-1324.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered;
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction;
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study;
- you are 18 years of age or older;
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary;
• you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature_________________ Date________________

Printed Name______________

Version Date: 9/23/2015
Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Interviewee Pseudonym:

Interviewer:

Location:

Date:

Notes:

1. Tell me about yourself, your education, and experiences?
2. How did you become a teacher (principal/leader) in this elementary school?
3. What do you believe makes this school successful?
4. How did the school improve academic achievement in reading over the past five years? In mathematics?
5. Tell me about your experiences with leadership at this school. Has it changed in the last five years?
6. What makes working at this elementary different from other schools? What do the staff have in common?
7. Given what you have told me about your experiences here, what does it mean for your teaching practice?
8. What do you think will help you continue to achieve success at your elementary?
9. Is there anything you would change?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?
## Appendix D: Data Analysis Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptive Code</th>
<th>apriori Code</th>
<th>Frequency of Interviews</th>
<th>Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Rural Sensibilities</td>
<td>Rural Background</td>
<td>R/PCB – Rural or southeast county background</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ava - p.4 …most of the people who work here are very familiar or live within the community or small communities. Brandon-p. 1 …all these small communities, in my opinion, are the same. Cherie-p. 10 …most people are from right around here somewhere close.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SCC – Small community or class</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Julie-p. 11 …small town atmosphere. Betty-p. 9 And it's small so sometimes that's good and sometimes that's bad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Ethic Student Focus</td>
<td>SWH – Staff work hard/Do what it takes</td>
<td></td>
<td>SC-SV Shared vision</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Alice - p.11 When we need to do something, we get it done. P.13 …I just think we are all working hard to help our children become successful. Joy-p.2 …there isn't a staff member here who wouldn't do everything in their power to help our children succeed. Lacey-p.4 ...we work really well together...we put the kids first. p.6 ...we all put forth effort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<p>| SC-SL Ensure student learning | 9 | Alice-p.11 If someone's free, they'll say, &quot;Do you have any kids? Do you want me to do their learning rings?&quot; p.16 of course our goals are to help the kids read better, help the kids recognize numbers better. Cherie-p.13 …help them learn something that they thought they couldn't learn… Joy-p.4 We are constantly assessing the students to see where they are, and not just their reading level but even more specific. | into doing everything. Sally-p.3 Everybody's really dedicated and here for the students. p. 8 We're going to do what's best for the kids that are here. Betty-p.9 Have one goal which is the kids and their success, meeting their needs. |
| SC-FR Focus on results | 6 | Joy-p. 6 I noticed that this year my students' scores were higher than last year. Lacey-p.8 …our scores are better than the other schools. Molly-p.9 He gets the top scores in Region 16 every time. P. 22 We were a School of Promise. We were a distinguished school. Betty-p.16 …if you compare us to other schools around us, we're leaps and bounds ahead of them right now. |
| SC-SA Strong sense of accountability | 7 | Molly-p.4 When you walk around the halls at ____, you will see every teacher instructing, every student, for the most part, engaged in their learning. Jacey-p.4 take ownership of their students because it wasn't like the special ed student or the gifted student or whatever labeled student. It ... was everybody's students. Julie-p.4 ...but Reading First just kind of tied it all together. And does make teachers accountable and kids accountable. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Values</th>
<th>PFF – Positive feelings about families</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FVES – Families value education/success</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Julie-p.8 Like 75%, I think, of the parents really do stress education and want their kids to do well…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FWH – Families work hard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alice-p.4 …there are a lot of hardworking families that value education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressing the Effects of Poverty</th>
<th>FSS – Families and/or students struggle</th>
<th>RC-HP High percentage of poverty 4</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alice-p.4 …I think that people in this area have seen struggle and they know struggle… Jacey-p.4 We have a lot of high need, very poor students, and they try to support…parents in every way they can… Betty-p.14 the free and reduced is somewhere near 80% …there's drugs in the family …kids who come to school filthy…mom's being abused…parents in jail.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| PC-MNEH Physical, mental and emotional health needs | 7 | Ava-p.10 You know, we play doctor, counselor, social worker, case worker… Molly-p.5 Children not having their needs met at home. Just about daily contact with Children's Services. I used to have one outside mental agency. Now I have two. Sally-p.10 a lot |
of teachers who bring in food for kids who may not have enough at home. ...they'll throw it in their locker so they have it for lunchtime.

| PC-SSR | Strong, secure relationship needs | 7 | Brandon-p.3 I've made a lot of great connections with kids. I mean the kids in high school still come down and see me… Cherie-p.11 if they don't feel that connection with the teacher…it can be rough for them. …it can be a very bad year. Jacey-p.14 ...she sends me messages all the time, "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be in school."

