School-Based Factors Perceived to Impact Successful Student Outcomes on Ohio's Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment

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This dissertation titled
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Abstract

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School-based Factors Perceived to Impact Successful Student Outcomes on Ohio's Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment

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This qualitative comparative case study identified the factors that educational professionals from rural Western Appalachia Ohio perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. Data were collected from two high-poverty elementary schools. To be considered for this study, one school had to consistently meet the state’s standard to earn the report card point by attaining 75% passage or higher on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement, and the other school had to historically struggle to achieve 75% passage. Interviews were the primary source of data collection and consisted of teachers, principals, and superintendents, respectively. Results indicate instructional strategies utilized by the teachers, supportive leadership, and both self- and collective efficacy are all variables that discriminate between the higher performing and struggling schools.
I dedicate this work to Louise Jennings Imes, my mother; Kenneth Jennings, my father; and Papa Russ. Mom and Dad, from my elementary years forward, you valued my academic successes. Thank you for the foundation of endurance that has enabled me to reach this goal. Papa Russ, I formerly express the gratitude for your love and support as a step-parent that I was too young to comprehend during the few years we shared together. I know you will be celebrating in heaven along with Mom, Dad, as Mom flaps jewel bedazzled angel wings and dances on a golden table!
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“So do not fear, I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Isaiah 41:10
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... 3
Dedication ........................................................................................................................... 4
Acknowledgments............................................................................................................... 5
List of Tables .................................................................................................................... 15

Chapter 1: Introduction ..................................................................................................... 16
  Appalachia Defined ...................................................................................................... 18
  Characteristics of Rurality ......................................................................................... 18
  Stereotypes Often Associated with Rurality ............................................................... 20
  Recent History of School Reform ............................................................................. 21
  Federal Reforms ........................................................................................................ 22
  Efforts at Reform in Ohio ........................................................................................ 27
  Current Implications of Reforms in Ohio ................................................................. 28
  Statement of the Problem .......................................................................................... 30
  Rationale for the Study ............................................................................................... 32
  Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................. 33
  Limitations .................................................................................................................. 34
  Definition of Terms ..................................................................................................... 34
  Organization of the Study .......................................................................................... 36

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................ 37
  Theoretical Frameworks ............................................................................................. 38
    Deficit theory. ....................................................................................................... 39
    Instructional core. ................................................................................................. 40
    Cognitive evaluation theory. ................................................................................. 43
    Leadership theory. ................................................................................................. 49
    Systems thinking. .................................................................................................. 49
    Role of the principal .............................................................................................. 51
    Impact of principal leadership on teachers’ expectations of students .................. 54
  Core Reading Instruction .......................................................................................... 56
    Phonemic awareness. ............................................................................................. 58
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonics</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-based Factors Perceived to Impact Reading Achievement</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent reading</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective efficacy</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of leadership on instruction</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy coaching</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Methodology</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context of the Study</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of study</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site selection</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample description</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis and Synthesis</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficence</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elementary B, Principal B. ................................................................. 104
Elementary B, Superintendent B.......................................................... 104
Analysis and Synthesis ......................................................................... 105

Similarities Pertaining to the Instruction of Reading Perceived to Impact Reading Achievement ................................................................. 105

Reading instruction. ............................................................................. 106
Instructional tools used to collect/analyze reading data ......................... 106
Scheduling.............................................................................................. 107
Ability grouping. .................................................................................. 108
Phonics................................................................................................. 110
Centers. ............................................................................................... 110
Vertical alignment.................................................................................. 111
Collaboration........................................................................................ 112

Differences Pertaining to the Instruction of Reading Perceived to Impact Reading Achievement ................................................................. 116

Kindergarten readiness........................................................................ 116
Test preparation. .................................................................................. 116
Fidelity of reading instruction at Elementary A...................................... 117
Struggle with implementation................................................................. 117
Struggle with follow-through using data. ............................................... 118
Fidelity of reading instruction at Elementary B...................................... 119
After-school tutoring program. .............................................................. 120

Similarities Pertaining to Meeting the Achievement Needs of Special Education Students................................................................. 120

Professional development not a factor.................................................. 120
Communication..................................................................................... 121

Differences Pertaining to Meeting the Achievement Needs of Special Education Students................................................................. 122

Instruction at Elementary A................................................................. 122
Specially-designed instruction............................................................... 123
Instruction at Elementary B. ................................................................. 123
Specially designed instruction............................................................... 124
Communication at Elementary A................................................................. 124
Communication at Elementary B................................................................. 125
Expectations................................................................................................. 125
Cooperation................................................................................................. 126

Similarities Pertaining to Perceptions of Professional Development and Its
Relationship to Student Achievement............................................................. 127

Professional development opportunities at Elementary A.............................. 127
Professional development opportunities at Elementary B.............................. 130
Implementation of professional development at Elementary A....................... 131
Implementation of professional development at Elementary B....................... 132
Solicitation of teacher input ........................................................................ 132
Professional development needs perceived to influence achievement .......... 133

Differences Pertaining to Perceptions of Professional Development and Its
Relationship to Student Achievement............................................................. 134

Similar Responses Pertaining to Building Climate and Its Relationship to Student
Achievement ..................................................................................................... 135

Differences Pertaining to Building Climate and Its Relationship to Student
Achievement ..................................................................................................... 136

Factors contributing to perceptions of school climate at Elementary A........... 136
  Pressure over achievement results ............................................................... 136
  Perception that outside influences impact achievement results ................. 137
  Changes in leadership ................................................................................ 138
Factors contributing to perceptions of school climate at Elementary B........... 138
  Level of principal’s direct involvement with students ............................... 139
  Praise for staff ............................................................................................ 139
  Perceived level of dedication ..................................................................... 140

Similarities Pertaining to Leadership Factors Perceived to Impact Student
Achievement ..................................................................................................... 141

Vision as a force guiding achievement ............................................................ 141
Visibility of administration ........................................................................... 142
Principal ........................................................................................................ 142
Superintendent ............................................................................................. 143

Emphasis on state reading achievement results ............................................ 143
Differences Pertaining to Leadership Factors Perceived to Impact Student Achievement

Vision as a force guiding achievement. ................................................................. 147
Visibility of administration. .............................................................................. 148
Competition. ............................................................................................................ 148
Perceived level of accountability that ultimately impacts achievement .......... 149
  Teacher accountability. ....................................................................................... 149
  Accountability to the board of education. ......................................................... 150
  Steps to increase accountability. ......................................................................... 151
Cultural presence of accountability at Elementary A. ....................................... 152
Cultural presence of accountability at Elementary B. ....................................... 153
  Accountability for the emotional well-being of students. ............................... 154
Emphasis on achievement testing at Elementary A. ........................................... 155
Emphasis on achievement testing at Elementary B. ......................................... 156
High expectations for achievement that permeate the culture. ....................... 157
Administrative role as instructional leader. ......................................................... 157
  Principal A as instructional leader. ................................................................. 157
  Principal B as instructional leader. ................................................................. 158
  Superintendent A as instructional leader. ......................................................... 159
  Superintendent B as instructional leader. ......................................................... 161
Precedent of struggle............................................................................................ 161

Similarities Pertaining to Efficacy and Its Perceived Relationship to Student Achievement

Perceptions of self-efficacy and relationship to student growth. ....................... 162
Self-efficacy related to building climate conducive to achievement. ................. 163
Self-efficacy related to testing preparation. ......................................................... 163
Collective efficacy related to student achievement ........................................... 164
List of Tables

Table 1: Demographic Information 2012-2013 ..............................................................82
Table 2: Demographic Information 2013-2014 ..............................................................83
Table 3: Demographic Information 2014-2015 ..............................................................84
Chapter 1: Introduction

This study illuminated the factors that educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio perceive to impact student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. The discussion in this chapter specifically addresses this population because (1) many high-poverty rural Western Appalachian children in the United States continue to struggle with successful performance on standardized reading assessments, (2) many educational professionals in such areas are uncertain of how to possibly impact student reading achievement, and (3) the understanding of school-based factors perceived to impact reading achievement in high-poverty rural Appalachian elementary schools has the potential to influence educational decisions that may impact future students’ performance outcomes.

A fundamental task at the elementary level in America’s schools is teaching students to read effectively by empowering them with the skills necessary to decode, read fluently, and comprehend grade level texts. Researchers agree that the mastery of particular literacy skills relates to students’ later reading achievement (DeBruin-Parecki, 2005; Diuk & Ferroni, 2011; Kim & Quinn, 2013; Lovelace & Stewart, 2009; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2012; Vaughn, et al. 2003), and the failure to acquire effective reading skills will likely hinder their future educational and occupational endeavors. The National Institute for Literacy (NIL) (2001) reported that people living in poverty, which is often characteristic of the rural Appalachian region, account for forty-one to forty-four percent of those with the lowest literacy rates. In Ohio, families of four who make less than $48,500 annually may qualify for low-income status. (Ohio Department of Education
[ODE], 2015a). An estimated 17.6% of the current residents in Appalachian Ohio currently live in such poverty, compared to the state average of 11.6%. Several counties in Appalachian Ohio- Athens, Jackson, Pike, Scioto, and Adams are those with the highest poverty rates, ranging from 22.7% to 31.7%, respectively (Larric, 2015). Statewide, children ages 0 to 11 and young adults 18-24 have poverty rates exceeding 20% (Larrick, 2015). Consequently, the greater likelihood of Appalachian children coming from a high-poverty rural area requires a deeper look at what it means to be both Appalachian and rural.

Nearly half (47.5%) of the schools in the United States educate fewer than 1000 students, and nearly three-quarters (71.5%) educate fewer than 2,500 students. The majority of such schools are located in rural areas (Stockard, 2011). In Ohio, one in four students are educated in a rural school district; Ohio’s rural population is higher than in any state with the exception of Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas (Johnson et al. 2014). Barley and Beesley (2007) agree that smaller districts are often characterized by limited bureaucratic challenges and strong personal relationships among administration, parents, staff, and students that may promote achievement gains. Simultaneously, however, such districts face the extreme demands of meeting state standards and requirements, especially in areas such as high quality professional development, scheduling that meets the demands of special student groups, and curriculum demands (McNeil, 2009). Laird, Cataldi, KewalRamani, and Chapman (2008) cite that Appalachia is characterized by difficulties in academic retention, and the high school dropout rate nearly doubles the national average.
Appalachia Defined

The federal Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) defines Appalachia as a mountainous range that spans 205,000 square miles among 13 states along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi and the northern reaches of Alabama and Georgia (Gore & Wilburn, 2010). The Appalachian region includes all of West Virginia and parts of the following 12 states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Forty-two percent of the area is considered rural compared with the national average of twenty percent. The Western Appalachian Region of Ohio consists of the following counties: Adams, Brown, Clermont, Gallia, Highland, Jackson, Lawrence, Pike, and Ross (Appendix D; E; ARC, 2016). Given the extreme poverty often found in this region (ARC, 2016) and the number of schools struggling to meet Ohio’s standards for reading achievement, Pike County, specifically, the researcher focused on this part of the state (Siegel, 2016).

Characteristics of Rurality

Rural areas of Appalachia are not only defined differently geographically by different entities, they are distinguished by a myriad of races, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and political/religious associations (Murray & Keller, 1991). Such markers are often generalized, however, to include narrow classifications of race, religion, and geographic origin (Alessandria, 2002). Rural culture and its relationship to rural education is a complex dynamic of various factors, however, that cannot be narrowed by simple descriptors.
The existing literature recognizes cultural descriptors associated with Appalachian rurality: deep-seated work ethic, uncertainty about the meaning/value of outsider presence, attachment to land, perception of safety within the natural environment, respect for tradition, struggling economic system with an elevated public assistance population, affiliation with spiritual beliefs, access to fewer educational resources, reduced emphasis on formal education, and sound ancestral and community connections (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Ball, 1969; DeYoung, 1985; Elam, 2002; Hann-Morrison, 2011; Pusateri, 2013). Individuals may possess one or more than one of the aforementioned attributes to constitute rurality; for rurality embodies not only geographical affiliation but also affiliation with the cultural elements of rurality (Pusateri, 2013).

The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (ERS) (2015) suggests nine definitions of “rural” derived from three sources: the United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB), United States Census Bureau, and the ERS. Three definitions of rural are derived from census location data while three others are based on census urban area. The OMB has a definition of rural based upon metropolitan statistical area. The ERS has a definition of rural supported by the rural-urban commuting area codes, and the census bureau suggests a definition grounded in socioeconomic indicators. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released three definitions for rural in 2006. For the purposes of this study, pertaining to its emphasis on rural Appalachian Ohio, rural will be defined as “all population, housing and territory” that is not “densely developed” and “encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, para. 1, 3).
**Stereotypes Often Associated with Rurality**

Many stereotypes are often assigned to residents of rural areas. An awareness of the presence of such stereotypes provides a framework that may underscore some of the school-based factors that are perceived to impact successful reading achievement outcomes in high-poverty rural areas. Research indicates rural stereotypes include laziness, inadequate concern for hygiene and groomed appearance, opposition to change, lack of refinement, inappropriate sexual behavior, lack of intelligence, incidence of violence, predisposition to substance abuse, unappealing physical appearance, poverty, typically of a Christian affiliation, Caucasian (Alessandria, 2002), and having speech considered to be inferior (Flora & Flora, 2012; Foster & Hummel, 1997; Heilman, 2004; Jarosz & Lawson, 2002; Massey, 2007; Pusateri, 2013).

In rural areas, it is essential to consider the cultural construction and challenges posed by stereotyping in order to potentially understand the complex rural realities of the school-based factors that educational professionals perceive impact successful student performance outcomes on standardized tests. Eppley (2009) interviewed a teacher who taught in both a rural and non-rural setting. When asked how the experiences differed, the teacher emphatically stated that teaching in a rural school is different because rural children needed to be taught how their lives fit within the scope of the larger world. She discussed the importance of a teacher’s ability to mediate the curriculum and the lived experiences of the students who were deeply rooted in their local community through generational ties (Eppley, 2009).
With the success of Russia’s Sputnik mission in the 1960s, the federal government of the United States became concerned about the performance of America’s students, especially those living in poverty (Wissehr, Concannon, & Barrow, 2011). It became clear that children in high-poverty did not have access to many educational supports available in more affluent areas. This fear and concern underscored federal and state measures to ensure that all children, such could maximize their learning potential measured by a new system of accountability (Wissehr, Concannon, & Barrow, 2011).

**Recent History of School Reform**

Given the struggles that many high-poverty rural Appalachians face, it is important to review the relevance of educational reform and the impact the reform movements have on the educational professionals and students who live in this area. Teaching children to read is a fundamental tenet of elementary school educators. Prior to 1983, courses of study were developed by local school districts, and the general consensus was schools were educating students based upon the school board’s perceived needs for a local district. Teachers had instructional freedom, relied predominantly on adopted textbooks for instructional guidance, and designed units and targets of instruction based upon their professional observations and perceptions of student need. Standards-based reform began with the advent of the Sputnik challenge and the United States government’s fears of falling behind the performance of other countries (Cusick, 1973). Consequently, in the 1960’s, President Johnson implemented the Head Start program and Title I funding as remediation attempts to infuse education from a national perspective (Alexandria, 2011).
Federal Reforms

In 1965, rural America was challenged by a declining population and an aging demographic. The trend of a declining population resulted in the consolidation of many rural community schools. Other societal issues such as the climate surrounding post-Sputnik rhetoric and passion over civil rights underscored the desire for a scientific solution to abate inequity and poverty (Stedman, 1994). President Johnson’s response to the multi-decade trend was the implementation of Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) of 1965 (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006). The intent was to address poverty by establishing equal access to education and to establish accountability for the public schools through standardized testing.

In April of 1983, under President Ronald Reagan, the National Commission on Educational Excellence authored *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* which encapsulated several recommendations intended to remediate America’s education system as a weak link to national security. This report was released at a critical time for rural America. The farm crisis of the 1980s yielded crippling reductions in land and crop values, interest rates and foreclosures were rising, and family farms were facing a state of crisis. The federal government emphasized that American schools were inadequate and failing to produce American workers who could compete globally (Stedman, 1994). Continuing with President Reagan’s efforts, in 1994 President Bill Clinton called for an Education Summit. This effort established *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* consisting of 8 national goals to be accomplished by all students by the year 2000 (Goals 2000, 1994).
1. All children will be ready to learn when starting school.

2. The high school graduation rate will increase to 90%.

3. All students will be assessed in grades 4, 8, and 12 and demonstrate competency in English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics/government, economics, arts, history, and geography.

4. Teachers will have access to professional development to reinforce their professional skills.

5. Students will be first in the world in mathematics and science.

6. Every American will be literate and possess the needed skills to compete in a global economy and exercise the properties of citizenship.

7. Every American school will be drug and violence free and offer students an environment conducive to learning.

8. Every school will increase parental involvement and create partnerships that promote the academic, social, and emotional growth of students.

(Goals 2000, 1994).

Given the growing concern of the federal government surrounding the state of public education in America, in 2002, President George W. Bush expanded the role of the federal government in America’s schools by enacting the No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2002) as federal law on January 8, 2002, with an emphasis on improving the education of the nation’s most disadvantaged students. The supporters of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) believed that measures would increase the accountability for student progress and produce positive gains in student
achievement, given the mandate that all students would pass a standardized grade level reading test by 2014. NCLB attempted to increase the accountability of America’s schools and educators by measuring growth in school performance against fixed standards known as adequate yearly progress (AYP).

NCLB required the following:

1. Students would be 100% proficient by 2014.
3. Disaggregation of education data to determine Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)
4. Counting graduation rate and participation rate toward AYP.
5. Requiring states to participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in grades 4-8 for reading and math.
6. Programs based upon Scientifically Based Research (SBR).
7. Sanctions for schools who fail to make progress.
8. Requiring teachers to be Highly Qualified (HQ).

(NCLB, 2002)

In order to improve reading instruction in some of America’s most disadvantaged schools (Manzo, 2006) and ensure that all children could read at or above grade level, NCLB also established the Reading First initiative (RF), which became the largest federal investment in literacy instruction in history (Salzman, Clay, Brown, Rosemary, & Lenhart, 2005). Under the direction of the United States Congress, The National Reading
Panel (NRP) (2000) was created to investigate the most effective ways to teach reading. Based upon the panel’s findings, RF emphasized professional development for teachers in grades K-3 grounded in scientifically-based reading research and data-driven decision making that provided teachers with reliable assessments used to identify students’ strengths and weaknesses (Salzman, 2008).

The federal government not only began scrutinizing the education of the nation’s general education students, but of those with disabilities as well. In 2004 the legislature adopted the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). This act emphasized the following:

1. Accountability for students with disabilities
2. Parental involvement.
3. SBR programs.
4. Flexibility in services.
5. Instruction classified as high quality and data driven.
6. Increased collaboration between regular education and special education service providers.

(Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA], 2004).

NCLB has caused tremendous controversy in the education community. As schools began to feel the academic and economic impact of the law, many educators and policy makers began questioning the viability and fairness of the law’s expectations, unfunded mandates, and timelines of expectation. Many became concerned and suggested that the law’s emphasis on monitoring progress according to the successes of
demographic subgroups might penalize schools and districts characterized by diversity. Controversy continued to mount surrounding the growing emphasis on the goal of reaching 100 percent proficiency by 2014.

In recent months the controversy associated with the unrealistic goals of NCLB motivated a bipartisan group of lawmakers to replace the mandate. President Barack Obama signed the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) into law on December 10, 2015. The bill intends to return significant powers to the state in the following ways:

1. Maintaining high academic standards that prepare students for college and careers.
2. Demanding that states redirect resources to schools challenged by low-performance, high drop-out rates, and achievement gaps.
3. Empowering local bodies to devise creative solutions for school improvement.
4. Reduce the burden of standardized testing by requiring testing in grades three- to eight and once in high school.
5. Providing increased access to high-quality preschool services.
6. Establishing innovative resources for research-based strategies that spur reform and support positive student outcomes.

(*Every Student Succeeds Act* [ESSA], 2015)

To support these efforts, the bill provides for weighted student funding that would require states and districts to distribute more of their funding to the highest poverty schools.

As a civil rights law, the ESSA upholds critical protection for America’s disadvantaged students. Schools will be held accountable for the progress of all students,
and the law prescribes reforms to remedy underperformance in schools failing to serve all students (ESSA, 2015).

**Efforts at Reform in Ohio**

To be compliant with federal reform efforts, Ohio’s legislature required ODE to adopt minimum standards as guidance to the state’s public school districts. These competencies were developed in math, language arts, and composition. School evaluations were required to monitor compliance (ODE, 2014). In 1986 the federal *Time for Results Report* also linked poor public education to weakness in national security. In response, in July 1987, the Ohio legislature adopted House Bill 231 (1987) which mandated achievement testing for all public school students in the ninth grade.

In further response to national mandates, in September of 1990, the Ohio legislature implemented a system of achievement testing for grades 4, 6, 8, and 10. These became known as the Proficiency Tests (ODE, 2014). In 1991, following the implementation of the testing accountability system, Ohio adopted requirements for new data availability in the Education Management Information System (EMIS), rules for excellent and deficient schools, Competency-Based Education (CBE) reported through EMIS, and a language arts model (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003).

In 1997 the Ohio Board of Regents and ODE united to create a set of common expectations for students aged preschool-sixteen. Academic Content Standards were created for language arts, foreign languages, mathematics, science, social studies, and the arts. In the same year, the Ohio General Assembly passed Senate Bill 55 which
established the first rating system that classified schools based upon their performance on 26 indicators that reflected student performance (NCES, 2003). This school evaluation system has recently transcended to a new system, however, consisting of report cards with letter grade evaluations for schools and districts.

In 2001 the Ohio legislature adopted Senate Bill 1 (2001) Ohio’s New Education Bill which mandated achievement tests, diagnostic tests, performance measures, reconfiguring the data available and used for district report cards, and intervention strategies for failing districts (NCES, 2003).

**Current Implications of Reforms in Ohio**

In 2011 ODE released for the first time in history, school rankings of Ohio’s 936 school districts, including public school districts, vocational schools, and private charter schools. In this first year, however, (Candisky, 2011) 60 school districts were not included in the rankings due to unavailability of test data. Calculation rankings have been based upon assessments administered in grades 3-8 and the 10th grade Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) which is currently being phased out.

In 2012, the state of Ohio adopted Senate Bill 316 (2012) which requires all school districts to evaluate students to determine whether or not they can read on grade level. Students not reading on grade level are required to have a Reading Improvement Monitoring Plan (RIMP) which requires all students to have 90 minutes of high-quality reading instruction designed and monitored by a highly qualified teacher to improve upon each child’s unique deficits. The plan requires schools to work closely with parents to monitor student progress.
Unless exempt from retention on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), students must meet a minimum cut score on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment or a minimum cut score on an ODE-approved alternative test in order to advance to fourth grade. Students who are retained under this Third Grade Reading Guarantee (TGRG) can take other fourth grade subjects, and if deemed “ready”, per individual school district policy, students can then be promoted mid-year to fourth grade. As part of the mid-year promotion, a team of individuals is required to analyze students’ data to determine if they are capable of meeting the demands of the fourth grade curriculum (ODE, 2015b).

Given the struggle of the nation’s public schools to meet NCLB’s goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014, and the state mandates that have consequently ensued, many educational professionals have desperately sought to reform the educational efforts within their schools. Given that the performance of Appalachian rural students on standardized tests often varies from state to state, Lee and McIntire (2000) suggest that such differences may be linked to variances in school-based factors.

Several rural elementary schools in Ohio are still struggling to meet the reading goals set forth by NCLB and Ohio’s TGRG (ODE, 2016; Siegel, 2016). Many of these Ohio schools received extra funding between 2003 and 2010 from the Reading First grant. This grant was designed to empower schools to meet the expectations of the Title I initiative. Title I funds are awarded to schools based upon the poverty count conveyed by the U.S. Census.
The Title I grant provided additional supports for struggling students in areas characterized by high poverty and low achievement. The grant was designed to assist those students who struggle to meet achievement goals (Salzman, 2008). As part of NCLB (2002), the Reading First grant was intended to fund literacy supports for struggling readers attending grades K-3 in high-poverty, low-achieving schools. This initiative distributed $6.38 billion dollars allocated for a maximum of six years to all 50 states, districts, and schools through competitive grants used to fund literacy efforts and reading skill development of K-3 students. Despite the access to these additional resources, however, many high-poverty K-3 elementary students continue to struggle to meet the standards of third grade reading achievement (Reardon, 2013) due to disparities often associated with income and other environmental factors.

Once the federal government mandated by law that school districts would be held accountable for student literacy, and the expectations of the year 2014 became imminent, administrators and teachers began to scrutinize their reading scores more carefully. Even though many high-poverty rural elementary Appalachian schools struggle to meet successful reading achievement outcomes, there are schools with similar demographics that do successfully meet the mandated standards. This study specifically highlights third grade student achievement and the school-based factors perceived to impact achievement in the high-poverty Western Appalachian region of Ohio.

**Statement of the Problem**

Evaluation Theory (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006; Lopez, 2012) and Leadership Theory (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Senge, 1990) all establish the groundwork for expanding the knowledge this study seeks to investigate. These theories serve to underscore the relationship between the reader and successful academic reading achievement. The literature presented in Chapter 2, however, established that current research focuses a great deal on the school-based factors associated with successful reading achievement outcomes, but few studies explore successful student reading achievement outcomes and how they pertain specifically to high-poverty rural Appalachian elementary students.

Previous research neglects the analysis of rural high-performing, high-poverty Appalachian schools. Due to a lack of high quality research conducted in rural settings, educational professionals are denied information about research-based interventions and strategies that support successful student achievement outcomes (Stern, 1994). This study examined school-based factors such as the following that may contribute to third grade reading achievement: building and district leadership, educator self-efficacy, educator collective efficacy, professional development, and instructional strategies implemented by the classroom teacher. By addressing the following key question, this study attempted to address the gap in present literature: What school-based factors do educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment?
Rationale for the Study

Several factors such as the classroom teacher, teacher/collective efficacy, and school leadership have been associated with improving student achievement (Marzano, 2003). Some factors such as home environment, literacy stimulation in the home (Myrberg & Rosen, 2009) and hereditary elements (Loehlin & Nichols, 2014) are beyond the immediate control of the structured school setting. Although such factors may influence student reading achievement, these elements are not within the control of the school setting. Consequently, this study focused on school-based factors educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachia perceive as impacting successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

High-poverty rural Appalachian students often lack educational opportunities, exposure to educational materials, and instructional experiences with highly qualified and/or tenured teachers (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Borman & Kimball, 2005; Knoeppel, 2007). Salzman, Newman, and Brown (2011) cited the rural disadvantage in literacy skills for entering kindergarteners. Not only do students often enter kindergarten with a disadvantage, but the high-poverty rural schools are most likely to employ inexperienced teachers and those with lower performance on teacher entrance exams to work with the students (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Carey, 2004; Wyckoff, 2003). Students of poverty may also struggle to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with educational professionals in their schools (Becker & Luthar, 2002), and research supports that classroom teachers are the primary factor influencing student achievement (Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Arnold et
al., 2005; Hanushek, 1997; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; NCLB, 2002; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Improving the quality of instruction in low-performing schools and narrowing the achievement gap between groups of Appalachian students requires that students be taught by high quality instructors. Some researchers suggest that increasing the pedagogical skills of rural teachers may have the greatest impact on the academic achievement of rural students (Larrick, 2015).

Amendum & Fitzgerald, 2013; Arnold et al., 2005). Despite the challenges faced by many high-poverty rural Western Appalachian schools, pockets of schools in this region are experiencing successful reading achievement outcomes (Telfer & Howley, 2014).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions that educational professionals have of the school-based factors that influence successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. School-based factors in high-poverty, rural Appalachian schools that empower students to gain the confidence and skill necessary to successfully perform on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment were examined throughout the study. The study was conducted in two rural Appalachian public elementary schools. One was a high-performing elementary school, and one was a low-performing elementary school. The rationale for comparing schools with contrasting standardized testing performance is to analyze the data collected from interviews concerning various school-based factors believed to impact student results. Data collected from the interviews was analyzed to explore any distinctive differences
that may be associated with successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

**Limitations**

This is a qualitative comparative case study. Patton (2002) describes a case study as the description of a particular phenomenon not intended to predict future outcomes. Consequently, any attempt to generalize the study’s findings should be carefully scrutinized. In addition, the sample size is small. Specifically, the study consists of interviews comprised of two teachers and two administrators from each school district. Personnel from two school districts provide the data for this comparative case study. In addition, interview transcriptions were completed by an outside professional, not by the researcher herself.

**Definition of Terms**

*Appalachia* – The mountain range that extends from the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi and the northern reaches of Alabama and Georgia (ARC, 2016).

*Benchmark*– A student’s present level of reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

*Center*– A physical area or station contacting instructional tools that students use independently or collaboratively to meet specific literacy skill goals (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

*Collective-efficacy* – Confidence held among a group that united effort can further an organization’s goals (Hoy & Miskel, 2013).
Comprehension – The intellectual capacity to grasp reading material (NRP, 2000).

Fluency – Ability to read text quickly, correctly, and with proper expression (NRP, 2000).

National Reading Panel – Group commissioned by a President of the United States to scrutinize the reading practices in schools and formulate practices to improve reading skills (NRP, 2000).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – A law that President George Bush signed in 2002 that required all students to receive the instruction necessary to read on grade level by 2014 (NCLB, 2002).

Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment – The state test that determines whether students may advance to the fourth grade or be retained (ODE, 2015b).

Phonemic Awareness – The capacity to recognize, process, and/or manipulate the phonemes (sounds) to create words (NRP, 2000).

Phonics - Reading instruction that encompasses sound-letter correspondences (NRP, 2000).

Reading Improvement Monitoring Plan – The plan required by all Ohio public schools that details interventions and monitoring intended to remediate reading deficits for all “Not On Track” students in grades K-3 (ODE, 2015b).

Rurality – Cultural descriptors often associated with people native to Appalachia (Hann-Morrison, 2011).
Self-efficacy – Confidence in one’s ability to meet an expectation (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993).

Third Grade Reading Guarantee – Legislation mandating that schools identify students from kindergarten through grade 3 that are deficient in reading and provide them with the instruction necessary to read on grade level by the end of grade 3 (ODE, 2015b).

Vocabulary Acquisition – Learning and understanding terminology that enables one to accurately communicate in both oral and written forms (NRP, 2000).

Organization of the Study

Chapter One has presented the introduction, history of school reform, statement of the problem, rationale for the study, purpose of the study, limitations, and definition of terms. Chapter Two will review the theoretical and empirical literature related to school-based factors that may impact student achievement. The various methods and procedures used to gather and analyze the data will be organized in Chapter Three. Emerging results and findings of the study will be presented in Chapter Four. Chapter Five will consist of a summary of the study’s findings, conclusions drawn from these findings, and implications for practice and future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The essence of Chapter Two highlights the bodies of literature with theoretical and empirical applicability to the proposed study. Studies that pertain to improved academic achievement will be of utmost significance. These studies not only support the theoretical perspectives that underscore this study, but they serve as models to consider when designing this study’s methodology.

Over the years, the frequency and importance of standardized testing has increased; consequently, understanding the perceptions that educators have of these tests is critical when studying student achievement performance. The results of standardized tests are presently used to evaluate teachers and make important school-based decisions. Urdan and Paris (1994) emphasize that the role of standardized testing has increased in the schools, but little research has examined differences among teacher perceptions of standardized testing. A quantitative study conducted by Urdan and Paris (1994) involved a 101 question survey completed by 153 K-8 teachers. Overall, the findings revealed that teachers distrust the usefulness and validity of standardized tests. The researchers also found that teachers who worked with low-achieving students expressed more negative responses toward the testing than teachers of higher-achieving students, and elementary teachers perceived more negative effects on students such as defiance and emotional problems. A more recent study of Judson (2014) also revealed standardized testing to be a school-based issue of greatest concern (p = .061). Teachers reported a perceived lack in their ability to influence positive student performance outcomes due to reinforcements particular to the school environment or to influences beyond their control (Judson, 2014).
Brashears (2006) also found that rural teachers linked the lack of student success to aspects beyond educator control. Such aspects include student home life, socioeconomic levels, and parental attitudes toward school.

Rural schools, like all schools, tackle various challenges pertaining to performance based assessments. The research pertaining to Appalachian students is significant because research involving minority students often excludes the Appalachian population, concentrating instead on African-American students, English as a Second Language (ESL) students, or students residing in urban locations (Brashears, 2006).

Cultural diversity, student needs requiring differentiated instruction, evolving federal and state accountability measures, and debates about funding allocation are common obstacles that pressure most U. S. public schools. Given their geographic isolation, and the lack of consensus on what it means to be from an Appalachian region, however, the task of educating America’s Appalachian rural youth while meeting the diverse needs of the population uniquely challenges the educational professionals who serve many of the students in these communities.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Establishing a foundation for understanding successful academic reading achievement in high-poverty rural Appalachian schools requires an understanding of theoretical components that underscore the potential for interventions to positively impact reading achievement. The literature in this section relates to four models and/or theories-Deficit Theory (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Gorski, 2010; Weiner, 2006), Richard Elmore’s model of the instructional core (Elmore 2003, 2004, 2010), Cognitive Evaluation Theory
(Deci et al., 2001; Legault et al., 2006; Lopez, 2012), and Leadership Theory (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Senge, 1990).

**Deficit theory.**

Deficit theory encapsulates a world view woven into U. S. society, institutions, and schools that describes assumptions and dispositions shaped to comply with an oppressive educational and social order (Gorski, 2010). The belief is that inequalities exist due to perceived intellectual, moral, and cultural inadequacies believed to be inherent in a group of people (Weiner, 2006). Deficit theory draws upon well-established stereotypes such as those associated with the high-poverty rural Appalachian region. Even though Appalachian residents are often stereotyped as lacking interest in education, studies as early as the 1970s have shown that families of poverty value education to the extent of their wealthier counterparts (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Leichter, 1978).

The implicit assumption that underscores deficit ideology is that school systems, educational professionals, and students all have equal access to an educational structure of opportunity that is equitable (Yosso, 2005). High-poverty schools, however, are more likely to have inadequate facilities, insufficient teaching materials, fewer licensed teachers performing in their licensure areas, and higher teacher turn-over (National Commission on Teaching America’s Future [NCTAF], 2004). Studies further reveal a less challenging curriculum, fewer experienced teachers, higher student-to-teacher ratios, larger class sizes (Barton, 2004), and inadequate funding (Carey, 2004).

Mass acquiescence of deficit thinking is easily applicable to the way educational efforts have responded to addressing the perceived socioeconomic disparity within the
achievement gap. Given that many educational professionals and schools continue to struggle to meet the mandates of NCLB (2002), it is not uncommon for leaders of rural high-poverty Appalachian schools to approach improving student achievement based upon this *deficit perspective* (Gonzalez, 2005; Trueba, 1988). Ford and Grantham (2003) define a deficit perspective as one that approaches students based upon an assessment of their perceived weaknesses rather than perceived strengths. The deficit perspective lowers expectations for students and inhibits the ability of educators to perceive student talents that manifest in various ways.

**Instructional core.**

Many educators in rural high-poverty Appalachian schools struggle to improve student performance. Elmore (2010) claims that improved student performance is dependent upon three interdependent components: content knowledge and skill of the teacher, engagement of students in learning opportunities, and academically challenging content. Learning and improved student performance can essentially be improved in only three ways. One is to provide a teacher with professional development that supports the knowledge and skill of the teacher. The second is to alter the instructional content. The third is to alter the relationship between the teacher and student and how this relationship relates to the content (Elmore, 2004). This involves analyzing the students’ reactions to the content being taught and the students’ role in the instructional process. Elmore (2010) emphasizes that effective schools in other countries assess the degree of interest students have in the instructional content, the students’ level of engagement with the content, and the students’ perceptions of the content adults are teaching them.
Examination of the instructional core allows educational professionals to target an area of improvement. However, if an organization changes one, it must change them all. If an organization alters the skill and knowledge of a teacher but fails to amend a weak curriculum, discrepancies exist between the capabilities of a teacher and what the content is capable of doing for students. Likewise, if the curriculum content is amended without enhancing the skills and knowledge of teachers, teachers become frustrated and ineffective because they aren’t prepared and capable enough to meet the demands of the curriculum. If educational professionals alter either of these without considering the student’s role in the instructional process, it is highly unlikely that students will maximize their level of engagement in the learning process (Elmore, 2004).

Researchers who have studied schools characterized by high poverty areas like the Appalachian region have had similar findings. High-performing high-poverty schools with high achievement typically have leaders who articulate clear expectations for student learning, convey a sense of urgency surrounding improvement, and secure professional development efforts grounded in challenging curricula efforts. In addition, the teachers in such schools internalize accountability for student learning, critically scrutinize their teaching methodologies, and expressed evidence of the willingness to abandon personal ineffective teaching practices in favor of new ideas (Elmore, 2004).

Elmore (2003) suggests that high-performing schools create binding professional norms that constitute a school-wide understanding of high-quality teaching practices and a collaborative, supportive working environment. Strong internal assessments that monitor student learning are utilized to provide informative feedback that directs
instruction and provides teachers and administrators with evidence that reveals the quality of their work. School improvement is not a linear process; it occurs in stages. Such stages often involve relevant gains on external performance measures, followed by periods of reduced improvement or even stagnation. Such patterns are logical, given that learners learn by tearing down preconceptions, applying new ideas to new practices, and determining which practices appropriately meet the criterion to become part of the current operating model (Elmore, 2003).

Successful high-poverty schools recognize that effective leadership is not defined by the personal attributes associated with an individual. Leaders in successful schools convey an explicit personal theory of what effective instructional practice looks like, and they model their own learning theories and their belief of what effective instructional practice looks like. Effective leaders engage in rich conversations that underscore effective instructional practices, and they convey a belief that school improvement is dependent on transformation of the instructional core. The instructional core can be “seen” through the tasks that students perform as compared to elements such as vocalization of the educators, grade level indicators, or the professional development implemented by educators. Leadership is recognized as a distributed power dependent on the individual levels of expertise that surround a common problem within the school. Schools that improve rarely participate in role-based professional development; improving schools attend to the strengths of individuals within the organization and how those individual strengths can be utilized to improve the effectiveness of the organization (Elmore, 2003).
On the contrary, many researchers have found that ineffective schools in high-poverty Appalachian areas have similar characteristics as well. Teachers and administrators at these institutions tended to attribute student learning challenges to home-based factors as compared to school-based factors. Educational professionals in struggling schools commonly suggested that students encountering difficulty mastering curriculum goals should align with private tutoring. This type of response is indicative of schools often comprised of educational professionals who unwittingly outsource their ethical obligation to teach every student. With this mindset, teachers are not challenged to identify and overcome deficits in their teaching practice that inhibit student learning or to collaborate with other educators about successful/unsuccessful teaching methodologies (Elmore, 2010).

**Cognitive evaluation theory.**

The emphasis of the teacher’s role in student success in Elmore’s model of the instructional core aligns heavily with the precepts of Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET). According to the theory, external events such as the presence of rewards, the delivery of evaluations, specific deadlines, and other motivational factors influence a student’s perception of competence and self-determination (Deci et al., 2001).

A central tenet of CET (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Legault et al., 2006) is that social influences, such as educational professionals, can support the autonomy, competence, and relatedness that foster the intrinsic motivation and internalized motivation that underscore successful academic achievement. When educational professionals uphold students’ sense of autonomy by offering moderated, but needed structured support for choice,
freedom, and responsibility, research supports that student motivation benefits (Hamm & Reeve, 2002; Lopez, 2012; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999). Confidence surrounding teacher expectations and mastery of material is an important source of motivation for students. Elmore (2003, 2004, 2010) agrees that when teachers effectively communicate content and consider the perceptions of the students pertaining to the content, that students are most impacted and most likely to demonstrate learning. It is also critical that teachers provide effective and timely feedback in such a manner that benefits the students’ competency needs (Hattie, 1987, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Students of poverty are especially vulnerable and require attention to such structured supports, given the lack of emotional, nutritional, and educational resources often available at home (Lopez, 2012; Reardon, 2013; Snyder, 2006).

Roney, Coleman, and Schlichting (2007) examined the relationship between reading achievement and climate of five middle grades in North Carolina. Using a mixed-methods sequential research design based upon Hoy and Feldman’s definition of organizational health, which links healthy school climates to improved student achievement, data analysis revealed a moderately positive relationship among the study’s inventory index scores and reading achievement.

To investigate predictive relationships among student characteristics that influence motivation for learning and achievement, Hardre et al. (2006) conducted a quantitative study of 6,539 students from 14 public high schools in Taiwan. The participants represented a range of socioeconomic groups and were homogenous in nationality. Paper-based questionnaires were distributed to all participants in their regular
classrooms utilizing a standard protocol during on-site school visits. The researchers concluded that the teachers’ ability to influence the students’ perceptions of classroom climate did predict students’ motivation (p<.01). Classroom perceptions explained 46% of variance in students’ motivation. These results are consistent with Western studies. Students who perceive teachers as supportive of their choices and learning become more engaged and exhibit characteristics of a stronger work ethic (Hardre et al. 2006). Educational professionals in rural high-poverty areas should be aware of the impact student motivation has on potential achievement and cultivate a school climate with the supports that enable motivation to thrive (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2012).

Other studies have investigated the relationship between student perceptions of the classroom setting and academic achievement. Fraser (1986) reported a positive relationship between students’ perceptions of the classroom experience and their attitudes toward learning and performance. Fraser (1986) claims that “the classroom environment is such a potent determinant of student outcomes that it should not be ignored by those wishing to improve the effectiveness of schools” (p. 1). Valeski and Stipek (2001) reported that kindergarteners’ and first-graders feelings about school related to levels of academic success. Studies of the classroom environment as cited by O’Connor, Fish, and Yasik (2004), revealed relationships between students’ perceptions of the learning environment and their sense of culpability about their academic performance (Gilbert et al. 2014; Wang & Wahlberg, 1997), their attitudes toward the subject matter being taught (McRobbie & Fraser, 1993), scores in English and math (Byrne, Hattie, & Fraser, 1986),
and their overall degree of contentment with their learning environment (Baker, D’Mello, Rodrigo, & Graesser, 2010).

The daily interactions between teacher and student in the learning environment have the greatest potential to improve academic student performance. Given the emphasis on relationships by the Appalachian culture (Ball, 1969; Barley & Beesley, 2007; DeYoung, 1985; Elam, 2002; Hann-Morrison, 2011; Pusateri, 2013), educational professionals in these areas can nurture this tendency to build relationships with students and parents that may ultimately impact student achievement.

Researchers reported that students in effective schools report a more cohesive connection between classmates, have more supportive teachers, and manifest more socially appropriate behaviors. Positive teacher-student interactions occur more frequently in effective schools (Carlisle, Kelcey, & Berebitsky, 2013; Lopez, 2012; Marzano, 2003; Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997). Hanson, Austin, and Lee-Bayha (2003) conducted a study of nearly 1,700 California public high schools. Participants were students enrolled in grades 7, 9, and 11, respectively. Researchers examined how test scores were related to constructive influences on student well-being: (1) caring relationships; (2) high expectation messages; and (3) prospects for engagement and influence. They used longitudinal, school-level test-score data, as well as data from the state-sponsored California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS). The CHKS is a comprehensive student self-report used to monitor the school environment, student health risks, and resilience. The schools where students reported a permeating ethic of care and high expectations yielded higher achievement test scores. Such interactions create an
atmosphere conducive to cultivating the intrinsic motivation that positively impacts student achievement (Hanson et al., 2003). Students in high-poverty areas such as the Appalachian region often rely heavily on the school setting and its resources to meet some of these emotional needs the home often struggles to meet (Elmore, 2004; Hamm & Reeve, 2002; Hattie, 2003). These positive teacher/student connections provide an environment rooted in an ethic care that underscores a culture conducive to learning and academic achievement.

Engaging students in the learning process correlates with improved student achievement (Carlisle et al., 2013; Elmore, 2004; Fraser, 1986; Hardre et al. 2006; Hattie, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Waxman et al., 1997). Many students in rural high-poverty Appalachian settings sometimes struggle to feel hopeful about the future. Educational professionals who work in rural high-poverty Appalachian settings can cultivate relationships with students that encourage hope and offer students the opportunity to view their future from a different lens (Elmore, 2003; Hamm & Reeve, 2003; Hattie, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Roney et al., 2007).

Snyder (1995, 2002, 2006) and Snyder, Lopez, and Pedrotti (2011) have suggested that hope is comprised of two primary components (agency and pathways) that are independent processes that must co-exist in order for “hopeful thinking” to occur. Agency involves the agent that internally motivates one to muster the cognitive willpower to succeed at tasks or goals while pathways refers to the certainty that avenues exist that allow for the successful attainment of such ambitions (Snyder, 1995). According to Snyder (1995) hope occurs at its optimal level when both subcomponents co-exist. For
example, students who express interest in performing well academically (high agency) and simultaneously believe they can devise the means to succeed and meet academic tasks and goals (high pathways thinking) are likely to be characterized as hopeful (Snyder, 1995). On the contrary, students with low levels of self-efficacy and perceived competence (low agency) who do not visualize solutions that allow them to reach academic goals and meet task demands (low pathway) may have a reduced level of hope (Snyder, 1995).

A school culture that fosters hope is an essential component of a successful school learning environment characterized by successful student achievement (Cleveland et al. 2011; Cleveland, Powell, Saddler, & Tyler, 2009; Lopez, 2012). McDermott and Snyder (2000) have found hope to be a predictor of achievement scores in grade school students and higher grade point averages in high school. Hope has also been associated with perceived academic competence and academic satisfaction (Chang, 1998; Lopez, 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1999). Many high-poverty students in Appalachia struggle to find hope in a culture often plagued by the stress associated with low socioeconomic status, unemployment, homelessness, transiency, and lack of resources (Barrett & Turner, 2005). The teacher, however, influences academic achievement more than any other factor (Andere, 2015; Hattie 1987, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Lopez, 2012; Marzano, 2003), and if the teacher is a nurturing, stable force offering hope for success within the classroom, improved student achievement may be realized.
Leadership theory.

Ultimately, the level of emersion of the previously described theories and their impact on student achievement depends on the leadership present in a district. Many theorists have suggested that effective organizations and successful organizational outcomes require the impetus of effective leadership (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Hoy & Miskel 2013; Senge, 1990). Senge (1990, p.3) defines a learning organization as an organization “…where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” Senge (1990) suggests five principles rooted in learning organizations that form a sustainable educational program capable of impacting successful student outcomes:

Systems thinking.

Effective leaders in effective schools rally the staff, students, parents, and community members around a common, believable, and attainable vision, such as improved student achievement. The educators recognize that a deep commitment to the intellectual, emotional, and social growth of the students is paramount to developing a learning community that functions with fidelity (Senge, 1990).

Personal mastery.

Senge (1990) maintains that effective organizations consist of individuals who willingly learn from others and believe that professionally, personal mastery is defined by a commitment to life-long learning.
Mental models.

To sustain a functioning learning community, the principal and staff need to examine mental models, create new models, and eliminate models that have proven to be ineffective with advancing the learning of their students. A fundamental part of this process is to create, nurture, and sustain the development of new leaders within a building (Senge, 1990).