<p>| PC-PA | Parent activities that impede child development | 5 | Cherie-p4 …they look up to us because some do…they don't have good home lives, or they don't have good role models. Jacey-p.5 It is not uncommon for a child to come to school in the wintertime with no socks or shoes on or wearing flip-flops. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RC-SEI</td>
<td>Socioeconomic issues as rural challenge</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jacey-p.11 …they constantly have these kids that are in absolute turmoil…I grew up in the suburbs. That didn't happen in the suburbs. Lacey-p.9 …some of our kids don't get out….more than most of our kids are impoverished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC-SEE</td>
<td>Student engagement and effort needs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Brandon-p.6 …you sit and put that extra effort into it, they'll put the extra effort into it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School and Community Pride</td>
<td>PFSC – Positive feelings about school and/or community</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Alice-p.21 I love working here, …if I'm alive, I hope to retire from ____. It's a great place to be. Ava-p.9 I feel comfortable here. I feel comfortable when I come in the building and people are smiling, and they make you feel welcomed. Joy-p.13 I'm just very blessed to work here…it's just, it's a great school. This is where my heart is. This is where I'm supposed to be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIM</td>
<td>School image as underdog/less than others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cherie-p.3 …there have been several that come in here and think that they're better than us. And so therefore they look down on people here. Joy-p.10 …we don't really have that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC-CC</td>
<td>Collaboration with community</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Molly-p.3 I have worked very hard to develop partnerships with outside agencies….I work very close with all three of those agencies to get services for our families.</td>
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<tr>
<td>RC-SR</td>
<td>School as community resource</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Julie-p.9 We are the resource. The school is the biggest job place in this area, and so I think a lot of people lean on that and know that we will pull together to help cuz we don't have any other resources to help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFF</td>
<td>Staff are friends or family</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Alice-p.22 …these people are my friends. I mean we are family. Cherie-p.12 …me and my team now are very close. We talk about everything…inside and out of school. We talk at home. We talk here. Molly-p.16 …we are a family….I lost my husband three and a half years ago....I came back</td>
</tr>
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</table>
to work immediately...I think part of it was I just needed to be here...I think it's part of we're a family. I knew they cared.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FF – Families are friends</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Alice-p.22 I've met so many families and they are still my friends.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STGEN – Students for generations (grandparents/parents/student s)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Alice-p.13 …she has children of children that she taught. And she may even have children of children. She might be on like a third generation here. Lacey-p.9 …you know all the kids, you know all the families. I've taught their parents. I'll probably teach their kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuo us Improve ment Mindset</td>
<td>Continuo us Improve ment Philosop hy</td>
<td>PTL/G – Professional Development/Teacher learning/growth ADDED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI – Continuous improvement</td>
<td>SC-CI Continuous improvement philosophy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSA – Problem solving approach</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jacey-p.8 …we don’t have all the answers but we're willing to figure it out or find out… Julie-p.13 Let's see what we can do to fix this problem. Molly-p.10 So, I thought I need…to look at this. So, we're piloting a couple of things. P.19 I would say, &quot;What's going on, and what can we do to fix this?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Professional Staff Relationships</td>
<td>Staff Characteristics</td>
<td>TCHAR – Teacher characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Student/Teacher Relationships</td>
<td>TREL$ – Teacher relationships with students</td>
<td>PC-SSR Strong, secure relationship needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brandon-p.3 I treat 'em as if they're mine, you know, and that's just…okay. P. 19 I want to have the best bond I could have with my students, and I want my students to know that I care…</td>
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<td>Alice-p. 14 …you want better for your children…Because they deserve that. Everybody does. Brandon-p.17 The kids, you know, care about one another. …I had a little boy this year…transitioning into a wheelchair and… no one in my room treats that kid any different. You know? Joy-p. 2 …it's</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEXP – High Expectations</td>
<td>Ava-p.3 I have high expectations for myself. I am a perfectionist, and I hate when I am not able to do something, so I just continue to try…until I can get it. Cherie-p.7 …she has something that needs done, there's a deadline or … doesn't tolerate people not bringing, turning things. Betty-p.3 …we're constantly ahead of the curve as far as when new things are coming out.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
just so hard...not to fall in love with these kiddos...

<p>| RC-KIS Knowledge of individual students | 5 | Betty-p.4 If there is a particular student that is, needs in one way or another, they look at the teachers and see what personality might fit to support that child a little better. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colleagial Practices</th>
<th>SCOLL – Staff collaboration/teams</th>
<th>SC-CC Culture of collaboration</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava-p.3 …we're able to talk to previous teachers…if we have a concern about a child…we're able to go back to their previous teacher and say, &quot;Hey, did you notice this? What works? What doesn't work?&quot; Brandon-p.7 The teachers are together. You know, we have a team meeting once a week-if not twice a week of, &quot;Okay, where're we going?&quot; planning things out. Cherie-p.12 …me and my team now are very close. We talk about everything. Jacey-p.20 …it's really kind of a village because the bus drivers look out for the kids, and they know where everybody belongs or where they should go….the custodians even look out for the kids as well as…lunchroom staff. Everybody's kinda looking out for each other. Julie-p.12 …we do have ur TBT meetings, and everybody brings something to the table. Sally-p.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC-LCCR</td>
<td>Leadership is a collective responsibility</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Alice-p.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and doing things. I'm on the evaluation committee...