Building shared vision.

Senge (1990) along with Teske and Schneider (1999) agree that an effective vision that cultivates professional trust should reflect the needs, interests, values, and beliefs of the school. Vision, alone, however, is not enough to motivate staff to higher levels of performance. Interviews conducted by Teske and Schneider (1999) concluded that vision alone will not motivate workers to change educational practice. A meaningful vision requires practical changes within the workplace that staff members view as realistic, and it should accurately reflect the interests and characteristics of the school and staff.

Team learning.

Senge’s (1990) final discipline is team learning. Team learning must be a commonly used practice to support the creation of a shared vision. Team learning is the expectation that a collaborative work culture will become a consistent practice intended to support students. Senge (1990) and Elmore (2003, 2004, 2010) agree that the principal fosters a climate conducive to the open discussion of stakeholders about student achievement, reflective classroom/teaching practices, and risk taking. Such leadership is
a prerequisite for an organization to maximize the self and collective efficacy of the educational professionals that influence student achievement.

**Role of the principal.**

Kearns and Harvey (2001), agree with Senge (1990), that building principals are central to improving student achievement. Effective principals foster a positive climate conducive to effective instruction that compliments an overall vison that supports a reflective learning community that tailors instruction and learning to individual students’ needs. School principals have a measurable impact on student achievement by the indirect influence they have on the teachers and leadership practices immersed within the school culture (Gurr, 1997; Hallinger & Heck, 1998). A qualitative study conducted by Barnett, McCormick, and Connors (2001) consisting of fifteen interviews in four schools concluded that a clear, attainable, and meaningful vision conveyed high expectations of students through leadership practices such as communication, consistency of leader actions, distributed leadership, and allocation of resources.

Leaders in a high-poverty Appalachian school are challenged by many cultural factors beyond the school setting. Effective leaders in these schools may acknowledge the presence of the environmental challenges such as poverty and the influence they have on students’ capacity to thrive, but effective leaders focus on the school-based factors and the human capital strategies available within the school setting to stir change that positively impacts student achievement and growth (Curto, Fryer, & Howard, 2011; Miller, Pavlakis, Lac, & Hoffman, 2014).
Teske and Schneider (1999) conducted a study pertaining to leadership and vision. These researchers interviewed eight principals of successful public schools in New York City. The study consisted of four elementary schools, two intermediate schools, and two high schools. All schools were high-performing but school-based factors varied. Class sizes varied, some ability grouped while others did not, teaching styles varied, learning environments varied in noise level, parental involvement ranged from little to extreme, and school size ranged. Principals were interviewed for 45 minutes using a prepared question structure. Consistent leadership was the one constant among all schools. Consistent leadership involved the hiring of high-quality staff, developing practices leading to an effective school community, and experience. All these principals had served several years in the district, rallying their people with a clear and attainable educational mission. High expectations for students were a cultural norm, and teacher/student accountability saturated the school culture. The results of Teske and Schneider’s interviews corroborated the results of Barnett et al., (2001) which suggest that vision must offer realistic and attainable changes to the workplace that further the interests and characteristics of the workplace.

Bulach, Boothe, and Pickett (2006) collected survey data from 208 educational leadership graduate students regarding the regularity of their principals’ behaviors and they impacted the students either positively or negatively. The survey consisted of 49 positive and negative behaviors and asked students to respond on a Likert-type five-point scale. “Never” scored a 1.0; “Always” scored a 5.0. Students answered based upon the frequency of behaviors exhibited by the principals. Negative behaviors were reversed
scored. Researchers used a factor analysis to analyze the data and determine the number of factors being measured. The factor analysis revealed nine key elements that accounted for 64% variance in the survey. Factors that accounted for smaller amounts of variance were fused with other factors—reducing the survey to five factors. The five emerging factors found to positively impact the principals were the following: human relations, trust/decision making, instructional leadership, control, and conflict.

The survey findings of Bulach et al., (2006) substantiated the findings of Barnett et al., (2001) and Teske and Schneider (1999). Human relations accounted for 38% of the variance quantified by the survey—average score being 3.63. Leaders who are learning-centered and student achievement oriented effectively communicate a motivational and encouraging vision that moves toward a common purpose that stakeholders find attainable and meaningful to the school community.

The research (Fullan, 1996; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Yukl, 2002) indicated that effective leaders convey a sense of professional trust that encourages mutual respect, teamwork and shared leadership responsibilities that foster teacher-leaders. The collegial climate is maintained even when external policy demands, mandates and internal conflicts create tension that challenges the attainment of the vision. As highlighted in Chapter 1, the Appalachian culture values community, connectivity, and interpersonal relationships. Stockard (2011) stated that given the smaller setting characteristic of many Appalachian rural areas, school personnel often have the capacity to build the personal relationships that may potentially impact student achievement.
The impact of principal leadership on teachers’ expectations of students.

Research relating to leadership’s direct impact on student achievement is problematic. Most research neglects to include the student perspective (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007), and research on the direct effects of principal leadership is minimal (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996). Some researchers (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008) have concluded that studies often lack external validity or generalizability when making claims about leadership and its impact on student achievement. Although the research directly linking principal leadership to student achievement is scant, many researchers agree that the principalship indirectly influences student achievement by setting high expectations and accountability for teachers (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Senge, 1990).

Studies of teacher expectations have shown that principal leadership can shape teachers’ attitudes toward students’ capacity to master core subject material (Miller et al., 2014). When principals set high expectations for student achievement, teachers are more likely to set high expectations for successful student learning. Effective principals convey high expectations through their personal actions and the specific educational practices designed through collaboration and implemented within a building. In one study conducted by Hallinger et al., (1996), on the school principal’s influence on reading achievement, data revealed no significant direct effect of leadership on reading achievement. Nevertheless, their outcomes did imply that when elementary teachers perceive their principal as a strong instructional leader, student achievement is promoted through various elements comprising the school-wide environment.
Eberts and Stone (1988) conducted a survey study consisting of 14,000 elementary schools to assess the impact of principal behavior on student achievement. They concluded that behaviors of principals do impact student performance and the principal’s ability to resolve conflicts and serve as an instructional leader are the primary factors that impact successful student outcomes. A follow-up study conducted by Brewer (1993) revealed a positive correlation between high academic expectations of the building principal and student achievement scores. Brewer also found higher achievement levels in schools where the faculty reflected like-minded ideals of the principal, shared the principal’s objectives, and had the capacity to implement the principal’s vision.

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) amalgamated the results of more than 5,000 studies concerning principal leadership and its impact on student achievement. These researchers found a statistically significant correlation between student achievement and principal effectiveness. The behaviors and practices of building principals have significance when studying successful student academic achievement outcomes.

Hallinger and Heck (1998) reviewed several quantitative studies from 1980-1995 that concluded school leadership has some small but educationally significant effects on student achievement. Principals craft a school climate that indirectly influences student achievement outcomes. Furthermore, evidence gathered from the Wallace Foundation Review (2004) showed minimal but noteworthy effects of strong leadership actions on successful achievement outcomes when demonstrated by leaders of schools facing
challenging circumstances. Although many factors contribute to successful student outcomes, leadership is generally viewed as the catalyst promoting and sustaining successful student outcomes (Beck & Murphy, 1996; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Murphy & Hallinger, 1988; Nash, 2011).

Leaders in high-poverty schools such as those in Appalachia may aspire to the *social frontiers* of educational leadership to develop multi-level policy fluency that reaches beyond principal behaviors within the school. Seeking to meet not only the educational demands of their students, but the health, transportation, housing, and other facets of life influenced by a culture of poverty, principal leaders strive to cultivate equitable opportunity for all students by strategically engaging public policy change at the federal, state, district, and local levels (Miller et al., 2014).

**Core Reading Instruction**

Experts agree that early reading instruction has a long-term impact on reading achievement. Children who read fluently in first grade demonstrate higher levels of academic success throughout their schooling. Students who struggle to read in first grade have higher probabilities of academic, economic, and social problems later in life. (Justice, 2010; Lovelace & Stewart, 2009; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2012).

In 1997, Congress asked the U.S. Department of Education to establish the NRP to evaluate existing research and evidence to determine best practices for reading instruction. On April 13, 2000, the NRP concluded its work and submitted its reports in 2001. After reviewing research on more than 100,000 students, the NRP published five targets of core literacy instruction related to sound reading instruction in kindergarten.
through third grade: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (NRP, 2000). The NRP is presently known as the International Literacy Association (ILA), respectively, and continues to support research and professional development to support global literacy.

To equalize educational opportunity in high-poverty areas such as those in Appalachia, the federal government implemented the Reading First K-3 literacy program. Although federal mandates directed the program, the program afforded some autonomy to states such as Ohio regarding its implementation. As a reform effort, Reading First focused on implementation and capacity building at the district, building, and classroom levels. There has been documentation of the success of Reading First Ohio pertaining to fluency improvement in urban children (Salzman et al., 2011).

This section of the literature review begins with a synopsis of the components comprising effective core reading instruction. Given the study’s focus on the academic reading achievement of rural high-poverty Appalachian youth, it is important to note that language and literacy are functions often found to be reduced in low-SES students (Lipina & Posner, 2012; Justice, 2010; Lovelace & Stewart, 2009; Nelson, 2010; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2012). The study highlighted other school-based factors in the rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio region that may attribute to successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. These factors included the following: independent reading, the teacher, the influence of leadership on instruction, professional development, and literacy coaching.
**Phonemic awareness.**

The International Reading Association (IRA) (1998) describes phonemic awareness as the insight about oral language that refers to the segmentation of sounds used in verbal communication. Phonemic awareness means students can voice all the sounds in a spoken word. When learning to read, the phoneme level of phonological awareness underscores learning to read (Lipina & Posner, 2012).

Uhry (1999) reported that many low-income students struggle to acquire reading skills. Longitudinal studies have been conducted on high-poverty students beginning in kindergarten or first grade (Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 1994; Tangel & Blachman, 1995; Uhry, 1999). These studies examined direct phonemic awareness instruction when conducted with primary students who entered school lacking basic phonemic awareness skills. Researchers determined that teaching phonemic awareness to students before the completion of first grade could positively impact their reading and spelling in later years (Ukrainetz, Ross, & Harm, 2009).

Many students from high-poverty families appear to struggle with phonemic awareness. Students who fail to acquire fundamental skills in phonemic awareness at any early age are likely to experience reading delays, and such experiences are more likely in high-poverty rural schools due to shortages of available resources (International Reading Association [IRA], 1998; Nelson, 2010; Ukrainetz et al., 2009).

Given that educational professionals feel tremendous pressure to ensure the proficient performance of students on standardized assessments, the amount of time devoted to phonemic awareness instruction has been under scrutiny. The NRP (2000)
concluded that many teachers were compulsively teaching phonemic awareness and such efforts were not improving students’ reading skills. Ukrainetz et al. (2009) studied two schedules of phonemic awareness for kindergarteners. In one schedule students were taught three times a week from September through December. In the other schedule, students were seen once a week from September through March. Researchers found that students who were seen during short, intense intervention made similar gains to those made during continuous weekly intervention. The findings of Koutsoftas, Harmon, and Gray (2009) substantiated those of Ukrainetz et al., (2009). Kousoftas et al., (2009) found that short, intensive intervention for beginning sound awareness when provided in 20-minute sessions to small groups was effective for 71% of the participants.

**Phonics.**

Phonics is the component of reading instruction involving the letter-sound correspondences that enables one to succeed with word-recognition activities involving print. Chall (1967) performed an extensive review of the theory and practical application underscoring effective reading instruction. Systematic phonics instruction targeted during the elementary years of instruction appeared to correspond with higher reading achievement (Weber, 2013). Noble, McCandliss, and Farah (2007) conducted a study hypothesizing that socioeconomic status may influence phonological awareness skills and the brain activity associated with reading. Given that many rural Appalachian children come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, effective instruction in phonological awareness is crucial to the foundation of literacy (Justice, 2010; Lipina & Posner, 2012; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2012).
Struggling readers appear to progress when exposed to a variety of phonics approaches. Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, and Hunt (2009) found that struggling students benefited more when teachers used more than one approach. Diuk and Ferroni (2011) also examined the phonological processing of students living in poverty. These researchers assessed 59 first grade children on letter knowledge at the beginning and end of the year. Results indicated that phonological sensitivity, verbal memory, and rapid letter naming impacted growth of knowledge (Diuk & Ferroni, 2011).

**Fluency.**

The NRP (2000) defined fluency as “the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with proper expression” (pp. 3-5). Students with strong fluency are able to decode words well enough to draw meaning from text that connects with their background knowledge.

When students read at their **instructional level** (words they can easily decode) or at their **frustration level** (text read with less than 90% success) they are more likely to build fluency, if the practice is accompanied by teacher guidance and regular feedback. (NRP, 2000). Kim and Quinn (2013) conducted a meta-analysis from 1998-2011 of 41 home-based and summer reading interventions from kindergarten to grade 8. Compared to the control group, students from low-income backgrounds who enjoyed independent reading time in elementary classes were more likely to enjoy higher achievement outcomes. Reis et al. (2007) found similar results. These researchers used a randomized design to investigate the effects of a reading program on 226 urban elementary students in two low-achieving elementary schools. When students were allowed to read self-
selected books of interest using differentiated reading instruction, given time for
independent reading, and given opportunities for decision-making in reading, oral reading
fluency and the students’ attitude toward reading significantly increased (Reis et al.
2007).

Vocabulary.

The NRP (2000) emphasized the role of vocabulary as an important component of
reading instruction. Deciphering word meanings and how the meanings relate to reading
comprehension and successful student outcomes with reading achievement has been the
focus of extensive correlational and causal research (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997;

Many children of poverty enter kindergarten with limited vocabularies when
compared to more advantaged students. Experiences that build background vocabulary
knowledge are often limited due to lack of economic resources (Lovelace & Stewart,
2009). Such disadvantages are difficult to ameliorate without intervention. Without
intervention, children in poverty often struggle to master adequate vocabulary needed to
attain successful results on reading achievement assessments (Coyne, Simmons,
Kame’enui, & Stoolmiller, 2004) given some of the language characteristics associated
with being from a low socioeconomic background (Nelson, 2010).

Children who live with parents who are language focused have heard 50,000,000
words spoken as compared to the 10,000,000 words heard by children raised by non-
language focused parents (Hart & Risley, 2003). Children living in high-poverty areas
like the Appalachian region are more likely to hear simplistic conversations pertaining to
daily living concerns (what to eat, what clothes to wear, how to act). Language tends to be concrete and these children struggle to think abstractly (Nelson, 2010). This struggle to think abstractly can ultimately impact successful outcomes on reading achievement assessments (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015).

**Comprehension.**

The NRP (2000) suggested that comprehension is heightened when readers relate new ideas in print to prior knowledge and experiences. Comprehension involves the recognition and processing of words as they are being read. Students may read and understand particular words, but are unable to comprehend word meanings (Lipson, 2007).

Individual studies as well as meta-analyses show that reading instruction driven by a comprehensive scope and strategic sequence of instruction that is paired with a consistent instructional format produces larger comprehension achievement gains (Stockard, 2011). In low-income populations, however, comprehension skills are particularly vulnerable (Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008; Lutkus & Weiner, 2003). Given the concern for this vulnerability, Hemphill and Tivnan (2008) conducted a longitudinal study involving several hundred high-poverty elementary students from sixteen urban elementary schools. These researchers concluded that letter-word identification skills learned in first grade were the strongest predictors of reading comprehension at the end of that grade. Vocabulary was the best predictor of reading comprehension, however, at the end of 2nd and 3rd grades (Hemphill & Tivnan, 2008).
Other researchers have found strategies effective when teaching comprehension. These include well-defined instructional learning targets, modeling, guided and independent practice with modifications, and formative/summative assessment embedded within the delivery (Butler, Urrutia, Buenger, & Hunt, 2010).

**School-based Factors Perceived to Impact Reading Achievement**

This section explores other school-based factors (besides core reading instruction) that research suggests may impact successful student reading achievement. These factors include the following: independent reading, the teacher, the influence of leadership on instruction, professional development, and literacy coaching.

**Independent reading.**

Research revealed a positive correlation between independent reading and student achievement (Cuevas, Irving, & Russell, 2014). Students who independently read the most, agreed Kim and Quinn (2013), scored higher on reading achievement assessments.

**Teacher.**

The NCTAF (2004) found the teacher to be more meaningful than any other school-related factor. The analysis of more than 100,000 student achievement scores across hundreds of schools also documents the teacher as the greatest factor impacting student achievement (Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). These findings imply that improving teacher effectiveness could be the most critical contributor to improving student achievement. Watkins and Edwards (1992) found that teachers’ attitudes toward reading significantly impact student achievement performance. Hattie
(2003) synthesized over 500,000 studies and determined the classroom teacher to be the greatest source of variance pertaining to student achievement.

Hattie (2003) found that expert teachers possess skills that differ significantly from experienced teachers—specifically on the way they represent their classrooms, the level of challenges used to enhance student thinking, and most importantly, in the depth of processing that their students attain. Students who are taught by expert teachers relay a more integrated understanding of learning targets, exhibit a more coherent understanding of learning goals, and think more abstractly as compared to other students (Hattie, 2003).

**Self-efficacy.**

Students of expert teachers with high levels of self-efficacy generally have outperformed students in other classes (Moore & Esselman, 1992). Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as an individual’s confidence in his/her abilities to meet the specific expectations that further a course of action. Teacher efficacy correlated with achievement on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Moore & Esselman, 1992) and the Ontario Assessment Instrument Pool (Ross, 1992). Watson (1991) noted greater achievement in rural, urban, majority Black, and majority White schools for students of highly efficacious teachers.

Hoy and Miskel (2013) emphasized teachers’ acuity of self-efficacy and its impact on student expectations. Teachers who have faith in their abilities to impact student achievement and steadfastly stay committed to the belief that all students can maximize their learning potential appear to be more effective. When confronted by challenge within the classroom, teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to differentiate instruction, embrace creative behavioral strategies, and maintain an
optimistic outlook toward student achievement. Bandura and Adams (1977) suggested that low teacher efficacy results in low student efficacy that impacts student achievement. Poor performance outcomes then impact teacher efficacy as teachers perceive their skills as inadequate.

Teacher efficacy literature (Tollefson, 2000; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfold Hoy, & Hoy, 1998) summarized studies that reveal a relationship between student achievement and teacher efficacy. Two studies conducted with elementary students in Canadian schools compared the achievement test scores of teachers with differing levels of efficacy. Students taught by teachers with higher efficacy scores earned higher scores on end-of-year, norm-referenced achievement assessments. Results yielded statistically significant variances in achievement scores for different subjects at different grade levels (Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988).

Collective efficacy.

Successful student achievement outcomes for groups of students are dependent not only on the works of efficacious individuals, but on how these individual efforts culminate into group processes of relating, functioning, and collaborating for the advancement of school-wide achievement. Bandura and Adams (1977) suggested that collective efficacy stresses the exercise of valid information, informed decision-making, and a system of reflexivity that encourages fidelity in the process. A group raises its level of collective efficacy when its members earnestly collaborate to determine common ground and courses of action that further the organization’s goals. Collective efficacy, emphasized Bandura and Adams (1977), shapes group decision making, the level of
effort put forth toward reaching group objectives, and the group’s endurance when objectives fail and need to be reevaluated. Hoy and Miskel (2013) defined an organization’s technical core as the system of activity that produces organizational outcomes. Through a spirit of collective efficacy, teachers, principals, and superintendents collaborate and evaluate the effectiveness of current core practices and decisively implement changes believed to further student achievement (Bandura, 1977; Goddard, Hoy, W., & Hoy, A., 2004; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993). Goddard et al., (2004) found that when a staff believes students can achieve, educators feel more responsible for student achievement, and they are more likely to be more diligent in working toward successful student outcomes.

**Influence of leadership on instruction.**

Rural schools are subject to the same laws, conditions, and expectations as their counterparts but often lack the community support and resources sometimes available to their urban and suburban counterparts. Wotherspoon (1998) suggested that the diverse social and economic conditions in rural areas influence various issues that impact rural schooling. Consequently, the teachers and administrators are the stable factors that often drive the efforts that potentially enable the students to successfully meet the state and federal government’s performance expectations (Huysman, 2008). Belsie (2003) suggested that NCLB (2002) has created a tremendous challenge for the rural schools because of the limited resources available to the rural schools.

Since the origination of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 1965, numerous studies have been conducted that support an inverse relationship between
student achievement and poverty. Specifically, student achievement has been found to decrease as poverty increases. Students from low-income households are three times more likely to be low achievers if they attend high-poverty schools as compared to low-poverty schools (Carmichael, 1997). It is not entirely clear in the review of the literature, but some research on rural poverty (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997) suggested that despite their challenges, rural students tend to drop out of school less than urban students and the academic performance of rural students is better than those in poor, urban areas.

Knapp, Copland, and Talbert (2003) noted that leaders with an instructional focus are primarily associated with high-performing schools. Such leaders consistently create meaningful and equitable learning opportunities for students and staff. Such leaders prioritize an instructional core that emphasizes improved student learning with actions and motivation toward strengthening the learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment system present in the school and/or district learning environment.

A number of studies indicated that transformational leadership (Fullan, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1992; Yukl, 2002) is the other leadership style that appears to be present in high-performing schools and school districts. Transformational leadership is characterized by organizational processes that encourage the highest level of productivity from all stakeholders involved (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Marzano et al., 2005). Transformational leaders work with the internal and external environments to devise creative strategies to move forward, locate the necessary resources to drive high-performing educational initiatives, and respond to the internal and external challenges impacting the local learning community. Such leaders empower the educational
community by sharing leadership within the educational environment. Consequently, several leaders emerge within the school setting who maximize their talents and leadership capacity as teacher-leaders. Long-lasting systemic change can occur because the learning community becomes a high-functioning collaborative system fueled by the strengths and talents of many, and the organization is not solely dependent on the strengths and leadership skills of a single leader.

**Professional development.**

Professional development can be defined as that which immerses participants in inquiry, questioning, and experimentation (Marzano, 2003). For years, professional development for teachers entailed short half-day or full-day seminars and workshops designed to offer educational updates and skill development on school sites. Such workshops often targeted random teaching strategies, methods, and/or motivational speaking designed to uplift and encourage staff. Some professional development involves the training of teachers to use specific techniques associated with packaged instructional programs. Trainings are often short and often not applicable to the daily work of all teachers who receive it. Teachers are often left on their own to apply what they can to their daily practice, and too often, teachers learn little and rarely change their pedagogical practice in long-lasting meaningful ways that result in improved student achievement or gains (National Reading Technical Assistance Center [NRTAC], 2010; Yoon, Garet, Birman, & Jacobson, 2007).

With the advent of NCLB (2002), ideas on how to conduct professional development within school districts began to change. Administrators began consulting
with staff to determine their needs, and school districts began using questionnaires to
survey teachers about their perceived needs. NCLB (2002) encouraged districts to assess
local needs to determine how professional development funds could best be used to
improve student achievement. This new approach to professional development has made
student-centered learning the focus, with an emphasis on improving teachers’ skills to
enable them to better identify complex student needs that serve as barriers to improving
student achievement.

Leaders in rural areas are eager to access and implement research findings about
research-based interventions and teaching strategies that support successful student
achievement. Identifying such findings is challenging, however, given the lack of high-
quality research conducted in rural settings (Arnold et al., 2005).

Strategic professional development designed to yield results in student
achievement are relative to scientifically-based instructional strategies (Marzano, 2003).
Teachers need opportunities to practice new skills and the time to master the complex
variations of a skill needed to meet the needs of a developmentally diverse classroom.