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>SC-TL Team Learning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Joy-p.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC-DD Dialogue and discussion</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Joy-p.9</td>
</tr>
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<td>Theme</td>
<td>Category</td>
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<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Collective Responsibility</td>
<td>Shared leadership practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal Leadership</td>
<td>SWH – Staff work hard/Do what it takes</td>
<td>SC-SV Shared vision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alice - p.11 When we need to do something, we get it done. P.13 …I just think we are all working hard to help our children become successful. Joy-p.2 …there isn't a staff member here who wouldn't do everything in their power to help our children succeed. Lacey-p.4 …we work really well together...we put the kids first. p.6 ...we all put forth effort into doing everything. Sally-p.3 Everybody's really dedicated and here for the students. p. 8 We're going to do what's best for the kids that are here. Betty-p.9 Have one goal which is the kids and their success, meeting their needs.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SL-ECR- Ethic of care</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandon-p.13 …she cares about the kids. …sometimes at staff meetings when she's telling you what you have to do she may not agree with it, but she tells you, and you may not agree with her. But…you know, at the end of the day, she cares about her kids. Jacey-p. So she called home to check and make sure everything was okay. …and then went back and told the student. And so, he could relax and learn cuz that's what he was...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
there for. Joy-p. 6 ...it's so nice because I know that she loves the kids as much as I do...
Molly-p.15 Just caring about kids, ...and, not only education of them but making sure that they're safe at night.

SL-MIP- Managing the instructional program 4

Jacey-p.2 ...the three of us worked together to learn the Reading First process and the requirements. So, during the change process we had to teach the ...teachers about assessment and the...assess, plan, teach philosophy. Joy-p.7 If anything comes along, she's always letting us know hey there's this workshop coming up if you'd like to attend. Molly-p.2 I was also the district coordinator of Reading First, Ohio, because we had been awarded the grant the summer that I accepted the position. p.6 I had to come in and change every aspect of the reading instruction here at ____.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethic of Justice</td>
<td>SL-EJ</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Brandon-p.17 But no one in my room treats that kid any different, you know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethic of profession</td>
<td>SL-EP</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cherie-p.7 …she gives us that direction. It’s always nice to know … what’s expected of you… Molly-p.12 … using the OTES rubric for evaluation…. I think it has helped teachers be more prepared… you can still lose your job if you’re ineffective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethic of critique</td>
<td>SL-ECQ</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ava-p.12 I’m very open to her opinion… she gives… very good constructive criticism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining school mission</td>
<td>SL-DM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Molly-p. 8 I said as long as I’m the building principal, it’s gonna be sustained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Leadership</td>
<td>PCHAR</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ava-p.4 She is very open… she listens… we come up with a plan, so it’s not all just one sided. Brandon-p.13 … she cares about the kids. Cherie-p.7 … you know what to expect from her and that makes… your job easier. Julie-p.2 … she understands our needs and she knows the people… Molly-p.13 I pride myself in knowing who fits here. Betty-p.9 … she’s also not… wishy-washy. And you just can’t go in there and you’re gonna get anything you want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSUP-Principal Support</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Alice-p.5  …whenever we have concerns,…she always backs us up. If we ever have an issue with a family or student,…she always backs us up first…and foremost. Jacey-p.11 …finally the principal got to the bottom of what was really bothering this child because he was being really disruptive in class. Joy-p.3 …another thing that is great is the support we have from our principal. We know that she is always going to be there to help us. p.7 …she's always trying to look for more resources for us…</td>
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<tr>
<td>L-EF-Empowering followers</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Alice-p.5  She is here for us to help us do a better job. Joy-p.5 …our principal said, &quot;Do you want this everyday math material? …How do you want to do that?&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>PFP-Positive feelings for principal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Brandon-p.12 I love our-I love-I love our principal. Cherie-p.6 I think she's wonderful. Sally-p.8 …her and I work very well together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL-PSC-Promoting positive climate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Molly-p.20 …its all about the atmosphere and climate, you know that.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Comment</td>
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<tr>
<td>L-CF</td>
<td>Confidence in followers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ava-p.16 …she's always said, &quot;You guys are the ones that have the kids the most. …You know what works; you know what doesn't.&quot; Molly-p.12 I have been fortunate to surround myself by good people. …I really take pride in…the people I have hired, because they're amazing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPRO</td>
<td>Principal professionalism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Alice-p.5 …she handles every situation very professionally, and I've seen her talking with parents and she does a great job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-OP</td>
<td>Optimistic and positive</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ava-p.10 …you always see her with a smile. Molly-p.27 I'm positive all the time….sometimes it gets in the way, but that's who I am.</td>
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<td>L-LE</td>
<td>Leading by example</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Connections to home</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPSUP</td>
<td>Principal parent/student support</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Alice-p.5 If we ever have an issue with a family or student, …she always backs us up…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEI</td>
<td>Parent Education/Intervention</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jacey-p.4 pretty much train the kids to go home and just read, read, read to their parents, to their family members, anybody who'll listen to them. Lacey-p.11 …we do home visits…</td>
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<td>Theme</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Descriptive Code</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to Effective Practices</td>
<td>Instructional Practices</td>
<td>RM INST-Reading and Math instruction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>RF-Reading First grant</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jacey-p.1 …we wrote a Reading First grant. And when we received the Reading First grant, I was…in the original grant to be the resource coordinator and the data manager. Joy-p.4 …then several years ago we switched over to Reading First…. We, you know, embraced it and it turned out to be…one of the best programs that has ever happened to us. Julie-p.3 I think Reading First has made us…dig deeper into the content and teach kids...</td>
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</table>
how to comprehend. Betty-p.4 I think it all started with the Reading First grant. And they just restructured the way reading was done entirely.