The effective modeling of teaching strategies encourages skill mastery. Such
mastery enables teachers to execute a skill instinctually instead of relying on the
deliberateness of conscious thought. Teachers also need accurate and timely feedback
relative to their practice of scientifically-based research strategies underscored by the
understanding that scientifically-based instructional strategies need adapted to the
particular needs and context of the individual classroom.
Professional development impacts student achievement only if teachers embrace change (NRTAC, 2010). Some educational professionals, however, maintain that the likelihood of changing instructional practice through professional development efforts is minimal and the efforts are futile. Knight and Cornett (2009) studied 50 teachers, however, and concluded that change in pedagogical practice is more likely if teachers are provided coaching along with the introduction to new teaching practices.

Other educational professionals maintain that when professional development is embedded in student learning and teachers collaborate about improving student achievement as it relates to the curriculum, professional development can change teacher pedagogy and improve student achievement (Arnold et al., 2005; Marzano, 2003).

Professional development is most effective when teachers are collectively involved as a unit (Marzano, 2003; Yoon et al., 2007; NRTAC, 2010). When educators engage in professional development as a professional learning community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), the educational environment is supported by a level of mutual cooperation, emotional stability, instructional guidance, and efficacy of the educators involved. Goals pertaining to accountability requirements, increased pedagogical knowledge, and implementation of teaching practices associated with improved student achievement that could not be reached by teachers in isolation, may be attained when educators work collaboratively. Richard Elmore stated in an interview with Crow (2008) that professional development likely to have the greatest impact on student learning involves a reciprocal relationship between the time colleagues spend solving problems pertaining to
instructional methods and the time spent outside of the classroom reflecting on potential next steps that may increase the potential for student learning.

Louis and Marks (1998) conducted a study and found that when a school views itself as a professional learning community, the following conclusions emerged:

1. Educators establish higher expectations for student achievement;
2. Students perceive teachers and peers as coaches interested in assisting them to achieve challenging learning objectives;
3. The quality of classroom pedagogy is higher; and
4. Student achievement levels are higher.

(Louis & Marks, 1998)

The findings of this study also emphasized the relationship between professional development and student growth measures. This finding is critical to those in charge of selecting or designing professional development opportunities in a building or district, because the direct connection between professional development goals created in a professional learning community underscores the specific type of professional development a district may need to provide (Louis & Marks, 1998).

**Literacy coaching.**

Many rural Appalachian schools were recipients of the Reading First Grant. One of the stipulations of receiving this grant was the implementation of a Literacy Coach. A literacy coach (NRTAC, 2010) is a highly trained individual who designs specific and strategic professional development intended to model, train, and provide teachers with individual job-related feedback. Dole and Donaldson (2006) stated that effective literacy
coaches have assisted teachers in improving student reading achievement, and many districts have elected to sustain the position long after the expiration of the grant.

The primary role of a literacy coach is to analyze teachers’ understanding of effective literacy instruction, observe instructional efforts, and determine appropriate examples to enhance the teachers’ craft that lead to higher levels of competence. To convey thoughts and make suggestions concerning these matters, a literacy coach needs to build rapport and establish trust with the teachers. Researchers have also determined that literacy coaches and teachers who work together are likely to share a heightened level of collegiality, engage in problem-solving, and hold conversations of inquiry that address building and district concerns that may directly or indirectly impact student achievement (NRTAC, 2010).

Literacy coaching can positively impact student achievement by influencing the greatest source of variance- the teacher (Hattie, 1987, 2003). Some researchers have found a correlation between literacy coaching and increased student reading and writing achievement. Literacy specialists in San Diego offered part-time peer tutoring accompanied by part-time literacy coaching in three high-poverty schools, and found that student reading achievement decidedly increased (Lapp, Fisher, Flood, & Frey, 2003).

**Summary**

The previous literature discussed theories and school-based factors that may impact student reading achievement. Developing strong literacy skills during the elementary years is critical to the foundation of students’ reading skills and their future levels of academic achievement. The requirements of NCLB (2002) has led to the
adoption of Ohio’s TGRG (ODE, 2015b) which mandates that every student, unless exempt by an IEP, read on grade level or be retained in the third grade. Although some schools in high-poverty rural Appalachian areas are able to successfully meet these standards, there are many educational professionals and students who continue to struggle to meet this mandate.

This chapter has summarized the recommendations of the NRP (2000) that prepare students for grade-level literacy and reviewed the literature and research related to other school-based factors that may impact student reading achievement. These factors included independent reading, the teacher, self-efficacy, collective efficacy, leadership, professional development, and literacy coaching. Chapter three describes the purpose of the study, research design, context of the study, data collection, analysis and synthesis, ethical considerations, role of the researcher, transparency, limitations, and delimitations.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the purpose, research question, and research design. Additionally, it outlines the context of the study, method of data collection, data analysis and synthesis. Finally, it addresses any ethical considerations, integrity, trustworthiness, the role of the researcher, and reflexivity.

Purpose

The interest in school accountability and school effectiveness has increased dramatically since the report, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) encapsulated the perceived performance problems within America’s public schools. This report created doubt in the minds of business officials and policy makers surrounding the United States’ ability to compete with the academic achievement levels of its international counterparts. The issue of school effectiveness and the ability to convey school effectiveness to the public began to underscore public education as school leaders began exploring systemic reform hoping to improve student performance outcomes on the achievement tests that ensued.

The purpose of this proposed study was to describe and identify school-based factors that educational professionals in high-poverty rural Western Appalachian Ohio perceive impact student achievement on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. In particular, this qualitative comparative case study compared school-based factors that distinguish between two schools with similar student demographics and economic challenges in rural Western Appalachian Ohio. Limited studies have examined
the perceptions rural Appalachian educational professionals have of school-based factors perceived to influence student achievement in their schools.

**Research Question**

This inquiry sought to answer the following question:

What school-based factors do educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment?

**Research Design**

Qualitative research seeks to understand the intricacies of human behavior and the rationality that causes human behavior (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research attempts to uncover the reasons why decisions are made as compared to the identification of explicit facts, which is more characteristic of quantitative research. Brantlinger, Jimenex, Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) asserted that qualitative methods primarily involve the application of observations, interviews, and data analysis that explore the beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of selected individuals that are consistent with a particular phenomenon of interest. Qualitative research is exploratory, relies on subjective judgment, and attempts to understand the given phenomenon of interest and its complexities in a naturalistic setting while remaining cognizant of one’s own personal biography and how it shapes the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research, creating a systematic empirical inquiry grounded in thick description and dependent on the recognition of common themes, discrepancies, and inconsistencies (Patton, 2002).
Qualitative research attempts to explore and analyze the collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions of individuals in a face-to-face context. It explores the interaction that exists between individuals and a particular phenomenon of interest and does not attempt to reach the conclusive outcomes more identifiable with quantitative research (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research is dependent on thick, rich description to establish the significance of an experience and make an interpretation possible by conveying the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of the participants involved (Patton 2002). Quantitative research seeks to study a single reality. The researcher and the participants remain independent without interaction and engagement. The findings are typically generalized from the sample to a larger target population, and the researcher often seeks to determine a cause and effect relationship between variables (Patton, 2002).

Given the lack of research available that explores the perceptions that rural Appalachian educators have toward their school performance (Arnold, 2005; Huysman, 2008; McCracken & Miller, 1988) and given that Russ (2010) emphasized that intimate personal connections are highly valued by the rural Appalachian culture, qualitative face-to-face data collection methods provide the researcher with data collection opportunities that generate the meaning, process, and understanding fundamental to answering the researcher’s question. Consequently, qualitative methods were used to document the perceptions of two groups of K-3 educational professionals in two high-poverty elementary schools in rural Western Appalachian Ohio.
Context of the Study

Type of study.

Qualitative researchers commonly use the case study design to approach qualitative inquiry. Yin (2003) suggested that research should meet three criteria to warrant the case study as an applicable research strategy: scrutiny of the research question, the researcher’s ability to control the event studied, and the degree of application to present events. The research question, “What school-based factors do educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment?” underscored the decision to use case study as the method of inquiry.

Marshall and Rossman (2015) and Patton (2002) further defined case study research as the focus on a case or cases found within a bounded system (setting or context). A case study requires extensive time in the field characterized by detailed in-depth data collection. In a collective case study, the researcher selects a topic of concern but uses several cases to illuminate a point of study. This could entail several cases from a single site or multiple cases from different locations. Multiple cases allow the researcher to study various perspectives (Patton, 2002).

The selected method of research in this study was a comparative case study conducted by a solo researcher relying on interviews as the primary source of data collection. To conduct an ethical study from this continuum, Glesne (2015), Li (2008), and Patton (2002) emphasized that the researcher should be prepared psychologically and technically for the unexpected and be capable of adapting in the mobility of the field. The
comparative case study consisting of interviews was appropriate for this study, given the
goal of the study, which was to assess the educational professionals’ perception of a
particular phenomenon at two different schools- specifically, what school- based factors
are perceived to impact successful student achievement outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade
Reading Achievement Assessment.

**Site selection.**

Purposeful selection illustrated by extreme case sampling was the selection
strategy used for the sample. Glesne (2015) stated that extreme case sampling involves
the selection of cases based upon those that are special and/or extreme in some way. This
selection strategy was appropriate, given the study encompasses one rural high-
performing, high-poverty Western Appalachian school and one low-performing, high-
poverty Western Appalachian school.

The schools selected for this study were chosen based upon the following criteria:

1. Each elementary school is located in one of Ohio’s Western Appalachian
   counties.

2. The schools have served a high poverty student population for the 2012-2013,
   2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years; both have over sixty percent of the
   student population qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

3. One school had to consistently exceed the state’s minimum score to earn the
   report card point- 75% passage or higher on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading
years. The other school had to consistently score below the state’s minimum standard based upon the same state accountability criterion.

Ohio’s School Testing and Accountability System is currently comprised of the following parts:

1. Achievement- combines two results for students who participated in the state tests-how many students who took the tests and passed; how well students performed on the tests

2. Gap Closing- reflects student success in reading, math, and graduation rate regardless of income, race, ethnicity, or disability

3. K-3 Literacy- reflects if more students are learning to read in grades K-3

4. Progress- reflects growth of students in grades 4-8 in reading and math

5. Graduation Rate- reflects how many 9th graders graduate in four or five years

6. Prepared for Success- readiness for college or career

(Siegel, 2016)

For this particular study, the reading scores of third graders who attend high poverty schools and took the Ohio Achievement Assessment were scrutinized from spring 2013 to spring 2015 to determine a high performing school and a low performing school. Pertinent to this particular study was Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Guarantee (TGRG) which specifies that any third grade student who neglects to meet the set score of 398 on the OAA or a qualifying score on a state approved alternative test will be retained- unless the student is exempt from retention as specified by specialized criterion as set forth by ODE (ODE, 2015b). It should be noted that in the spring of 2015, ODE
changed Ohio’s testing system from the paper/pencil OAA to an on-line testing system presently known as Ohio’s State Test.

**Sample description.**

Elementary A and Elementary B share demographic similarities. Elementary A houses grades K-6 and Elementary B consists of grades K-5. Poverty rate, achievement results, and similarity of third grade population should be carefully noted (Table 1).
Table 1

Demographic Information 2012-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary A</th>
<th>Elementary B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate</td>
<td>83.98%</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Pupil Expenditure</td>
<td>$9,277</td>
<td>$7,017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers: Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers: Master’s Degree</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil/Teacher Ratio</td>
<td>14.66:1</td>
<td>19.66:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Grade 3</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Special Education Grade 3</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio Achievement Assessment- Reading Pass Rate</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Racial Subcategory (White) Enrollment</td>
<td>97.5%</td>
<td>96.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities Subcategory Enrollment</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For 2013-2014, the poverty rates are nearly identical and both schools service a similar percentage of special education students. Elementary B, however, continues to consistently demonstrate high achievement (Table 2).
Table 2

Demographic Information 2013-2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary A</th>
<th>Elementary B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate</td>
<td>75.73%</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Pupil Expenditure</td>
<td>$4,648</td>
<td>$7,659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers: Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers: Master’s Degree</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil/Teacher Ratio</td>
<td>21.33:1</td>
<td>25.0:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Grade 3</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Special Education Grade 3</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio Achievement Assessment- Reading Pass Rate</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Racial Subcategory (White) Enrollment</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
<td>95.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities Subcategory Enrollment</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2014-2015 ODE began publishing the percentage of students meeting the TGRG. This number indicates the number of students who met the minimum score on the state’s reading achievement or an ODE approved alternative test (Table 3).
Table 3

Demographic Information 2014-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary A</th>
<th>Elementary B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>67.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Pupil Expenditure</td>
<td>$10,507</td>
<td>$7,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers: Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers: Master’s Degree</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil/Teacher Ratio</td>
<td>18.66:1</td>
<td>20.7:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment Grade 3</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Special Education Grade 3</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio Achievement Assessment- Reading Pass Rate</td>
<td>62.57%</td>
<td>92.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Meeting Third Grade Reading Guarantee</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants.

Eight participants were interviewed for this study. The participants in this study included a teacher from grades 1 and 3 from each school, the elementary building principal, and the superintendent of each school district. Using an alphabetized list of teachers’ names, participating teachers were selected using the second name from each alphabetized list of grade level names.
The participants from Elementary A averaged 13.5 years of professional experience; the average years of experience at Elementary B was 15.25 years. Both schools reported that all participants have engaged in research-based professional development pertaining to their content teaching assignment. Neither school reported teachers as being nationally certified nor having a doctoral degree.

**Data Collection**

Qualitative researchers attribute their data collection strategies to various circumstances. Consequently, the purpose of this study, proximity to the field, and the availability of resources and participants require consideration (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). For this particular study, the researcher gained access to both sites by contacting the district superintendent. An email detailing the rationale for the study, the participants required, and the potential duration of the study followed the initial phone call. During a face-to-face meeting, the researcher reiterated the rationale for the study, the expectations and numbers of participants required, and the duration of the study. The researcher then contacted each of the building principals via a face-to-face meeting to discuss the rationale for the study, the expectations and number of participants required, and the duration of the study. After establishing rapport with the building principals, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participants by arranging an in-person meeting with each group of participants to once again reiterate the rationale for the study, the expectations and number of participants required, and the duration of the study. The researcher began all meetings emphasizing procedural ethics, confidentiality of
responses, and the participants’ rights to terminate their involvement in the study at any time.

Interviews.

Interviews were the primary method of collecting data for this comparative case study. To ensure the consistent collection of data from each participant, the researcher used the semi-structured interview protocol. This design allowed the interviewer to modify the questions and the ordering of the questions. The interviewer also probed the participants for clarification and/or further elaboration of the answers. The semi-structured interview design, according to Patton (2002), enables the interviewer to establish a conversational atmosphere that encourages an open and candid environment conducive to thorough and honest responses.

Interviews were the primary data source because they enable the researcher to gather more information about the “why” behind the academic achievement of the students. Interviews with teachers provided these educational professionals the opportunity to share their perceptions about the school-based factors perceived to impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. The principal and superintendent at each site were interviewed using some of the same questions; the questions were, however, adjusted to illuminate feedback conducive to their leadership roles.

The interviews were conducted during a scheduled time as determined by each participant and lasted a maximum of one hour. The interview setting was selected by the participant in order to support each participant’s needs and level of comfort. Once written
consent was obtained, interviews were tape recorded with a primary recorder and a back-up recorder. The interviewer scribed handwritten notes during the sessions as well. As Patton (2002) suggested, the interviewer emphasized key points made by the respondent in quotation marks so that each participant’s unique voice was conveyed within the transcription. The interview questions provided the framework for the participants’ opinions about reading instruction, the role of the teacher pertaining to student achievement, teacher efficacy, leadership, and professional development. All questions informed the primary research question, “What school-based factors do educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment?”

Interviews were transcribed by an outsourced professional who used a standardized transcription protocol (McLellan, MacQueen, & Niedig, 2003). To enhance the overall readability of the transcripts, the transcripts were not transcribed verbatim. At the completion of each interview, however, the researcher maintained the rigor and validity of the interview process by checking the tapes, reviewing the interview notes to reduce signs of ambiguity, and conducting post interview reviews with the participants to support the credibility of the findings. Each participant’s interview data were summarized and respondents were encouraged to correct any errors during that time. Once the interview transcriptions were completed, the researcher conducted an analysis of the transcriptions using a manual method of coding to determine thematic, conceptual, and theoretical clusters as described by Saldaña (2013).
Analysis and Synthesis

As previously noted, interviews were the primary method of data collection. Using multiple interview sources enabled the researcher to gather rich data that supports the proposed inquiry and affords reliability and validity to the study.

To begin data analysis, the researcher typed out the interview questions and provided the interview participants with a copy. The participants’ responses to the interview questions were recorded and then transcribed by an outsourced professional using a standardized transcription protocol. To gain more control and ownership (Saldaña, 2013) of the work, the researcher elected to code manually. To gain familiarity with the text, the research first conducted a cold read of the transcripts. The researcher then listened to each recording while following along with the transcript. Listening to the recordings allowed the researcher to fill in the intelligible words reflected by the transcripts to ensure the accurate reflection of the participants’ perceptions.

The researcher then began by “pre-coding” the participants from Elementary A followed by those from Elementary B. Saldaña (2013) defined pre-coding as a process that involves circling and highlighting rich, significant quotes and passages of interest. During the First Cycle coding process, the researcher used Initial Coding to determine initial phrases of interest that supported the overall research question, “What school-based factors do educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment?” Saldaña (2013) defined Initial Coding as an open-ended process used to highlight “first impression” phrases that are not specific types of codes.
The results of the Initial Coding revealed patterns that led to the development of Descriptive Codes and In Vivo Codes. These codes assigned more specific value to words and phrases within the transcript. Saldaña (2013) defined a Descriptive Code as one that summarizes the primary topic of an excerpt. In Vivo codes are direct words of the participant placed in quotation marks (Saldaña, 2013).

After applying and reapplying the coding process, the researcher examined the codes for emerging patterns so that similarly coded data sharing similar characteristics could be organized into categories as well as any emergent categories beyond the initial descriptive topics. During this process, the researcher’s codes and categories became more refined. Some First Cycle codes were subsumed by other codes, relabeled, or eliminated in preparation for Second Cycle coding.

Second Cycle coding involves analyzing and reorganizing the First Cycle codes to find categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization for the First Cycle codes. The researcher used pattern coding to develop labels that identified similarly coded data (Saldaña, 2013). Each interview was analyzed inductively to examine patterns and connections that lead to emerging categorical themes. The data was then compared against any emerging categorical themes and analyzed deductively to determine if the categories were supported by the overall data set. The emerging categories from Elementary A were then compared to those from Elementary B. This comparison ultimately led the researcher to develop the common themes that underscore the study.
**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher followed the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Ohio University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Ethical guidelines addressed respect for people, beneficence, justice, and integrity.

**Respect.**

The researcher conveyed respect for the participants by obtaining informed consent that provided participants with descriptive information about the study, comprehension regarding all aspects of the study, and the right to withdraw from the study without consequence and/or refrain from answering questions if desired (Glesne, 2015).

**Beneficence.**

The researcher emphasized beneficence by minimizing any risks of harm to the participants (Glesne, 2015). The researcher gave consideration to beneficence by using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and their schools. The participants were told who would have access to the final publication of the study, and participants understood that direct quotations could be used.

**Justice.**

The researcher considered justice on behalf of the participants. Researchers have an ethical obligation to avoid any exploitation and/or abuse of the participants. Recognizing the vulnerability of the participants and their contributions are the responsibility of the researcher (Glesne, 2015).
**Integrity**

Integrity underscores the practice of qualitative research. Honesty directs the ethical practices comprising the data collection process and analysis. It is characterized by moral practices and the intentional effort of the researcher to protect participants from harm, to explain and gain informed consent (Appendix B), and to convey the respondents’ perceptions as accurately as possible (Glesne, 2015).

To maintain the integrity embedded in conducting the interviews, permission was obtained from both the superintendent and principal of each participating elementary. The researcher phoned each superintendent and principal. After speaking, the researcher emailed a formal letter of written permission and arranged for a face-to-face meeting. The principals then informed potential participants of the researcher’s visit. The researcher then verified the willingness of each participant.

Before conducting each interview, the researcher briefly educated the participants by offering an introduction of the study that included the study’s purpose, length of participation, confidentiality, and the applicability of the study to the educational profession. Participants were then given the opportunity to clarify any questions or concerns before signing an informal consent form prior to beginning the interviews.

Interviews were tape recorded with permission and stored in a secure area along with the tape recorders, interview notes, and informal consent forms. Interview tapes will be destroyed approximately one year after the completion of the last interview. All electronic data will be password protected on the researcher’s personal computer. Signed
consent forms will be kept secure for three years after the duration of the study and will be shredded at the end of the three year timeline.

As stressed by Patton (2002), the researcher encouraged uninhibited answers of the participants by ensuring the confidentiality of all responses. To support the confidentiality of their responses, pseudonyms were utilized to reference the school districts, elementary school names, and all participants.

**Trustworthiness**

The researcher is obligated to ensure that a study’s findings are significant, truthful, and of value to the intended audience (Patton, 2002). Four criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability— influence the degree of a study’s trustworthiness (Glesne, 2015).

**Credibility.**

Credibility is dependent on the following: rigorous methods, the researcher, and a philosophical belief in the value of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). Consequently, specific strategies such as member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation underscore a credible qualitative study.

**Member checks.**

Glesne (2015) defined member checks as the sharing of data and interpretations with participants. Member checks were used to verify the accuracy of the participants’ responses. The review of transcripts allowed participants to verify the accuracy of thoughts they articulated and further clarify thoughts if desired.
**Peer debriefing.**

Peer debriefing is “[the] process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer…for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit in the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Using impartial peers to examine the transcripts, final report and general methodology provided feedback that enhanced the credibility and dependability of the study. Peer debriefing also enabled the researcher to become more aware of her own views regarding the data.

**Triangulation.**

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomenon (Patton, 2002). The researcher selected triangulation of sources. Triangulation of sources examines the consistency of different data sources from within the same method (Patton, 2002). The researcher conducted eight interviews from three perspectives- teacher, principal, and superintendent.

**Transferability.**

When conducting a qualitative study, Glesne (2015), Patton (2002) and Yin (2002) emphasized the relevance of rich, thick description central to others who may be interested in replicating a study to ascertain similar results. Both sites in this study were rural, high-poverty elementary schools located in the Western Appalachian region of Ohio. The transferability of this comparative case study may benefit other educational professionals seeking to explore the perceptions educators have of school-based factors that impact third grade reading achievement performance.
Dependability.

The consistency of a study’s findings and the ability to replicate a study’s findings determines its level of dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher employed dependability through transparency— the process of clearly conveying the data collection and analysis process. Transparency is essential to future researchers who may be interested in repeating the work. (Patton, 2002).

Confirmability.

Confirmability refers to the extent that a study’s findings are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher employed peer debriefing, as previously described, to establish confirmability of this study.

Role of the Researcher

Personal background.

This research is of particular interest to me because I myself have been raised in a high-poverty, rural, Appalachian setting and received K-12 reading instruction in a high-poverty rural Appalachian school district. Whereas the sense of community and the intimacy of the educational experience provided within its small classes fostered a strong work ethic and enabled me to receive excessive amounts of one-on-one teacher attention, I found myself struggling to meet the demands of academia when beginning my freshman year of college. I felt disadvantaged and unprepared because several of my peers had experienced exposure to more challenging curriculum options that my small rural school could have possibly provided.
Influence of Appalachian values.

The Appalachian values such as persistence, strong work ethic, and spiritual reliance instilled in me by my family’s cultural background, however, strengthened my resolve and enabled me to succeed despite my self-perceived deficits. My father worked long hours in the blast furnace at the local Empire Detroit Steel Mill. An assertive and ethical union steward, he fought for the workers’ rights, negotiated with the mill’s leadership, and offered spiritual counsel to those in need. I learned the value of bringing honor to your family name. My mother, a beautician by trade, chose to stay at home and raise me. I wanted my parents to feel that my words and actions represented our family name well; I understood the sacrifices they had made to provide the best life for me they possibly could. These values and feelings of gratitude directed my path and kept me focused during the critical formative years, and they still underscore my decision-making, work ethic, and attitude to this day. Having been educated in a high-poverty rural Western Appalachian setting underscores my interest in the educational experiences of Appalachian youth and the perceptions that educational professionals have concerning school-based factors that may impact their reading achievement.

Educator history.

My nineteen years as a rural public school educator and my five years as a rural elementary school counselor have enabled me to view systematic rural education from various lenses. I have been part of district-wide and school-wide improvement efforts. I have engaged in conversations and witnessed the personal struggle of rural Appalachian school leaders seeking the answers to district-wide and school-wide improvement. And I
have watched administrators and teacher-leaders hang their heads in despair year after year when achievement results return from the state. The results are the same—some rural high-poverty Appalachian educational personnel have successful reading achievement outcomes to review, while other professionals continue to watch students struggle to reach proficiency despite numerous efforts and sacrifices to improve.

**Intent of the study.**

The intent of this qualitative comparative case study was to answer the researcher’s question pertaining to school-based factors perceived by educational professionals to influence successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian elementary schools. Given the researcher’s personal background with rural high-poverty Western Appalachian education, the study’s purpose was in the forefront of the researcher’s mind during all stages of the research process. Any of the researcher’s bias in data collection, analysis, or reporting could be attributed to the K-12 education obtained in a rural struggling high-poverty public school and/or the researcher’s current position in a rural struggling high-poverty public school.

**Attention to bias.**

To account for personal bias, the researcher highlighted the literature pertaining to school-based factors that impact student reading achievement. The researcher also imposed reflexivity as suggested by Glesne (2015) and Patton (2002) both before and after all interviews and during the analysis of all interview transcripts. Given the researcher’s role as the primary instrument of data collection, examination of the
researcher’s personal biases, assumptions, and behaviors during the inquiry were carefully considered. As the primary instrument of data collection, the researcher considered what factors enabled her to see and what may have inhibited her from seeing (Glesne, 2015).

**Reflexivity**

Critical to the study’s transparency was the presence of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Glesne (2015) reminds researchers that having an awareness of how personal characteristics, values, and positions interrelate with others in the research setting may influence the interpretation of data and the reporting of results.

Reflexive processes enabled the researcher to contrast her own voice with the perspectives of the participants. The researcher practiced reflexivity before and after each interview. To document the reflexive process, the researcher kept journal notes. An obvious presence of reflexivity underscores any credibility in the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study’s findings. Patton (2002) stated that given complete objectivity is an impossible outcome, qualitative researchers must strive for balance when reporting data authentically.

Given that the researcher attended a high-poverty struggling school in Western Appalachia that struggled with successful reading achievement outcomes, and that the researcher is a current practitioner in a high-poverty struggling school in Western Appalachia that struggles to attain successful reading achievement outcomes, any bias in the researcher’s collection, interpretation, and reporting of data should be acknowledged. Given the presence of this potential bias, this study includes bodies of literature that
underscore specific school-based factors perceived to impact student reading achievement.

**Limitations**

Any attempt to generalize the findings of this qualitative comparative study should be cautionary. The nature of the case study design was to thickly describe a particular phenomenon and not generalize the outcome to other populations or use the findings to make predictions (Glesne, 2015; Patton, 2002). The sample was small and the results are only representative of the data collected from the two particular elementary buildings and eight educators studied in Western Appalachian, Ohio. This study’s results do not take into account any unknown factors perceived to influence reading achievement in other K-3 elementary buildings in rural Appalachian Ohio or in other high-poverty, rural Appalachian regions.

When dealing with human subjects, the potential for personal bias is always present when participants answer interview questions. Likewise, random personal or school-based factors influencing the emotional and mental state of the subjects may have influenced their responses and/or actions on the particular day of the interview. The research was conducted by a solo researcher; consequently, the study’s conclusions reflect the analysis of a single perspective influenced by the personal bias the researcher instinctively brings to the study. While this study concentrated on the school-based factors that may contribute to successful student achievement, there may be other additional strategies that support student success that are beyond the scope of this particular study.
Teachers were interviewed during school hours at a location conducive to their needs. The interviews were conducted during one session, the day and time selected by the participant. The quality and accuracy of responses, however, may be influenced by unrelated stressful events or uncharacteristic uplifting events that preceded the interview and potentially influenced the state of mind of the participants and the answers they provided. Demanding schedules often restrict the amount of time teachers are willing to volunteer their participation. This limitation may have compromised the richness of some responses. Interview questions cannot assess every thought of a participant; the number of questions used must supply rich, thick, description yet yield a manageable amount of data. There may be undiscovered information applicable to the study that specific interview questions failed to ascertain.

This was not a longitudinal study. This limitation may have influenced the professionals’ ability to reflect accurately and form responses, especially when questioned about professional development experiences that may have been experienced over time.

Further obscuring the understanding of rural school improvement are the myriad of definitions used to define “rural”. Rural student enrollment may range from 1.1 million to 11.6 million depending on the definition used. The difficulty in ascertaining a common and consistent definition of the term makes it challenging to compare the results of studies found on rural issues (Arnold et al., 2005).

The limitations discussed, however, are not significant enough to negate the credibility of the research findings or the implications of these findings.
Delimitations

This study was limited by geographical region and proximity to the research sites, given the need for personal interviews and potential follow-up interviews. This study also neglected to include the perceptions of community members and other professionals in Western Appalachia who may have differing perceptions of school-based factors perceived to influence successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. When using interviews, data are dependent on the memory, accuracy, and ability of the participants to accurately convey their perceptions verbally. The thick, rich description characteristic of interview data is also somewhat dependent on the researcher’s ability to establish the trust and rapport with participants capable of emitting honest, reflective responses. Educational professionals often stress about the ramifications of answering probing questions regarding school matters. Even though the professionals participating in this study have coded pseudonyms, the nature of the sample and the size of the district suggest that anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

This study specifically explored the perceptions educational professionals in two rural high-poverty Western Appalachian schools have of school-based factors that influence successful outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. The results should be generalized with caution if applying these perceptions to educational professionals who work with students in other areas (i.e. urban, suburban, other rural regions). In addition, this study explored educational professionals’ perceptions related only to third grade reading achievement. Said perceptions may not be applicable to achievement in other subjects or grade levels.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this comparative case study was to gather rich, descriptive data concerning the school-based factors that eight educational professionals perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. Specifically, this study compares two high poverty elementary schools located in Western Appalachian Ohio, one consistently high achieving, and one consistently struggling to improve. This study will compare teaching practices pertaining to reading, perceptions of professional development, leadership, and both self- and collective efficacy as well as emerging perceptions based upon probing during the semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Process

Interviews were the primary method of data collection. Data collection began by reviewing any pertinent information on each of the school’s websites and accessing school report card information from the Ohio Department of Education website. Multiple interview sources were used to increase validity in the investigation and facilitate triangulation.

The participants identified for this study were purposefully selected for this study based upon an established set of criterion. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard the names of the participants and their schools.

Interviews

Two individual teacher interviews were conducted at each elementary school site. Interviewees consisted of a first grade teacher and a third grade teacher, in addition to the building principal and district superintendent. The interviews consisted of fifteen
questions, five background questions and ten open-ended questions designed to elicit thick, rich description concerning school-based factors perceived to influence student reading achievement on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. Probes were used in addition to some of the questions presented in the study. Probes allowed the researcher to more accurately clarify the participants’ responses and gather the descriptive detail necessary to the overall validity of the study. Consequently, the study employed a semi-structured interview protocol. Interview questions were slightly adjusted to fit the role of the administrators. All interviews began with some initial rapport building, the obtaining of informed consent emphasizing measures of confidentiality and right of participant termination at any time.

All of the interviews occurred individually and privately. At Elementary A, all interviews were conducted in a quiet conference room located inside the school. When asked, all participants agreed to be interviewed in this location and displayed a high level of comfort. The superintendent, however, had to be interviewed on a different day, and this interview took place in his office. At Elementary B, the interviews occurred in the elementary principal’s office. When asked, all participants agreed to be interviewed in this location and displayed a high level of comfortability. The superintendent, however, had to be interviewed the following week, and this interview took place in his office. Each interview was recorded using two handheld digital recording devices.

Upon the completion of each interview, each interview was played to ensure accuracy and clarity, and then uploaded to an outsourced transcription company to be transcribed (not verbatim) into a word document. Copies of the transcription were then
delivered to each participant to be reviewed for clarification and accuracy as part of the member checking process. The next section will describe the analysis and synthesis of data that yielded emerging patterns and themes.

**General Description of Participants**

Participants in this comparative case study served elementary school populations in rural Western Appalachian Ohio. All participants had direct teaching experience or supervisory experience with a K-3 population. The participants’ years of experience serving a K-3 population ranged from five years to thirty years. All participants, except one, have served in their current position for a minimum of five years. Participants are detailed below.

**District A.**

Low-performing district

**Elementary A.**

Low-performing elementary

**Elementary A, T1.**

T1 holds a bachelor of science with a major in social science and emphasis in psychology. She earned a master’s degree in the art of teaching and currently holds a five-year professional license with a K-8 certification. Her eighteen years of elementary teaching experience consist of kindergarten and first grade assignments and are preceded by one year as an aide in a handicapped preschool classroom.
Elementary A, T2.

T2 holds her PK-3 teaching license and has taken courses in educational administration to be certified as a PK-3 principal. She has completed the licensure coursework toward the principalship but has not taken the licensure exam. Her eight years of teaching experience have all been in the same grade at the K-3 level.

Elementary A, Principal A.

Principal A holds a Social Studies licensure for grades 4-9, a principal’s license for K-12, and an intervention specialist license for K-12. She has taught for fifteen years (two years being at the K-3 level) and served as a K-12 principal for nine years.

Elementary A, Superintendent A.

Superintendent A holds a 7-12 teaching license (biological science), a master’s degree with a K-12 principal’s license, and a superintendent’s license. He has taught high school science for five years, and has served as a high school assistant principal for two years, and a K-12 curriculum director for one year. He worked as an assistant superintendent for 6 months. He is finishing his first full year as superintendent. He has seventeen years in education.

District B.

High-performing district

Elementary B.

High-performing elementary
**Elementary B, T3.**

T3 holds licensure in PK-3 education and a master’s degree in teacher leadership. She has also taken some courses in administration toward a principal’s license. She has ten years of K-3 experience. She has served in her current position for two years but has four years of experience within another building within the district. The other four years were spent teaching in another district.

**Elementary B, T4.**

T4 holds licensure in early childhood education for PK-3. He has taught for five years; all five years have been in the same grade.

**Elementary B, Principal B.**

Principal B has a K-12 intervention specialist license and an administrative license for K-12 also. She has twelve years of teaching experience and four years of administrative experience. Three of the teaching years have been at the K-3 level, and all four years as principal have been at the K-3 level.

**Elementary B, Superintendent B.**

Superintendent B is licensed to teach mathematics and psychology 7-12. He is a licensed principal for K-12 and holds a superintendent’s license. He taught high school mathematics for 12 years; acted as a K-3 assistant elementary principal for one year; an elementary principal for three years; a high school principal for six years; an assistant superintendent for one year; and eight years as a superintendent. He has worked 31 years in education.
Analysis and Synthesis

This section of the study introduces the data acquired through the interviews with the educational professionals at each site. To begin the interview analysis, the researcher listened to all of the audio files and took notes. Once the transcriptions were received, to ensure accuracy, the researcher compared the completed transcripts to the original audio recordings. The researcher then used descriptive coding as described by Saldaña (2013) and compared the data by chunking ideas with the same code into major categories that led to themes. Using a detailed coding process encouraged a more accurate interpretation of the data that is not hindered by preconceived notions of the researcher (Saldaña, 2013). The interviews of the educational professionals consisted of four demographic questions and thirteen interview questions that were closely aligned to the research question.

Similarities Pertaining to the Instruction of Reading Perceived to Impact Reading Achievement

The next section details the similar answers provided by the educational professionals from Elementary A and Elementary B when asked their perceptions about the school-based factors perceived to impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. Although the responses have led to the theme of reading instruction, the manner in which these factors appear to materialize within the school setting are dramatically different and will be further detailed in another section.
**Reading instruction.**

All participants perceive that high-quality reading instruction is a factor that influences success on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. All teachers and principals participating in the study stress the importance of the foundational skills students learn in kindergarten and first grade and the ability of other teachers to build on these skills throughout grades two and three.

**Instructional tools used to collect/analyze reading data**

All respondents indicate that reading data is consistently gathered and reviewed. Students are benchmarked in both buildings, although the tools used to benchmark vary between the two schools. When teachers benchmark, they determine the students’ present levels of reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

Elementary A uses Fountas and Pinnell, i-Ready, Fundations, and Wilson. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment system is used quarterly to benchmark students. Fundations is utilized in grades K-2 to determine and target skill deficits, and Wilson, the follow-up program, is used in the same manner for grade 3. The professionals from Elementary A believe in the progressive building of literacy skills emphasized by these programs and the challenging activities they provide to higher performing students. Most recently, Elementary A has begun monitoring students using i-Ready as a growth measure, and all respondents report that the program enhances their ability to analyze student data more accurately because they perceive the program mirrors the 2014-2015 third grade state reading achievement data. T2 indicates that although i-Ready data appears to provide accurate student data and profiles, and the staff has examined these,
“[they’ve] never done anything with them. [The staff] never makes it all the way through anything…and the most important part [of gathering the data]…is to prepare [student ability] groups.” Principal A emphasizes that teachers use bits and pieces from various sources to improve reading achievement because “…[t]here’s not a fix-all” to what teachers use when trying to improve achievement scores.

Elementary B uses STAR testing, Accelerated Reader, and DIBELS to monitor student growth. Elementary B uses STAR testing to benchmark students three times/year, although T3 indicates “there’s mixed opinions about it because it is multiple choice.” Accelerated Reader is used by Elementary B as well; students set goals, monitor their own progress each week, and earn rewards. Accelerated Reader is “not something that has one hundred percent participation” (T3), however. Principal B highlights the use of DIBELS scores and fluency checks each nine weeks, and T4 indicates that their fluency checks measure where students should be statewide. Quarterly assessments are also used at Elementary B to measure the skills students know well and what skills need targeted for improvement.

**Scheduling.**

All participants perceive that a lengthy, uninterrupted block dedicated to reading instruction influences successful achievement performance outcomes. Even though the participants agree on this point, the two elementary buildings have distinct variances in their scheduling practices.

Elementary A has implemented a ninety minute literacy block. All students receive that core reading instruction in homeroom. Based upon levels of deficit, students
are then assigned a Tier for additional instruction. T1 and T2 indicate that
“…paraprofessionals will pull the lower achieving kids out [for Tier 2]…and then if
students are really struggling, they will pull ‘em out another half an hour a day and do the
[Tier 3].”

Scheduled reading instruction at Elementary B varies between grade levels. All
participants here emphasize, however, that teaching reading skills in small ability groups
is the center of the elementary schedule. In grades K-2, Principal B stresses that the entire
morning (until 12:00 p.m.) focuses on the teaching of reading. In the morning, first and
second grade have 90 minutes of reading instruction taught in six reading groups. Third
grade uses three reading blocks per day, with each block lasting 75 minutes, respectively.

**Ability grouping.**

All participants agree that ability grouping enables the teachers to individualize
instruction so that individual student needs are met. All participants perceive that when
teachers and students have lower ratios, the students receive more individualized
attention that potentially impacts their potential for growth and increased reading
achievement outcomes.

Those interviewed from Elementary A stress the use of i-Ready student profiles.
These profiles allow staff members to assign students to profile levels that focus on
particular skills. T2 explains, “Students in Profile 1 study phonics, phonemes, and
breaking apart words and blends and diagraphs.” Students considered to have more
severe deficits are pulled out for Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention and continue to focus on
the Profile 1 areas. All Elementary A participants agree with T2’s belief that small group
instruction offered by guided reading groups improves student reading achievement because it affords teachers the opportunity to “differentiate among reading abilities” and focus more on individual student needs. T2 did reference, however, that one of the third grade teachers “…does things different…she’s doing small-group, but she’s not doing the guided reading and math the way that [she] and another teacher [are].”

Superintendent A states that the high school has been performance grouping for years but the elementary is just beginning to process grouping students according to data. As mentioned earlier, all students of mixed ability receive ninety minutes of core reading instruction. Elementary A then ability groups students according to levels of deficit, placing students into Tiers for skill specific intervention. Students requiring Tier 2 intervention receive an extra thirty minutes of reading instruction, and students in Tier 3 receive an additional thirty minutes. Consequently, students requiring the most intensive intervention receive an extra sixty minutes of reading instruction in addition to their ninety minutes of core instruction.

All respondents from Elementary B claim that ability grouping enables their students to successfully learn the skills necessary to perform well on Ohio’s Reading Achievement Assessment. All students are assigned a reading block based upon reading skill level. Students in K-1 remain in this block for 90 minutes and students in grade 3 remain in the block for 75 minutes. Principal B reports that the average intervention group functions with an 11:1 student/teacher ratio, with a special education ratio of 7:1, and a high group of 23:1, respectively. Principal B also stresses the use of guided reading groups throughout the classrooms in Elementary B. Grade levels also use Google Docs to
track student data gathered from these groups and then teachers meet weekly to discuss
the proper placement for students based upon the data available. Once third grade test
scores return and those results are analyzed, students are divided into “specialized
intervention groups” to help those who failed to pass the state’s reading achievement
assessment.

*Phonics.*

All participants, with the exception of Superintendent B, specifically mention
phonics instruction and the importance of addressing any deficit pertaining to phonics.
Those who reference phonics stress its impact on successful reading achievement
performance.

T1, Principal A, T4, and Principal B report the use of the Phonics Dance, a
program that reinforces decoding skills and builds on phonemic awareness through the
use of rhyme, movement, and chant. Both schools utilize computer programs, as
discussed previously, that provide data and instruction toward addressing deficits in
phonics. T4 stated, “The biggest thing…I do is the phonics. I really try to hound that into
them so they can sound out unfamiliar words.” T2 stresses the need for third grade
teachers to learn the early phonics rules so they can help the struggling students with the
phonics that they [third grade teachers] don’t understand how to teach.

*Centers.*

Teachers report the implementation of centers in both schools. Centers are
organized stations containing supplies that students use individually or collectively to
support specific skills (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Both Principal A and Principal B
support the use of centers in the classroom. These respondents report that centers allow teachers to differentiate their teaching practices so that skills are taught in ways that impact all students and ultimately influence achievement performance. Principal B states, “How much easier would it be to have 8 kids sitting around you and you’re talking and focusing on those 8 at a time, and going through a rotation in 25 minutes. That’s what I see as being effective.” Principal B states that “[e]very one of the first-grade class rooms uses centers.”

Vertical alignment.

Professionals from both schools agree that vertical alignment conversations and actions based upon those conversations can positively influence successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

Professionals from Elementary A acknowledge the necessity for vertical alignment, but perceive the district struggles to systematically implement the communication and/or changes based upon discussions of it. T1 indicates that “informal communication” exists between the K-1 staff. She defines informal communication as casual interaction in the hallways with students from other grade levels and follow-up conversations with teachers pertaining to issues that they may have. Second grade teachers are located down another hall, so communication is more challenging. The teachers do “…keep folders on the kids” and “pass the information along…from grade level to grade level.” Teachers also give each other the “lowdown” on certain kids. T2 indicated that teachers from the various grades discuss students at lunch, but they “don’t know a lot about how things align.” Principal A indicates “…the day we did this (vertical
alignment) some grade levels asked questions and took notes and did it “correctly”, but
“[t]he other group didn’t have stuff together”; consequently, that group “…didn’t take it
serious and they didn’t do it right.” She indicates that vertical alignment usually entails
“… just plain discussion and ask[ing] them [teachers] questions and look[ing] at
examples of things they’re doing in their classroom.

Participants from Elementary B agree that vertical alignment impacts teacher and
student preparedness to successfully perform on the third grade reading achievement
assessment. T3 states, “We’re all using the same terms to make the transition a little
easier from grade level to grade level…and making sure that everybody is following their
pacing charts, and that these skills are being mastered by [the previous grade] before they
come to [the next grade].” Principal B adds that vertical conversations also enable
teachers to meet a variety of student needs, beyond the academic ones.

**Collaboration.**

All educational professionals agree that collaboration among teachers, leadership,
parents, and the community may positively impact student achievement performance
whether it be directly or indirectly.

**Teachers.**

Both buildings have teachers that collaborate with grade level peers on a Teacher
Based Team (TBT) at least once per week. Teachers from both buildings review student
data, discuss instructional strategies, and determine needs for improvement.

The staff from Elementary A believes their TBTs are valuable but not fully
functional. T1 from Elementary A expresses that staff has “kinda got more of that team
building going on…and that has been a big factor in turning things around.” T2 indicates that TBT meetings do reinforce the high expectations conveyed by the principal, but “[i]nstead of the teachers saying what’s needed for [the] TBT, the administration says what we need to bring for [the] TBT.” T2 also believes that engaging in more vertical conversations with teachers would be beneficial to improving student performance because currently, they “don’t know a lot about how things align.” Student data points are shared “…all the time, but timing is off.” Once state test achievement data is released, staff members in Elementary A hold TBT meetings to examine the data and determine next steps. Grade-level special education teachers have recently been involved in Elementary A’s TBT meetings. Principal A indicates that “[t]hey’re not in every week”, but when they do attend, everyone reviews the data about students they (regular education and special education) share.” Elementary A also involves the school counselor in the TBT process by asking her to research and find resources and information that enables teachers to be more successful in the classroom.

T2 indicates that Principal A is “very, very good about coming to TBTs” and asking teachers questions about struggling readers. Elementary A also has a curriculum director who is “the leader” of the TBT process within the district. Superintendent A indicates that “[b]ecause of the TBT process, they (principals) are getting better at collaboration because they’ve had to- they’re in these conversations on a regular basis.”

Teachers from Elementary B also review student reading data as they collaborate during the TBT process. Both teachers and the principal express the value of weekly TBT meetings. TBT meetings are a district requirement, but T3 stresses that her grade-level
team would “definitely meet” even if the meetings were not required. She indicates that her TBT “…meet[s] constantly as a team and are constantly discussing things going on.” T3 also perceives that TBTs “keep up” with relevant and trending information themselves in addition to attending regularly scheduled meetings. Teachers work closely together to plan and implement curriculum decisions. For example, T3 perceives that the writing skills students learn are directly related to the skills learned in reading; the reading and writing teachers desire “consistency” for all students. Teachers work and plan for each week to ensure coverage of the “same skills”.

*Leadership meetings.*

In addition to TBTs, both buildings have a Building Leadership Team (BLT) and a District Leadership Team (DLT). All teachers and principals interviewed agree that principal visibility and participation at TBT and BLT meetings is critical to a TBT and BLT process that supports successful student achievement outcomes. Both principals discuss how they support the sharing of teachers’ ideas during the TBT process. Principal A indicates that after the completion of walk-throughs, she herself will share ideas between teams; Principal B states that she asks teachers to share specific practices with other team members.