RM INT- Reading and Math intervention 6 Jacey-p.7 …their intervention programs are really structured… Joy-p.4 we also have done a lot of after-school programming…we offer tutoring to our kids. Joy-p.5 we get to have an even smaller group in the afternoon for the intervention piece. …then we can target those needs for that 30 minutes.

CC- standards 5

5CR-Five components of reading 3 Alice-p.6 The five components…we do it every day. We do vocab. We do comprehension. We do…phonics, phonemic awareness. We do all of that every day. Molly-p.6 Every teacher at ____ received intense professional
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
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<tr>
<td>MathC-Math curriculum/Everyday Math</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Molly-p.9 We were an Everyday Math school. ...we have bought...some core math materials.</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSUP-Home support and parent accountability</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Alice-p. 6 I push reading at home from like the third week of Kindergarten.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment and Results</td>
<td>TEST-Formative and summative assessments</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ava-p.5 ...we also group our students based on their DRA levels. Joy-p.6 So we're constantly assessing those sometimes using flashcards, sometimes manipulatives, sometimes paper pencil.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SOUT-School outcomes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Alice-p.13 ...we would compare local scores with our scores. Jacey-p. ...that keeps you going because you hear the success stories. Joy p.6 ...I noticed that this year my students' scores were higher than last year's.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>OTES-Ohio Teacher Evaluation System</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Molly-p. 12 ...using the OTES rubric for evaluation-it's a lot more involved. It's a lot more reflection. ...I think it has helped teachers be more prepared, number one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to Success</td>
<td>EW/P-Extra work/paper work</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Alice-p.16 We hate it. We hate filling this out. Didn't we just fill this out? Ava-p. The paperwork's kinda taken...a toll on everything, time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IS-New Intervention specialists/special education support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cherie-p.15 I struggle with that because my Intervention Specialist is only in the room with me for, like, 20 minutes, 25 minutes for language arts so that's not enough.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL-Principal/staff retiring/leaving</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ava-p.15 She's wanting to retire, and I don't want her to retire. P.16 So, I'm very comfortable with her, and that's a struggle for me to not see her in that role.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tech-Lack of technology</td>
<td>2</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Quote</th>
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<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Rural Sensibilities-Rural Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacey-p.11 I grew up in the suburbs. That didn't happen in the suburbs… Molly-p.14 …you would think that having an understanding of people that live in poverty…prior experience working in a rural district would help. But what I found for the most part is any teacher that comes here, regardless of their background, embrace these children. Betty-p.1 So its a different cultural environment than I grew up in.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Sensibilities-Familial/Congenial Relationships</td>
<td>Brandon-p.21 I do feel the last couple of years that the positivity's role may be starting to slide… I feel people are starting to get a little, you know, short with one another.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Quote/Comment</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Sensibilities - Family Values</td>
<td>Julie-p.8 I think its very sports oriented. …you will go to a football game or a basketball game…and there's just throngs of people. And then for parent teacher conferences, they won't come.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive/Professional Relationships-</td>
<td>I told the principal here that I almost think we have been the ruination of our kids because the last two years the kids have no respect. You almost can't teach this year because they are so chatty because there's no punishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Student/Teacher Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Alice-p.14 I'm probably more of a follower. I don't ever consider myself a leader….I'm a leader kind of in the back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Responsibility- Teacher Leadership</td>
<td></td>
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