At the superintendent level, both superintendents hold collaborative meetings. Superintendent A only holds principals meetings when he feels building or district needs require one, and when he does hold one, the principals know “…the entire time is gonna be focused on academics.” Superintendent B, on the other hand, prefers to meet regularly on Tuesdays with all the principals, special education coordinator, special projects
director, the assistant superintendent, and the treasurer. Once this meeting concludes, he meets alone with the elementary principals to discuss issues pertinent to their individual needs.

Parents.

Elementary A encourages parent contact so that parents understand where their children are performing academically. Elementary A offers parent workshops, but the topics of the workshops were unspecified.

Participants from Elementary B perceive that parent involvement ultimately supports the achievement of students, but respondents indicated that they do not depend on parent involvement efforts; they themselves provide students with the supports needed to be successful. Principal B does require teachers to maintain communication logs that detail efforts to contact parents, however. Elementary B also offers an after-school program that creates additional opportunities for teachers and parents to meet casually and discuss concerns parents may have.

Community.

Respondents from both schools perceive that meeting students’ basic needs is important. If basic needs are not met, improved academic achievement can be more challenging.

T1 from Elementary A indicates that staff works with local agencies such as Children’s Services, to meet the basic needs (shoes, coats, book bags) of their high-poverty students when needs arise.
When necessary, Elementary B also works alongside local agencies and community service groups to provide students with similar needs.

**Differences Pertaining to the Instruction of Reading Perceived to Impact Reading Achievement**

**Kindergarten readiness.**

Respondents from Elementary A specifically target the district’s need to improve kindergarten readiness by increasing involvement in preschool and/or Head Start. Superintendent A states that “only five to ten percent” come to kindergarten at grade level, and “less than half” attend preschool or Head Start. Superintendent A adds that “vocabulary skills are way, way below what they’re supposed to be for incoming kindergarteners.” Superintendent A expresses plans to address this concern with efforts to increase participation in preschool and Head Start. Kindergarten readiness is not addressed by any respondent from Elementary B.

**Test preparation.**

The principal from Elementary A is the only respondent to reference specific test preparation strategies as impacting student achievement. She states, “A lot of times, some of the strategies that we use are simple test-taking strategies like underlining, ‘stop, go back, re-think.’” T1 from Elementary A suggests that “sometimes the focus is too much on the test, but that’s what the state expects.” Superintendent A alludes to test prep strategies, but they pertain to the high school level. Superintendent A also expresses the belief that teachers often “create test anxiety and schools create test anxiety” because “if everything’s important, the test anxiety shouldn’t really be there.” He perceives that when
students are conditioned to believe that all work is important and meaningful, the test becomes another academic task that simply demands one’s best.

Staff members from Elementary B, however, emphasize test preparation for both students and staff. T3 explains that students spend “a lot of time in the computer lab” and teachers use a mobile lab of Chromebooks, laptops, and iPads. They also use test practice websites and take practice achievement assessments on sites such as Study Island. T3 references some professional development surrounding reading strategies that have also helped teachers prepare students for the state test. T4 stresses that his role in preparing students for the third-grade achievement assessment involves preparing students with a strong phonics foundation “…making sure they’re able to read…” and some basic computer skills such as drag and drop. T4 indicates, however, that it would “…be beneficial if we [K-1] could see the same kind of stuff they’re [third grade] doing [just so we know] in two years this is where they have to be.” Principal B conveys the belief that although “…it’s a third-grade test, it affects everyone. Everybody’s linked.” When third grade teachers at Elementary B create their own tests or homework, they model the vocabulary found on the state test. They focus on key words within questions and prepare students by saying, “The expectation is you’re gonna pass.”

**Fidelity of reading instruction at Elementary A.**

**Struggle with implementation.**

Elementary A perceives the district struggles with the fidelity of reading instruction. T1 reports, “…we have a lot of things in place…” and “I don’t always see the consistency…all the way through the building.” She adds, “…we’ve had a lot kinda
thrown at us…” She perceives that many teachers feel “overwhelmed” and a “lack of support” persists because “…once [the teachers have]…studied…and…talked about it [new professional development topic]…” they are “expected to do it, and “there’s not a lot of follow-up with it.” The building is currently working to increase follow-up to make implementation of consistent teaching practices easier. T2 believes that “three-fourths” of the teachers provide instruction similarly.

T1 also indicates that she herself utilizes whole brain instruction, and it is “…kinda sort of goin through the school.” At this point, she hopes that more teachers will embrace whole brain instruction, but several teachers appear disinterested or not willing to commit to something new.

**Struggle with follow-through using data.**

Although the district is data rich, all respondents express concern about the follow-through in using data to effectively improve reading achievement results. T2 states, “There are times when we are analyzing the data, but it kinda ends there. We’re not fully using the data the way we should to implement instruction.” She offers an example.

…we came two weeks after [my] unit was over to discuss our results and [how to] help those groups that were struggling [with the unit] when that should’ve happened when we gave our pre-test. Everything is just kind of delayed. We’re talking about data points all the time, but the timing is off.
Principal A adds that the district has “…tried a lot of things over the years.” She notes that staff members become frustrated when they implement certain teaching practices for a period of time but fail to see successful data [meeting the state standard of 75% on the reading achievement assessment]. Superintendent A agrees and states, “…the district has been collecting data and using a variety of programs for several years, but we never do anything with it.” He explains that principals in his district know where the students are, “…but that’s where [the district] drop[s] the ball. What do we do once we know where they are?”

**Fidelity of reading instruction at Elementary B.**

Individuals from Elementary B perceive the fidelity of instruction that impacts reading achievement is strong. T3 perceives that “everyone’s sticking to” the individualization of instructional practice that makes a difference with reading achievement results. T4 also mentions that “…we [staff] expect a lot of our students and …teachers are trusted to do a job and they do it.” The teachers and principal convey the belief that every teacher in the building is accountable for the third-grade reading achievement assessment- “…even though it’s a third grade test, it affects everyone. “Everybody’s linked,” states Principal B. Principal B also expresses a strong belief that when the classroom doors are closed, the teachers know they are expected to prepare students for the achievement assessment, and she believes instruction is being completed with fidelity both horizontally and vertically because their testing results show it. She also stated that her teachers will “call each other out” if someone appears to be disengaged with the building expectation of fidelity.
After-school tutoring program.

Elementary A does not have a grant enabling them to support an after-school program for its students.

Elementary B has received a grant for several years that has enabled the staff to meet some basic student needs, offer after-school reading skills tutoring, homework support, and emotional support. The program has also enabled staff to build a deeper rapport with students. Principal B states, “…I think that’s part of the reason we’re so successful…we start with the basic needs here first.” All respondents from Elementary B perceive the after-school program enables the teachers to provide struggling students with the help needed to support improved academic achievement. Approximately 183 students regularly attend the program each year.

Similarities Pertaining to Meeting the Achievement Needs of Special Education Students

Respondents from both schools indicated that staff strives to meet the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) accommodations of students to support their academic achievement. Both schools utilize an intervention specialist to work with students who have an IEP. Although meeting the needs of special education students emerged as a theme between the two schools, the manner in which the schools address this need varies and will be detailed in a later section.

Professional development not a factor.

No respondents from either elementary reference any professional development opportunities that target the instruction of special education students. Teachers from
Elementary A reference some professional development on differentiated instruction, but the teachers do not reference any impact on their instruction of special education students.

**Communication.**

All professionals perceive that communication between general education teachers and intervention providers is critical to improving individual student literacy deficits that ultimately impact reading achievement. All participants agree, however, that communication between general education and intervention providers can be challenging due to scheduling conflicts, but communication is paramount to support the success of students requiring intervention assistance.

The principal from Elementary A stresses that intervention specialists are included in grade level TBT meetings more often than ever before. Principal A perceives that sharing data with the intervention teachers will be a step in closing the building’s achievement gap between the special education students and their typical peers. The apparent struggle with communication between general education teachers and special education teachers, however, is perceived as problematic by all respondents from Elementary A and will be detailed in a later section.

The teachers and principal from Elementary B indicate that general education teachers communicate with intervention teachers on a regular basis to support the reading achievement of special education students. At Elementary B, all reading teachers meet regularly during TBT meeting times to discuss student progress. The reading teachers are not categorized as general education teachers or intervention teachers. T3 states, “We
don’t really call them intervention teachers anymore. They are just reading teachers like us.”

**Differences Pertaining to Meeting the Achievement Needs of Special Education Students**

**Instruction at Elementary A.**

At Elementary A, special education students receive 90 minutes of literacy instruction with their typical peers. These students then receive extra intervention in Tier II. Part of this instruction includes guided reading groups. Students who continue to struggle are referred to an Intervention Assistance Team (IAT) and receive additional instructional time in Tier III intervention. Those who continue to struggle are ultimately referred for special education and receive instruction by a special education teacher. Teachers also rely on i-Ready data and the diagnosis of “Profile 1 areas” to determine target areas of instruction. “Profile 1 areas,” stated T2, are “hit more in intervention, but [are] hit once or twice a week in addition to regular instruction.” All respondents reference a focus on “student growth” to measure success, although a commonly understood definition of this term was not given.

Although respondents from Elementary A agree that accommodations are met in the general education classroom to support student growth and achievement, T2 from Elementary A expresses concern. Her concern is that teachers concentrate so diligently on classroom accommodations to meet grade-level goals for TGRG, but when students leave for intervention, the students’ time is spent on IEP goals. T2 states, “We’re not pushing for anything else, which maybe that’s how it should be done.”
however, these goals are not written for grade level expectations; consequently, all respondents from Elementary B are concerned that students are not being challenged enough in the intervention setting. T2 states, “I think there are some gaps [instructionally] because we don’t get to meet with those intervention teachers, so we don’t know exactly what they’re doing when they pull them.” In reference to instruction, Superintendent A discusses the district’s practice of creating “[a] gonna pass [Ohio’s achievement assessment] no matter what list, a probably not going to pass no matter what list, and a bubble list (students who will pass with intervention).” The intent is to create skill-based interventions that meet these students’ needs. He indicates, “The high school’s done that for a long time. The elementary never has.”

**Specially-designed instruction.**

All respondents from Elementary A perceive that teachers struggle to understand and meet the needs of the Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) portion of the IEP. Principal A states, “I don’t think they understand it [SDI]. T1 references assistance from the speech therapist and researching on her own as ways she learns to be more effective with specially designed instruction. Superintendent A adds, “We aren’t doin’ a good job of closing that gap. A lot of it’s because our teachers don’t really know how exactly to address some of the [instructional] issues.”

**Instruction at Elementary B.**

All professionals at Elementary B stress the positive impact of ability grouping students to provide one-on-one literacy instruction that targets similar deficits. The teachers perceive that ability grouping enables teachers to more easily meet students’ IEP
and 504 accommodations. Students who struggle the most are taught by a teacher in a
group consisting of six or seven students. The next lowest group may have eight or nine
students, and the next block may consist of approximately twelve learners. For reading,
identified students are not generally with their typical peers. Teachers write a Reading
Improvement Monitoring Plan (RIMP) detailing instructional strategies and special data
tracking for students with severe deficits.

*Specially designed instruction.*

T3 from Elementary B relays confidence with meeting the needs of SDI. Based
upon the ability grouping system used at the elementary, T3 does not teach students with
IEPs. T4 indicates a “general understanding” of the document and his role in carrying out
the instruction. Principal B and Superintendent B reference their test scores as evidence
that staff can differentiate and successfully meet the demands of specially designed
instruction in ways that impact student achievement.

*Communication at Elementary A.*

All respondents from Elementary A indicate that communication between general
education and special education presents a weakness in Elementary A’s desire to improve
reading achievement with their special education students. T1 references “scheduling” as
an issue that impedes the staff’s ability to communicate with intervention teachers as
effectively as they could. She also references being “bogged down with paperwork” and
stated, “…with the schedules- it’s not always a priority. It’s hit and miss.” Principal A
agrees with the presence of a communication problem, “… [the teachers] don’t really say
what they’ve been working on [to each other] and some material taught may overlap, or students may be [taught skills they have already mastered].”

Superintendent A expresses that communication problems inhibit the general education teachers’ understanding of students’ Evaluation Team Report Content (ETR). Superintendent A explains that ETRs contain information that indicates “what the kid can do, why they can’t do what other kids do, and things we need to be doing to help them be successful.” Teachers need this information to understand the detailed cognitive and physical impairments that influence individual academic achievement.

**Communication at Elementary B.**

Both teachers and the principal at Elementary B report strong communication between general education teachers and intervention specialists within the building. These professionals stress that a single intervention specialist is shared between both second and third grades. T4 states that his grade level “[tries] to communicate daily [or] weekly and figure out what [they’re] going to do to help make student[s] successful.”

**Expectations.**

All respondents at Elementary A perceive that the expectations of special education students should be increased. Principal A states about the special education classes, “I don’t know if our pacing is good enough.” She perceives these classes “go way too slow, and sometimes we don’t push them [special education students] quick enough or hard enough.” She further adds, “I think our expectations might be lower than what they should be for some students.” Superintendent A stresses the need for the expectation of the resource room to change. He states, “…the resource room is not a
place to do homework…they [general education teachers] need to get out of the mindset, and they are movin’ in that direction.”

All respondents from Elementary B express high expectations for their special education students. T2 states, “Our special education teachers are very great at what they do. They’re not just going slower or making it easier for the students. They’re still pushing them as far as they can.” Repeatedly, respondents emphasize that high expectations are the cultural norm. Principal B states, “…all kids are expected to succeed and every kid in third grade will meet that raw score of a 42. I know it’s gonna happen. It’s gonna happen.” Superintendent B agrees, “I don’t say to principals, ‘We’ve got 15 kids on an IEP we’ve gotta get to pass [and single out the population]. I just say we have a total number of kids that we need to pass.’ We expect every kid to pass.”

**Cooperation.**

Principal A and Superintendent A discuss a problematic level of cooperation between the intervention teachers and the general education teachers. Principal A states, “I think the regular ed teacher looks at a special ed teacher as, ‘You take the kid and teach it. They’re not mine.’” Superintendent A discusses a time when all teachers were brought together to familiarize themselves with the needs of their special education students. The intent was to create a collaborative effort to talk about each student they would have and create an “IEP at a Glance” that would be an easily accessible document for teachers to understand and use. The end result was “… they [teachers] just did it for compliance, farmed it out… you do these five, I will do these five, so it would be done.”
Respondents from Elementary B view their intervention teachers as “just another teacher” and these professionals relay everyone is part of a whole process in terms of educating and identifying students for special education. Both T3 and T4 along with Principal B emphasize that when students struggle and need evaluated for special education services, the staff is “supportive, and anything that [they] can do to help a student, [they’re] gonna do it. If that means extra interventions or whatever, then all of us are very willing to do it.” The participants report no incidents of teachers being unwilling to cooperate or being disengaged in the intervention/referral process.

**Similarities Pertaining to Perceptions of Professional Development and Its Relationship to Student Achievement.**

Professional development emerges as a theme in both schools. Although the administrative professionals perceive professional development as useful and important in preparing teachers to best meet student needs, professionals struggle to credit their district’s professional development as a factor that directly impacts student achievement outcomes.

**Professional development opportunities at Elementary A.**

All respondents from Elementary A agree that meaningful professional development can ultimately benefit teachers by positively impacting instruction, and both districts regularly offer professional development opportunities for certified staff.

Respondents indicate that professional development is offered at Elementary A and has included the following:

- Book studies
• Using data to guide instruction
• Designing formative/summative assessments
• Creating pre- and post-tests
• Training for monitoring programs such as i-Ready
• Creating learning targets
• Differentiated instruction
• Guided reading
• Common Core
• Daily Five

Some professional development is completed during TBT meetings, waiver days, attendance at outside trainings (usually at the local Education Service Center [ESC]) while others are completed after school hours. Superintendent A references the “thousands of dollars” spent over the years on programs intended to impact reading achievement.

T1 reports overall satisfaction with district professional development and describes it as “enjoyed”. T1 perceives the “majority” of teachers “jump on board” when the district offers a book study, although there are some teachers who are only interested in the professional development credit. Although T1herself appears pleased with the district’s professional development, she expresses concern with teachers who sometimes “scoff it off” and retort, “That (professional development idea) would never work with our group. You don’t understand our group.” She expresses concern with teachers who
are stubborn and need to “…see change [as a result of implementing new professional development] to make it [their effort to implement] happen.”

T2 from Elementary A states, “Most of us think of professional development as going to a session, but it’s usually here. We don’t typically leave the school for professional development.” All participants from Elementary A perceive i-Ready professional development to be the most “beneficial” in relation to encouraging student growth. T2 also indicates that teacher buy-in regarding the applicability of professional development is “…better this year that what it has been in the past. [I]t’s probably about 50-50 as far as staff is concerned. I think we had buy-in because it’s [i-Ready] what we wanted and needed.”

Principal A perceives that a “[a] few years ago, [the teachers] thought [professional development] was a waste of time because it was more whole group. More recently, states Principal A, teachers have more time to work on tasks they perceive are “necessary and needed”; consequently, teachers view professional development as “more productive”. Principal A agrees with T1 and T2 and believes that teachers have more buy-in because professional development days are not viewed as “wasted”.

Superintendent A expresses concern with the district’s history regarding professional development. Because the district has tried to implement so many programs and ideas over the years that haven’t changed achievement levels, he perceives the teachers have “become sour to anything new” and are “skeptical” about the value of the district’s professional development.
Professional development opportunities at Elementary B.

Elementary B has district professional development without students during three days during the year. Reading achievement and reading strategies are prioritized topics, but the professional development has never been directly related to testing. Like Elementary A, general education teachers from Elementary B rarely leave the district to attend professional development, but if they do leave, teachers are expected to present to the staff upon their return.

Overall, the value of professional development at Elementary B is viewed as a weakness. T3 and T4 from Elementary B have mixed views toward professional development. T3 and T4 agree that professional development often does not appear planned. T4 states that some professional development is viewed as “…busy work… and a waste…like a last minute roulette [of what] we’re going to be doing…but some of them [professional development experiences] are really great.” T3 describes professional development as “jumbled”. T3, T4 and Principal B agree that the most beneficial professional development involves teachers meeting together, evaluating “what’s working, not working, and what [needs added],” and sharing ideas that impact instruction and align instruction were noted as most beneficial when considering the impact of professional development on student achievement outcomes. Principal B calls professional development the “weakest” area of the district. T3, T4, and Principal B report that many teachers voice the preference to teach rather than attend professional development.
Superintendent B, however, perceives that “most people are glad that they don’t have to go out places to be trained…” and the teachers are “content with having all of [the] professional development done in the district.” The superintendent indicates that his approach to professional development has primarily been a fiscal decision. The district has struggled financially in years past, and he didn’t want to “just do away with professional development because it’s critical for all [the] teachers.” Consequently, his solution has been to offer all professional development within the district.

**Implementation of professional development at Elementary A.**

Educational professionals from Elementary A view the implementation of professional development as important, but respondents perceive the district struggles to effectively implement and monitor the impact of the opportunities. Even though all professionals portray i-Ready as meaningful professional development, T2 emphasizes, “We never make it all the way through anything. We stop three-quarters of the way through…” T2 notes the implementation of professional development as a concern by stating, “... [W]e get the information we need, but then we have to figure out how we’re gonna get it all together to implement it in the classroom.” Superintendent A agrees that the district has struggled with professional development over the years because “[w]e’ve done a horrible job…because we come up with all these great ideas…and there’s very little follow-up…or support to help [teachers] be really, really successful.”

In regard to professional development on differentiated instruction that the district has offered, T2 indicates that teachers struggle to implement the changes. T2 perceives
teachers need to “…see videos or have some of the teachers that are really successful with differentiating come in and show [how to teach differently].”

Superintendent A believes that the programs and professional development selected over the years could have been more effective, and the lack of achievement growth is “…not the fault of the program[s]. It’s the fault of our [district’s] implementation…”

All respondents from Elementary A agree that the administration conveys the expectation that teachers should implement what they learn from professional development. Teachers perceive the expectation based upon Principal A’s walk-through presence in the classrooms.

**Implementation of professional development at Elementary B.**

At Elementary B, professional development is often used to meet district requirements for testing ethics, health and safety issues, and other state mandated topics. Consequently, teachers do not perceive that professional development topics drive the instruction that influences academic achievement outcomes.

T3 is the only professional from Elementary B who describes any professional development perceived to directly relate to achievement testing performance. Both teachers and the principal indicate that the vast majority of instructional change results from conversations that occur among teachers during professional development time.

**Solicitation of teacher input.**

The administration from District A and District B both perceive they value teacher input pertaining to professional development topics.
The administration from Elementary A utilizes surveys to solicit input from teachers detailing ideas for professional development topics. They also use exit slips at the completion of professional development to determine if teachers would like more professional development in the future about given topics. Both teachers reference this solicitation of teacher input as critical to teacher positivity toward professional development. Elementary A also engages a literacy coach when planning professional development. This individual also solicits ideas from teachers, plans the professional development, and sometimes co-teaches professional development with staff.

All respondents from Elementary B agree as well that administration solicits ideas from the staff, but the teachers feel this input is rarely used. Professional development topics are ultimately perceived by the teachers as the superintendent’s decision. Principal B expresses concern for the teachers’ input, however, by stating, “I hope they feel it’s used.” Superintendent B indicates that he hopes teachers feel their input is valued, but to incorporate all teacher ideas into professional development topics would be “impossible”.

**Professional development needs perceived to influence achievement.**

Professionals from both schools reflect on future professional development topics they perceive would benefit the instruction that impacts student achievement.

All respondents from Elementary A specify professional development needs that could ultimately impact student achievement. To influence achievement, T2 expresses the desire for training on “differentiated instruction”, but states, “…we’ve had that over and over again…and [they] never go any further” than defining it and offering a few simple ideas. Principal A indicates that years ago, professional development was “whole-district
and [everyone] did the same thing.” Recently, they have begun to make professional development more “standard or grade-level specific” pertaining to teachers’ needs. Superintendent A states, “We haven’t done much,” concerning professional development that directly prepares students for Ohio’s reading achievement assessment, and “…we haven’t done a good job of getting our teachers in the mindset of how important it is for these kids to pass this test.” He perceives that personnel need to “[g]et it [instruction] down to the kid level,” and focus on using data meet individual students’ needs.

Respondents from Elementary B also reflect on professional development ideas they perceive impact student achievement. T3 perceives more professional development directly related to Ohio’s state reading achievement test would benefit instruction, but she acknowledges that the district’s abilities to meet such a request are often compromised by the untimely release of information from the state. T3 and T4 believe K-3 teachers should have some training detailing the expectations of Ohio’s third grade achievement tests. T3 perceives that information detailing the “design of questions, the setup of the test, how to read results, and [what can be done] to target areas [of need] would be beneficial to teachers. Superintendent B defers to the expertise of his principals’ assessments of their building needs to answer such questions.

**Differences Pertaining to Perceptions of Professional Development and Its Relationship to Student Achievement**

No differences are noted in the use of professional development to directly impact reading achievement.
Building climate is a theme that all the educational professionals perceive impact student performance on achievement assessments. All the teachers and principals reference meeting the “basic needs” of their students in poverty as fundamental to encouraging a positive student climate. These professionals indicate that meeting the students’ needs for food, school supplies, coats, shoes, and so forth is a priority that creates a climate underscored by care. T1 from Elementary A states, “They (students) might come to school to get a hug, a pair of shoes, or food. That’s our reality.” Principal B from Elementary B states, “I feel like they (our teachers) do such a good job of looking out for every kid and making sure their needs are met. I think that’s part of the reason we’re so successful is that we start with the basic needs here first.” The educational professionals perceive that such care and interest ultimately have an indirect impact on student achievement in a positive way. Neither superintendent made references to meeting basic needs and its relationship to academic achievement.

All teachers and principals perceive that students believe the staff genuinely cares about their (students) well-being. These professionals believe that such an understanding encourages students to feel more comfortable during times of stress (state testing) and indirectly impacts academic performance and standardized testing performance.
Differences Pertaining to Building Climate and Its Relationship to Student Achievement

**Factors contributing to perceptions of school climate at Elementary A.**

The teachers from building A describe the climate as “relative[ly] positive” and “split”. Principal A uses the word “improved” to describe the building’s climate. Both teachers perceive that “lower elementary” (K-3) grades have more team building and a stronger climate than the upper grades (4-6). Both teachers perceive that relationships are “really good” in the lower elementary. T2 emphasizes, however, “I know of at least three grade levels that are butting heads all the time about everything. We just have climate issues- morale issues…amongst some teachers- it’s mostly at the higher end. The lower elementary seems to be on board.” T2 does not perceive “for the most part”, however, that these climate differences impact third grade achievement tests scores. Superintendent A stresses “rewarding students for effort” and having teachers who “create an atmosphere of success- that whatever students do is important”. Students should have the mindset that all learning is “important”.

**Pressure over achievement results.**

The majority of the participants from Elementary A perceive the pressure to attain state standard achievement scores as a negative influence on the building’s climate. Both administrators perceive a lack of “serious [ness]” among the teachers surrounding the expectations of the state assessment. Because the district has had the “same results forever, not very good [...]” Principal A perceives that “teachers have put the number aside, and they don’t feel the stress or strain that they probably should feel with
achievement.” Superintendent A met with staff about fall reading achievement assessment scores and addressed the culture of “blame” often witnessed in the district. Principal A adds, “I think everyone has the blame game of whose fault it (low academic achievement) is.”

T2 and Principal A reference how the building climate changes when test scores return. Historically, the high school has experienced more success with their student passage rates and has carried the district academically by earning the majority of the district’s report card point designations. T2 states that when achievement scores return from the state, teachers “…joke that everyone will be talking bad about the elementary.” T2 adds, “Whenever we go to a meeting district-wide, about data, all of us elementary teachers cringe, and we just don’t even wanna go, because we know fingers are gonna be pointed. You walk in perky, and you leave all down in the dumps feeling like you stink.”

Perception that outside influences impact achievement results.

T2, Principal A and Superintendent A reference the area’s poverty and the outside factors often associated with poverty. All participants from Elementary A perceive that these factors impact the staff and building climate. T2 states, “There’s a lot of outside factors that we have no control over. I understand that…but it brings me down to know I work as hard as I try to do in my classroom to make a difference with these kids [and don’t attain the desired achievement results].” Principal A adds about poverty, “I don’t wanna play the blame game here, but it’s a culture…the whole attitude in our community or in our district about education. It (importance of education) is not instilled in the students.”
Changes in leadership.

T2 references the district’s change in leadership over the years as a factor influencing building climate. She has experienced climate and its perceived impact on student achievement under the leadership of three different superintendents and indicated that in the past it was “not a good environment”. However, the majority of respondents from Elementary A perceive that under the direction of the new superintendent, building climate and its impact on student reading achievement are improving. Superintendent A emphasizes the role of student “success” to a building’s climate. He stresses the importance of creating a “culture and climate of success on every single thing…so that success on [the] test is expected [and] not a surprise to anybody.” Superintendent A also emphasizes the importance of principals knowing his “mindset… [because] it keeps more of an academic atmosphere everywhere. If you have a superintendent who never mentions academics, it’s not gonna be high on your [principals’] priority list.”

Factors contributing to perceptions of school climate at Elementary B.

The majority of respondents from Elementary B use the word “family” to describe their school climate. T4 describes the climate as “great”. Both teachers and the principal reference staff breakfasts, monthly staff dinners, the caring approach of the principal and teachers, the trust the principal conveys to the staff about the jobs they do, the relationship the principal has with her staff, and the after-school program as the basis for the description.
**Level of principal’s direct involvement with students.**

The teachers reference Principal B’s direct involvement with the students as a contributing factor to a positive school climate. Direct involvement of Principal B is noted as eating with students, disciplining students, working with students in the classroom, and a general visibility around the school. Principal B allows students to have “leadership roles” however she can. She offers a student council for student leadership and service growth, and the opportunity for students to lead activities such as the Pledge as much as possible, using the school’s intercom. During morning announcements, Principal B also mentions students’ names for various recognition of success. She also stays after school to run the tutoring program to help students and build rapport. Principal B has memorized every student’s name so that parents and students feel that “every kid is somebody and they matter and are respected.” Teachers perceive that such actions of the principal underscore a positive climate that contribute to achievement performance outcomes.

**Praise for staff.**

Principal B feels “blessed” to have her job. The quotes below convey Principal B’s feelings toward her staff:

- “They (teachers) don’t realize what they do, the everyday routine, is phenomenal.”
- “I feel like they (teachers) do such a good job at looking out for every kid and making sure their needs are met. I think that’s part of the reason we’re so successful.”
• “Our teachers are so good...they wanna [give holiday surprises like turkeys] to [kids] on their own.”

• About herself, Principal B perceives at times that teachers think, “She (Principal B) is just telling me that [compliment] cuz she has to, cuz she’s my mom.”

• “I want ‘em (staff) to come to my house cuz I want ‘em to feel like [they’re] part of my family.” God knew what I needed more than I did, cuz I love this job.”

• “…our teachers are so good and so emotionally connected to [the] kids.”

• “I brag on my teachers to the superintendent because their scores are the highest”.

• When addressing a teacher who has made a mistake, she might say, “Don’t do that [inappropriate action or behavior], but I still love you and expect you to do well and know you’re a great teacher. You just made a mistake today.”

Principal B also references her own mistakes and indicates that when dealing with teachers, she explains mistakes that she herself has made and reinforces learning from the mistakes.

**Perceived level of dedication.**

T4 indicates that teachers are “completely dedicated” and states, “I think that’s just the climate. We have a hard group of kids to work with, but they’re the most rewarding. I think that’s pointed out a lot by our building principal. It makes people wanna be better at their job and makes people want to do what’s right for the kids. Even if it means more work for us.” All respondents indicate that teachers exhibit more positive behaviors than negative ones, especially when discussing students. T4 states,
“…it’s not like, “Oh, man. Can you believe so and so did this? We share a lot of ideas and what works for each individual student, and [we] communicate with each other…”

T4 stresses the impact of positive relationships goes beyond the teachers and the principal. “Even the custodial staff, the lunch room, the secretaries, they’re all very positive people. If you need something and you ask about anyone they’ll be more than happy to do [whatever you need]. I think it’s kind of contagious.” Principal B states, “I want every kid here to be treated as if they were your own kid.”

**Similarities Pertaining to Leadership Factors Perceived to Impact Student Achievement**

All participants find administrative leadership to be a common theme that influences positive student reading achievement outcomes.

**Vision as a force guiding achievement.**

Elementary A and Elementary B both have educational professionals who recognize a vision statement that underscores achievement efforts within the school. The vision at Elementary A states, “We will strive every day to provide high quality, educational experiences that prepare and inspire students to achieve.” The vision at Elementary B reads, “We in partnership with the community, home, and students work as a team to identify and meet the needs of all students.”

Teachers and principals from both schools agree that elementary students are too young to recite and internalize a complex building vision; however, participants perceive that students do internalize a vision based upon the building climate and educational efforts put forth by their teachers and the administration.
Visibility of administration.

All respondents from Elementary A and B perceive that visibility of administration influences reading achievement assessment.

Principal.

All respondents from Elementary A indicate that principal visibility at TBT meetings and building professional development conveys an administrative interest in the instruction that prepares students for state reading achievement assessments. T2 states, “She (Principal A) is very, very good about coming to our TBTs and asking us questions…about those low-targeted kids.” Principal A has documented 350 classroom visits. She perceives that such visits encourage teachers to “take things [instruction] more serious [ly] and [emphasize] her expectations.” T1 states that principal presence has increased this year and “[t]his is the best year we’ve had.” She credits the addition of morning announcements accompanied by the repetition of a motto as two ways Principal A has increased her visibility within the building. Participants from Elementary A agree that such visibility conveys the message that administration “cares about the kids, cares about how [teachers] are doing, [indicates a desire to know] what’s going on, and [conveys a desire] to be more involved.” (T1). T1 further describes the current administration as “pretty aware” of the instruction and happenings within the building and she “kinda like[s] that.”

The teachers reference Principal B’s visibility with the students as a leadership factor perceived to impact student achievement. Principal B is described by T3 as “very visible” given she eats with students, effectively disciplines students, works with students
in the classroom, and is “constantly” present in classrooms or some area of the school where students are present. Principal B encourages student leadership and involves students daily in the morning announcements. She also stays after school to run the tutoring program which increases her visibility and ability to influence students’ lives. Principal B mentions that she has memorized every student’s name so that parents and students feel that she is personally connected to each student.

Both teachers and Principal B herself reflect on her presence at TBT and BLT meetings in addition to her presence with the teachers during professional development days. T3 and T4 perceive that Principal B’s effort to attend these meetings conveys her interest in the instruction necessary to maintain their successful achievement results.

**Superintendent.**

All respondents from Elementary A reference the visibility of Superintendent A. T1 notes that the past two superintendents were rarely visible, and the present superintendent will “pop in at the grade school, walk around, and …read books to the kids at times. The kids know him and know who he is.”

Participants from Elementary B perceive that the “presence” of the superintendent matters in setting a district-wide expectation of successful achievement, but this will be addressed in a later section.

**Emphasis on state reading achievement results.**

Both Elementary A and Elementary B have a system in place to disseminate the results of the state test. In both school districts, the principals and superintendents create data tracking sheets and compare their scores to other districts, especially those within the
same county. Both principals conduct meetings with their respective staff members. Once results are clear, both principals involve their teachers in ability grouping students according to the results. Principals and teachers then collaborate and target interventions to address problem areas. The climate surrounding the discussion of results and the cultural expectation of the meetings about the test results vary between the two schools, however, and will be detailed in a later section.

**Competition.**

Both superintendents perceive value in establishing a climate supporting competition surrounding achievement test scores.

Both Superintendent A and B discuss their competitive natures surrounding achievement results. The superintendents perceive that achievement comparisons push the professionals in their respective districts to try harder and perform better. Both superintendents present district testing data to their principals and teachers. They also present testing results during board meetings so that board members understand how their districts perform in comparison to nearby districts.

Principal B from Elementary B references the competitive nature between the elementary principals in her district and among schools within the county, but she is the only respondent other than a superintendent to reference competition.

**Administrative role as instructional leader.**

All participating teachers perceive that successful student achievement relates to a principal’s capacity to serve the building as an instructional leader. All respondents indicate that administrators should be aware of building data so they can arrange the
dynamics of the building’s support system to provide what teachers need to ultimately impact student achievement.

T1 perceives that Principal A establishes “high expectations” for Elementary A. When the school offers professional development states T1, “she (Principal A) gets involved in it, sits through it, does it … and sets the expectation that we should then [implement] it (professional development). Both teachers from Elementary A agree that Principal A listens to teachers and encourages professional development that meets the needs and wants of the teachers. Teachers also perceive that Principal A is knowledgeable about the practices of reading instruction that underscore successful reading achievement

Both Superintendents agree that principals who are instructional leaders are a critical component that underscores successful achievement results. Superintendent A states, “…a principal is the driving force behind good instruction. If there’s not good instruction, you have to go back and blame the principal. It’s a principal’s job to make sure all of his or her teachers are delivering good instruction with the right curriculum…” Superintendent B adds, “I try to make sure that we’ve hired the best people and put those people in place…those building principals have a tremendous impact on what can happen in the building.” Even though the superintendents agree on the importance of instructional leadership, Superintendent A and B differ on how they perceive their participating principals as instructional leaders. These differences are detailed in a later section.
**Attendance at meetings.**

All teachers from Elementary A and Elementary B perceive that Principal A and Principal B regularly attend TBTs, BLTs and DLTs, and facilitate discussions about instruction, student needs, and student data that encourage the changes needed to support student achievement. Teachers also perceive that building principals are knowledgeable about the practices of reading instruction that underscore successful reading achievement.

**Emphasis on student growth.**

Both Principal A and Principal B emphasize student growth and making yearly gains that translate to increased achievement. All respondents perceive that as the instructional leader, an effective principal conveys the expectation of communication between the general education teachers and special education teachers so that students with disabilities have the opportunity to meet expected growth along with their peers in the general education setting.

**Establishing high expectations.**

Both Principal A and Principal B perceive they have vocalized high expectations for students and staff. T1 and T2 agree that high expectations have been voiced, but they express concern with Elementary A’s struggle to improve reading achievement scores. Superintendent A perceives his principal voices high expectations, but battles outside factors that are often attributed to Elementary A’s struggle to successfully progress. Principal B’s high expectations are perceived to be clear and culturally present at Elementary B. Superintendent B voices the understanding himself that his principal expects every student to pass the reading achievement assessment.
Differences Pertaining to Leadership Factors Perceived to Impact Student Achievement

**Vision as a force guiding achievement.**

Although vision has been recognized as a unifying message for educational practice within the buildings, the professionals relay some conflicting aspects pertaining to building vision.

Superintendent A from Elementary A perceives his principal has a “focus on success” pertaining to the state’s reading achievement assessment, yet battles the expectation of unsuccessful results because the building has struggled to attain successful reading achievement scores for so many years. Professionals from Elementary A express the desire to attain their vision, but they are battling a precedent of struggle to attain the desired improvement in reading achievement.

Professionals from Elementary B perceive their consistent success with achievement outcomes underscores the active presence of a working vision. At Elementary B, T3 perceives “…everybody is very driven towards the same goal…everybody is working towards that goal [state testing results]…and everybody seems to be putting forth effort to do what needs to be done to help students and get them where they need to be.” Principal B indicates that the district has an “overall generic vision” but stresses that the elementary focus in the district is Superintendent B’s goal…reading education…” The vision at Elementary B addresses meeting the needs of “all students”. The achievement outcomes, the after-school tutoring program, and the meeting of students’ basic needs are referenced as indicators that support their vision.
Visibility of administration.

All participants from Elementary A perceive both the principal and superintendent as visible figures in the building.

Principal B and Superintendent B perceive themselves as visible figures within the district. Principal B indicated that Superintendent B visits the schools in the district on a regular basis and randomly enters classrooms. Superintendent B keeps a spreadsheet tracking the number of visits he makes to the buildings and stated, “I will actually walk into a classroom without the principal. I think most of the teachers are used to me bein’ around.” T3 and T4, however, did not relay this strong visible presence of Superintendent B. T3 stated, “There’s not really a lot of direct contact with the superintendent on the job that we’re doing.” T4 added, “We don’t see him a lot here.”

The teachers remarked that Superintendent B’s “presence” and influence pertaining to reading achievement is felt more indirectly through the comments and messages sent through the building principal.

It should be noted that Elementary B’s district consists of five buildings spread across the district, and Superintendent B is housed at a separate location as well. Elementary A is part of a campus setting with all grade levels contained within the same building, and Superintendent A is housed within the same building.

Competition.

Superintendent A and T2 from Elementary A referenced the presence of competition between the high school and the primary. This competition in District A is viewed negatively by the teachers and the principal, given the primary’s historical
struggle to attain successful results. All respondents from Elementary A perceive that the competition, although not intentional, negatively impacts the climate at Elementary A.

Respondents from Elementary B referenced active competition between elementary administrators. Principal B discussed an obvious and strong competitive spirit between the elementary principals surrounding achievement results in her district. She stated, “He [Superintendent B] probably doesn’t know that [my building] has the highest [score], but I will tell him [and] brag about it.” Superintendent B commented on the apparent competition between his principals, “All three elementary principals are very, very competitive with each other, almost to the point where I’ve had concerns from time to time about them. Overall, however, Superintendent B wants the principals “to be competitive because [he perceives] it makes them perform at a higher level.” Superintendent B indicated that the interest in competition extends beyond the administration and to the board of education, “All they [board of education] wanna know is ‘Are we beating these other people around here?’”

**Perceived level of accountability that ultimately impacts achievement**

*Teacher accountability.*

All respondents from both schools indicated that teacher accountability relates to student achievement, but the perceptions of the presence of accountability varies between the two schools.

All respondents from Elementary A perceive an overall lack of accountability for achievement results that has been part of the building and district culture for years. T2, stated, “…we need to be more accountable [because] that would help with the follow-
through in our reading and instruction…” All respondents with the exception of one, however, perceive that accountability is slowly beginning to improve. T1 indicated that teachers are experiencing more follow-up sessions with the principal and support that changes instruction. T1, T2, and Principal A also agree that the demands of the BLT and DLT “try to hold everybody accountable” because teams are required to maintain meeting minutes and convey information from the teacher level to the building level and to the district level.

All respondents from Elementary B agree that accountability is understood, conveyed regularly, and manifests as a cultural expectation in District B. T3 stated, “…we are busting it from the minute we’re here until the minute we leave…” When referring to accountability, respondents from Elementary B used phrases such as “everyone”, “making sure”, “constantly”, “expect a lot [from students]”, “push the students”, and “push each other”. T3, T4, and Principal B noted feelings of never being satisfied with the status quo. These staff members discussed a yearning to “do more” and stressed the search for new ideas and ways to reach students that impact student achievement performance outcomes.

*Accountability to the board of education.*

Superintendent A is increasing his own accountability to his board of education by presenting district test score data. He noted that in the past, the board was not informed or familiar with district data, and even though some data may not be positive, he perceives increasing academic awareness of the board is critical to the cultural shift
necessary to increase accountability in all levels throughout the district. No other respondent from District A mentioned specifically feeling accountable to the board.

Principal B and Superintendent B both referenced being accountable to the board of education. In District B, however, the board of education has held the Superintendent of District B accountable for the reporting of achievement scores for several years. District B hosts a community meeting every spring where the superintendent presents district wide data among other accomplishments and noted items of interest to parents, students, community members, business owners, and local politicians. Principal B stressed the emotional impact of having Superintendent B present her building’s test scores to the board. She doesn’t ever want to “let him [Superintendent B] down”. In reference to Superintendent B and accountability, Principal B stated, “I think there’s a lot of people that don’t like him, but they know where they stand. They know if he says it’s [successful reading achievement] gonna be done, it better be done.”

*Steps to increase accountability.*

Only Superintendent A referenced specific changes designed to increase teacher accountability in the future. Beginning in the 2016-2017 school year, Elementary A will be split and have two principals. Each principal will be expected to be an instructional leader and serve the staff as an expert on curriculum for two grades. Each principal will direct approximately 130 students and their staff, respectively. Superintendent A has also created a new position for a Special Education Director. This individual will serve as a liaison between the school and the parents of special education students. The goal of this position is to facilitate communication between the parents and the school. By increasing
rapport between the school and the home, Superintendent A envisions an increase in achievement and a narrowing of the achievement gap between the general education and special education populations.

Superintendent B relayed no improvements or need for change in the upcoming year.

**Cultural presence of accountability at Elementary A.**

Respondents from Elementary A referenced a struggle with the cultural expectation of accountability. Teachers and administrators have little fear of non-renewal of their contracts for poor achievement performance. Superintendent A voiced the historical struggle with successful achievement as an issue that has plagued the staff’s efforts for several years; consequently, low achievement has become more of an expectation. Principal A referenced her personal struggle and stated, “I hate to fail. I am not a loser.” She contemplates whether she has tried to “protect” the teachers too much from the results of disappointing scores instead of demanding they “go above and beyond because [they aren’t] doing good enough.”

At his most recent staff meeting, Superintendent A referenced Hattie (2003) and stated, “Research shows that 90 percent of you guys have to be onboard for this [change in achievement performance] to be successful. The ten percent of you who are wantin’ to fight, I’m gonna get rid of ya and replace you with ten percent who are happy to be workin’ here and happy to do these things [steps to improve achievement]. As the district’s leader, Superintendent A is working to strengthen the cultural expectation of
accountability and working to initiate changes that he hopes will lead to improved achievement outcomes.

**Cultural presence of accountability at Elementary B.**

T3, Principal B, and Superintendent B emphasized the cultural presence of accountability at Elementary B and in the district as a whole is first rooted in the expectations of the superintendent. The superintendent relays these expectations to the principals who then relay them to staff. Principal B describes her Superintendent as a “numbers guy”. She stressed, “He looks at all the numbers. He wants us [principals] to look at all the numbers.” Principal B perceives that accountability “has a positive influence [on the district] and shows that he [Superintendent B] thinks we’re the best in the surrounding counties. I think he holds us on that pedestal and we wanna remain there and we don’t wanna let him down.” Principal B stated, “I’m trying to make everybody [in my building] accountable…the expectation is [kids] are gonna pass [the state achievement assessment].” Principal B explained that the superintendent’s expectation of accountability is passed on directly to the students. Staff members, including herself, explain the importance of the state achievement test to the students by stating, “…I need you to pass that test. [We] hate to put that kind of pressure on ‘em, but we don’t want ‘em here next year in third grade.”

Superintendent B stresses accountability to the teaching staff. Superintendent B has worked in districts with minimal accountability where teachers’ achievement scores were consistently low and there were no ramifications. “That doesn’t happen in this district. Our people know that if they’re in a position and they’re not performing well,
they better get it [improved achievement scores] done in the next few years or they will be moved.”

“[Superintendent B] will tell you (teachers), ‘If you don’t wanna be here go, cuz I’m not gonna play games with anybody. If you think it’s better somewhere else, go somewhere else.’”

Superintendent B makes accountability clear to the principals. He stated, “They’ll pass over their friend [for a job] to keep their building runnin’ well.” He tells them, “If I go in your building and I see that people are not working- they’re not doing what they’re supposed to do, the attitude is poor in the building- I’m gonna hold you accountable for that.” This Superintendent further stressed that “expectation and accountability from the top…the board of education” separates high poverty struggling districts from those that are successful.

**Accountability for the emotional well-being of students.**

Principal B from Elementary B was the only respondent who discussed the accountability of teachers for the emotional well-being of students and its relationship to academic achievement. Principal B described a situation involving a teacher who allegedly disparaged a student. The teacher imitated a student’s disability, Principal B confronted the individual and chastised, “You don’t make fun of a kid. That’s not okay. That’s not how we treat kids. I have high expectations for these kids, [and] I want every kid here to be treated as if they were your own kid.”

Elementary A did not reference accountability in this manner.
**Emphasis on achievement testing at Elementary A.**

Both administrators from Elementary A perceive that staff members do not take Ohio’s achievement assessment seriously enough. T1, however, perceives that “sometimes the focus [of the district] is too much on the test,” and the state doesn’t understand the problems associated with their high poverty area. T2 added that teachers “joke” when going to district-wide testing meetings because “fingers are gonna be pointed” at the elementary and they expect to leave feeling dejected. Because of this expectation, “[they] just don’t even wanna go.”

Principal A stated, “I think we wanna get 90% [on the reading achievement assessment]...but some people look at this as just a job and ....we’d really change if they would take that [teacher effort] seriously.” Superintendent A indicated that not taking the test “serious[ly]” is a concern. He stressed, “It’s about mindset and getting everybody in the notion that these tests are important. We haven’t done a good job with that. We’ve not followed through. We’ve not made sure.” In the past, Ohio achievement results have returned from the state, and the data suggested that several students had left extended response answers blank. This told him “that kids [had] been leaving stuff blank all year and not been in trouble for it, and results like that are the fault of the teacher and nobody else.” He explained that in the past, elementary teachers have experienced no consequences when students perform unsuccessfully on standardized tests. The inception of the TGRG, however, has changed the level of accountability for the administration, students, and the teachers who teach them, and he is working to create a district culture that supports high expectations resulting in successful achievement.
The majority of respondents from Elementary A also referenced poverty and the impact the outside factors often associated with poverty have on student achievement performance. Superintendent A, however, aligned more with responses from Elementary B when he stated, “I know- no one needs to explain to me the reality of what we have here. Don’t come back and make excuses that our kids can’t be successful.”

**Emphasis on achievement testing at Elementary B.**

All respondents from Elementary B emphasized the district’s focus and expectation of successful reading achievement results. Both T3 and Principal B stressed that achievement results are “linked” to everyone K-3. Principal B conveys the importance of the test to students by announcing the names of high-scoring students over the intercom. Superintendent B stressed that in district meetings he publicizes the district’s achievement test results broken down by grade level in comparison to 37 other schools. Even though names are not attached to the scores, teachers within the district know which scores and teachers to associate together. Through this comparison, Superintendent B knows which teachers are “beating” other teachers. He uses test reporting data to make decisions about moving teachers where they can positively impact the most students and attain successful results or negatively influence the fewest number of students. When a teacher with lower results questioned him about the open distribution of this data, he responded, “They’re your results, and you need to own ‘em. I can’t help you there. You just gotta get better.” Everyone in the district knows that Superintendent B presents the district’s test data during the open session of board meetings.
**High expectations for achievement that permeate the culture.**

Elementary A reported conflicting views on the establishment of high expectations for student achievement. T1 stated, “The principal stresses the things we (teachers) have control over. She sets high expectations.” T2 agreed and stated that teachers are “trying to reach every student, push every student, and have high expectations for every student.” Principal A, however, perceives that “expectations might be lower than what they should be for some students.” She referenced poor communication and general education’s lack of ownership concerning meeting the needs of their special education population. Superintendent A has made it clear to the administration and staff, however, that he “[doesn’t] wanna hear the reason [they] don’t do very well on third grade tests or anything else is because [they] have too many special education students or too many students impacted by poverty.”

Participants from Elementary B consistently reported that high expectations permeate the culture.

**Administrative role as instructional leader.**

Although respondents from Elementary A and Elementary B generally agreed that administrators should be actively engaged as instructional leaders, there were differences between the principals’ and superintendents’ approaches to this leadership.

**Principal A as instructional leader.**

As the instructional leader at Elementary A, Principal A conveys the importance of “goal setting” and “clear learning targets” to the staff. The administration supports the review of current research to influence decision making in the district and changes in
teaching practice, but teachers perceive the building lacks follow-through on the application of the research to the daily classroom instruction that ultimately impacts student achievement. Principal A works closely with the curriculum director at Elementary A. They conduct needs assessments and then plan professional development that addresses research-based teaching strategies and interventions. Each year, Principal A and the curriculum director collaborate on goals to improve student achievement.

**Principal B as instructional leader.**

As the instructional leader at Elementary B, Principal B stresses the accountability of having “high expectations” for all students and meeting the basic physical and emotional needs of students that often go unmet at home. If their struggling students are not performing where they should be, it causes Principal B “to have some hard conversations” with the teachers involved. Unlike Elementary A, Elementary B does not have a building curriculum director to direct professional development, collaborate with the principal, or manage data. Principal B is the data manager for the building. Throughout the interview, Principal B quoted data pertaining to student/teacher ratios, testing data, and attendance. As the data manager, she ultimately decides when and if students should transition from one ability group to another. Principal B and the teachers perceive her active role as the manager of the after-school tutoring program also enhances her credibility as an instructional leader among the staff. When conducting informal classroom visits, Principal B will tutor and assist the classroom teacher with struggling students. Principal B conveyed an interest in “stealing ideas” that work from professionals in other schools because there are “benefits in watching someone else”.
Principal B stated, “I have analyzed everything…because the expectation is that every kid in third grade will meet that raw score of a 42. I know it’s gonna happen. It’s gonna happen.”

**Superintendent A as instructional leader.**

Superintendent A perceives that he should be the instructional leader of the district and perceives himself as the primary data collector and disseminator for Elementary A and the other grade levels.

*Special education.*

Three out of four respondents from Elementary A perceive that teachers are generally confused by the IEPs and ETRs of their special education population. All respondents reported uncertainty surrounding the expectations of the general education teachers to fulfill the obligations specified in the specially designed instruction part of the IEP. As an instructional leader, a key focus of Superintendent A in the future is the strengthening of the instruction for the special education students. Superintendent A plans to facilitate more communication and understanding between regular education and general education teachers by creating a position to support these goals. Superintendent A has spent time himself reviewing the district’s ETRs and IEPs. The district has struggled to reduce the large achievement gap between the general education students and special education students, so changing the way teachers collaborate and view their special education process and population is critical to improving the achievement performance of the special education sub-group.
Data analysis.

Superintendent A stated, “I am doing almost all of the data, all of the curriculum stuff myself. I have everything grouped by [state] standards. I can see how any student has performed on any test. I review i-Ready data from the elementary and semester exam data from the high school. I can meet with teachers and say, ‘Here’s what I’m seein.’.” Superintendent A helps teachers develop intervention groups based upon this data.

Superintendent A has met with every grade level all the way up to tenth grade and presented achievement data in a way that he perceives makes success on the achievement test more attainable for their special education population. He stated, “I broke it all down and took the exact number of special education students by category in each grade. In third grade, 94 percent of the students do not have a cognitive disability of any kind, so I don’t wanna hear the reason that we don’t do well on the third grade tests is because we go too many special ed kids. It’s not right.”

Superintendent B maintains spreadsheets for district-level data, but he does not view himself as the data manager for the individual buildings. He perceives this responsibility belongs to the building principal and he himself does not break down data to the individual classroom level. He will, however, review or discuss any such data presented to him.

Hesitation to increase demands on principals.

Superintendent A has been hesitant to expect his principals, in their current learning situations, to be data managers. He stated, “I have more time than principals. I
have the time to sit down and really look at i-Ready data, for example, and make charts and compare this and that and look at growth and align things.”

**Superintendent B as instructional leader.**

Superintendent B referenced hiring the best building principals he can to direct the instructional practices of the building that impact student achievement results. He perceives that he has more of an indirect influence on the instructional leadership related to academic achievement than a direct influence. His indirect influence manifests through expectations conveyed to the principals and through managerial decisions that influence instruction. He stated, for example, “I’m notorious in southeastern Ohio for not calling off school in inclement weather. Calling it off because it’s cold. Our kids can read because we go to school once in a while.” He also limits interruptions during the school day. Outside groups can only meet with students during lunchtime or other times that least impact instruction.

**Precedent of struggle.**

All participants from Elementary A, and no respondents from Elementary B, referenced an historical struggle to successfully attain successful achievement results. All respondents from Elementary A referenced the presence of outside factors that inhibit their ability to improve their test scores. Superintendent A discussed a persistent lack of accountability in the district that has extended from the board, to the principals, to the teachers. The teachers and Principal A reported feelings of frustration with results and the impact of such frustration on the staff’s abilities to overcome perceived obstacles. Elementary A has fought the expectation of low achievement despite their efforts to
improve. T2, T3, and Principal A, however, expressed their desire to improve achievement. Superintendent A expressed the intent to implement positive changes in the district that will ultimately influence student achievement in Elementary A.

Similarities Pertaining to Efficacy and Its Perceived Relationship to Student Achievement

The responses from Elementary A and Elementary B revealed that both self- and collective efficacy as themes perceived to impact student reading performance outcomes.

Perceptions of self-efficacy and relationship to student growth.

T1, Principal A and Superintendent A from Elementary A perceive themselves as efficacious in relation to student growth. T1 stated, “I do feel like I have a big impact on these kids because I see improvements. Principal A remarked, “When you look at where the kids have gone…they’ve grown this year.” Superintendent A reported high levels of self-efficacy when discussing his part in creating a culture of success trickling from his level, to the classroom level, to the student level, and ultimately to the home. Superintendent A feels confident in his ability to initiate changes that will ultimately impact positive student performance outcomes on the state’s reading achievement assessment.

All respondents from Elementary B reported high levels of self-efficacy in reference to student growth. All professionals further expressed high levels of competency in meeting students’ needs and doing “whatever needs to be done” (T4) to ensure that students receive the individualized instruction necessary to help students achieve a minimum of one year’ growth. Principal B stated, “…I tell everybody that I
expect a year’s worth of growth in a year, no matter where they [students] are.” Principal B best expressed a high level of self-efficacy when she stated her reaction to a teacher who complained about having struggling students. Principal B reacted by stating, “You’re not gonna tell me that you can’t have growth, cuz I’ve been there with kids lower than what you’re working with. Not one time did I ever say, ‘These kids can’t or these kids won’t’ because every kid will.”

**Self-efficacy related to building climate conducive to achievement.**

All respondents, with the exception of Superintendent B, reported feeling efficacious about cultivating a classroom climate and school climate conducive to successful achievement outcomes.

On multiple occasions, teachers and administrators referenced working diligently to address the basic needs of students that underscore a readiness to concentrate on academics. Superintendent B indicated that he has more of an indirect role in creating climate. He stressed that his part in the process is hiring the best people who can cultivate the building climate conducive to positive achievement outcomes. About himself he stated, “I’m not the best at praising people…if they [principals] don’t hear from me, it’s probably a good sign.” Superintendent B did acknowledge the value of being positive with his principals, however, when he stated, “I have been working on that [letting principals know they have done a good job].”

**Self-efficacy related to testing preparation.**

All teachers interviewed perceive themselves as working diligently to teach and prepare students for the reading achievement assessment.
Respondents from Elementary A used words such as “passionate”, “capable”, and “do[ing] my very best” to describe the effort used to prepare students for the yearly test. T2 stated, “I think I’m capable [of preparing students to pass the test], but there are times I think I could do better. I give it my best every day [and] do everything that I can possibly think of.”

Respondents from Elementary B used words such as “positive”, “relationships”, “communication”, “trust”, and “expectations” when discussing the effort put forth to prepare students for third grade reading achievement assessment. All respondents stressed the culture of high expectation that exists within the district and building. T3 summarized effort, “…our whole day is boom, boom, boom. We don’t have any breaks. We are busting it from the minute we’re here until the minute we leave.”

**Collective efficacy related to student achievement.**

**High expectations.**

Teachers from both buildings reported an overall perception of high collective efficacy among the teachers in their buildings and their belief in their collective body’s ability to prepare students to successfully pass the state’s reading achievement assessment.

**Access to materials.**

All teachers reported access to instructional materials that can be effectively used to prepare students for the state’s achievement assessment. Access to adequate instructional materials was perceived to positively influence the collective efficacy of the staff.
Differences Pertaining to Efficacy and Its Perceived Relationship to Student Achievement

Perceptions of self-efficacy and relationship to student achievement.

Although professionals in both schools reported high levels of efficacy in relation to student growth, professionals from Elementary A reported low levels of efficacy in relation to student achievement. Principal A stated “…it’s a direct smack in [my] face every time [they] get back these scores because [I] know what [my] teachers are doing in the classroom. She stated, “It’s really hard for me to stay positive with [a vision] and have a vision whenever I’m getting beat up every single day of my life by state department administrators and the SST (State Support Team) for not having stuff.” Principal A further added that she perceives participation in the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) has helped her to be more of a visionary because teachers are seeing differences in growth. In reference to vision, Principal A stated, “I have to remind myself to keep bringing up the positives that we’re doing and showing the growth that they [teachers] are making.” Principal A concluded, “I don’t feel like I do a good enough job.”

T1, Principal A and Superintendent A from Elementary A referenced feelings of frustration and discouragement associated with self-efficacy surrounding the improvement of student achievement test scores because so many students enter kindergarten at least a year behind. T1 stated, “We know that coming in. Every year the gap gets bigger…because every year we have more kids coming in further behind. When they come in and you’ve got half your class that’s low, it gets overwhelming.”

No respondent from Elementary B expressed thoughts of low self-efficacy.
Attribution to outside factors.

All respondents from Elementary A referenced the school’s historical struggle to attain successful results on Ohio’s reading achievement assessment as a factor that negatively impacts self-efficacy.

Respondents alluded to the following factors as impacting self-efficacy:

- Lack of parent interest in educational pursuits
- Apathy of students
- Lack of parent involvement and engagement with homework
- Lack of basic needs being met (food, school supplies, emotional support)
- Number of students from broken homes
- Unpreparedness for kindergarten
- Number of identified special education students
- Rigor of the state reading assessment
- Frustration of student growth not translating to achievement results
- Past precedent of failure to attain successful passage rates

The teachers and principal from Elementary B referenced the presence of poverty within the district and the lack of support for education commonly found at home, but no staff member indicated that such outside factors influenced their self-efficacy.

Respondents consistently discussed problem solving approaches to such dilemmas. Professionals referenced the after-school tutoring program, assessment of teaching strategies, and discussion with colleagues to solve conflicts pertaining to students who struggle academically.
Perceptions of collective efficacy and relationship to student achievement.

Teachers’ perceptions.

Both teachers from Elementary A reported that teachers have high expectations for students, and these high levels contribute to positive claims of collective efficacy. However, there are some differences in the data that challenge this belief. Although participating teachers from Elementary A indicated that teachers have high expectations for students, these statements were often qualified by hedging terms such as “majority”, “most”, and “try to have” high expectations. The notion of high expectations was also simultaneously used in conjunction with terms such as “discouraging” and “frustrat[ing]” when referencing achievement results.

Teachers from Elementary B described the presence of collective efficacy differently. Statements about collective efficacy contained terms such as “throughout the grades” and “everybody”. T4 stated that collectively teachers “absolutely” believe in their staff’s ability to attain successful results on Ohio’s third grade reading achievement assessment.

Administrators’ perceptions.

The principals’ and superintendents’ perceptions of collective efficacy vary within their respective buildings.

When asked if she perceives her staff collectively believes in their ability to attain successful results on the state test, Principal A stated, “No, I don’t think they feel that way at all. I don’t [perceive] that they [perceive] they can hit that number…because they’ve been beat up with these numbers over the years.” Principal A perceives that
teachers need to see a little success and get an upward trend in the score before they can view the state’s 75% cut score as attainable. Superintendent A corroborated this thought by stating, “No, absolutely not. Absolutely not. I don’t believe the teachers in the past have believed they even have a shot at having kids on grade level, a big percentage, or passin’ this third grade test.” Like his principal, Superintendent A’s “…expectation is “sustained growth.”

Superintendent A perceives his principal has a “focus on success” that encourages a high level of collective efficacy that results in more successful outcomes on the state’s reading achievement assessment, yet she battles the expectation of unsuccessful results because the building has struggled to have successful reading achievement scores for so many years.

All respondents from Elementary B reported high levels of collective efficacy perceived to impact student achievement outcomes. When asked if she perceives her staff collectively believes in their group’s ability to attain successful reading achievement results, Principal B stated, “Yes, yes, collectively”. She qualified her perception by mentioning that two teachers in the building appear to struggle with self-efficacy, but she emphasizes “student growth” with them in lieu of achievement results.

Superintendent B stated, “I’m sure they do,” when revealing his perception of Elementary B’s collective efficacy surrounding third grade reading achievement results. He perceives that collective efficacy is high because “the people [staff] have seen we can do this [perform well on the test] and [that] really makes a difference in the [staff’s] effort.”
Competition.

Elementary A alluded to competition between the elementary and the high school surrounding state testing performance. The impact of this competition appears to negatively impact both the self- and collective efficacy of the educators in the elementary setting. T2 stated, “I think we believe we can do it, but then the scores kinda make us doubt ourselves.” When scores return, the perception is that “…they [the district]’re gonna talk bad about the elementary.”

Superintendent A referenced feeling competitive with other schools in the county, but this competitiveness was not addressed by any other respondent from Elementary A.

The presence of competition and its impact on collective efficacy is viewed differently by those in District B. Instead of competing with the high school, the three elementary buildings and their principals appear to be competitive with each other. Superintendent B stated, “My elementary principals are very, very, competitive with each other, almost to the point where I’ve had concerns about them from time to time.” He supports this competitive spirit because he perceives it makes them “perform at a higher level”. Superintendent B also referenced a competition within the county surrounding achievement test scores and didn’t hesitate to add that “statistics show that we’re one of the higher-performing school districts in [the Western Region of Appalachian Ohio]…with the same type of kids that we have.”

Principal B praises her staff and acknowledges their consistent results. She indicated that she doesn’t want to “let [Superintendent B] down, and in turn, the teachers
don’t want to let her down; consequently, she praises them “all the time” hoping to keep them motivated, encouraged, and appreciated.

**Trust.**

No respondent from Elementary A mentioned trust and any perceived relationship to student achievement.

All respondents from Elementary B perceive that trust impacts student achievement at Elementary B.

*Trust between administrators and teachers.*

Both T3 and T4 from Elementary B perceive that administration trusts the work ethic of the staff. T3 stated, “They [administrators] trust that we (teachers) are doing what we need to do to get it [successful results on the achievement test] done, and the principal does not feel the need to “hound” or “micromanage” to ensure that teachers perform their jobs satisfactorily. Principal B stated about herself, “I really trust [that teachers use their planning time ethically] because that assessment [Ohio’s reading achievement assessment] still has to be given.” T3 and T4 perceive they have the autonomy to design lessons and teach the students according to personal preference as long as the end result supports successful student achievement outcomes on state tests. Teachers also feel trusted because they have “a piece of the decision and a lot of input in how [their] grade level is run” (T3). Teachers also reported high levels of trust relating to the discipline of students. Teachers feel confident that Principal B “supports” their teaching because they know if a disciplinary issue interferes with learning, Principal B will handle the situation in a supportive way.
Trust between administrators.

Both Principal B and Superintendent B indicated high levels of trust within the administration. Principal B stated, “Superintendent B trusts me so I wanna give the same [respect] to our teachers.” Principal B stressed the trust she has for Superintendent B’s judgment pertaining to district decision-making and the facets that influence achievement outcomes. “Superintendent B knows what we have to do more than anybody, so when he says ‘We’ve gotta get this done… you have to trust that that [course of action] is what has to be done.’” Superintendent B conveyed his trust in the district’s principals by stating, “I try to hire the best building principals and give them the freedom to do their jobs.”

Similarities in the Most Important School-based Factor Perceived to Impact Student Achievement

Teacher.

Expectations, focus, and willingness.

The majority of the respondents from Elementary A referenced various attributes of the “teacher” when describing the most important school-based factor perceived to influence student reading achievement. T3 and Superintendent B were the only respondents from Elementary B, however, who answered accordingly. These professionals perceive that successful achievement outcomes result from high teacher expectations and the ability of the teacher to control the happenings in the learning environment so they focus on student achievement. T1 stated, “… [It’s] research-based and proven that a highly effective teacher is going to make a difference.” T3 and T4 both
stressed that the teacher’s willingness to do what needs to be done to get students where they need to be is important to sustain high student achievement.

**Cultivating and establishing relationships.**

T2 indicated that academics are “very, very important”, but “before you can really touch a student educationally, you have to touch their hearts first…and let them know that you love them, care about them, and want them to succeed.” Principal B and T4 also perceive that a permeating ethic of care is the most important school-based factor relating to student achievement. Principal B stated, “…they [students] get support emotionally-from a hug or by having all their physical needs met.” Principal B also referenced the after-school tutoring program and how it cultivates a teacher-as-parent relationship. Many students fight with their parents about help with homework. Their tutoring program provides students with teachers who act in a supportive parent role by helping them (students) complete work and meet educational needs that otherwise might not be met.

**Difference in the Most Important School-based Factors Perceived to Impact Student Achievement**

**Empowerment.**

Principal B stressed that empowering students to believe in their abilities is the most influential school-based factor that influences achievement. Because so many students lack the family support that encouragement that supports educational pursuits, the inner “drive” and “gumption” to say, “I’m going to school. I’m gonna learn. I’m taking seriously what I’m doing. I wanna be better,” needs to be facilitated in the school setting.
Summary

This chapter presented the findings of a qualitative comparative case study that identified and described the school-based factors perceived to influence third-grade results on Ohio’s Reading Achievement Assessment. The study compared responses from one high-performing elementary and one low-performing elementary both located in high-poverty rural Western Appalachian Ohio. In particular, this case study compared factors relating to reading instruction, professional development, leadership, and both self- and collective efficacy. Eight interviews were conducted in this study consisting of teachers, principals, and superintendents, respectively. The findings were compared to determine the similarities and differences in the perceptions of the educational professionals interviewed at both schools. The interviews were transcribed and coded using the recommendations of Saldaña (2013).

Chapter five will present the interpretation of the findings, recommendations for action, and implications for future research will be discussed. Implications for change will be presented as well as researcher reflections about the study and the processing of its findings.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

This chapter begins with a summary of the research and a brief review of the contents discussed in chapters one through four. The intersections between the literature review and the findings are also explicated. The implications for the field, recommendations for the field, and recommendations for future research conclude the chapter.

Summary

This study adds to the research base behind the academic achievement results in rural high-poverty Appalachian areas and contributes findings that fill a gap in the literature that presently exists. Previous research neglects the analysis of rural high-poverty schools, denying educational professionals who work in these areas the research-based support that supports improved or sustained achievement outcomes. Semi-structured interviews consisting of teachers, principals, and superintendents were used to collect data until the data saturation was reached.

The purpose of the study was made explicit in chapter one. Presently, America’s schools are challenged to ensure that all students can read effectively by providing them with the foundation necessary to decode, read fluently, and comprehend grade level texts. Many students in the high-poverty rural Appalachian areas of Ohio, however, struggle to acquire the skills that enable them to attain reading achievement scores. The failure to attain successful reading achievement scores in the third-grade results in the retention of students under Ohio’s TGRG. Although many high-poverty elementary schools struggle to prepare students to meet this achievement standard, there are high-poverty elementary
schools that do successfully meet the mandate. The history of school reform, statement of
the problem, rationale for the study, purpose of the study, limitations, and definition of
terms were also presented in chapter one.

The literature base that underscores reading and successful reading achievement
was discussed in chapter two. The chapter began with a discussion of the challenges
faced by high-poverty rural schools and the theoretical frameworks that support positive
reading achievement outcomes. Theoretical frameworks included the following: deficit
theory, Elmore’s instructional core, cognitive evaluation theory, and facets of leadership
theory were explicated. The chapter then transitioned to a synopsis of the components
comprising effective core reading instruction. The chapter concluded with literary
foundation of school-based factors perceived to influence successful reading achievement
performance. These factors include the following: independent reading, the teacher, self-
efficacy, collective efficacy, leadership, professional development, and literacy coaching.

Chapter three highlighted the study’s methodology. The chapter began with an
explanation of the purpose of the study- to describe and identify school-based factors that
educational professionals in high-poverty rural Western Appalachian Ohio perceive
impact successful student achievement on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement
Assessment. The chapter then presented the research question and the research design.
The context of the study was shared, detailing the type of study and the site selection, and
sample description. Data collection was shared and the plan to analyze and explore the
data was noted. The researcher revealed pertinent ethical considerations and then
explored the role of the researcher as related to the study itself. Chapter three concluded
by establishing the transparency of the study conveyed by the detailed reflexivity of the researcher.

Chapter four explained the organization, analysis, and synthesis of the data. The similarities and differences among the educational professionals’ perceptions that emerged during the coding process were discussed. The data revealed similarities and differences between the educators’ perceptions of the school-based factors perceived to influence achievement at the high-performing school and the low-performing school. Similarities and differences were found to be relevant to reading achievement in the following areas: instruction of reading, meeting the instructional needs of special education students, climate (building), leadership, self-efficacy, and collective efficacy. Lastly, participants were asked their perception of the “single most important school-based factor perceived to influence reading achievement”. Data was summarized based upon the open-ended interview questions and they synthesized according to common themes and patterns. Findings from the data analysis are abridged below.

**Conclusions**

Intersections from the literature review and the findings from this study are detailed below. The findings respond to the research question, “What school-based factors do educational professionals in rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio perceive impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment?”
Teaching practices perceived to support academic achievement.

Elementary A uses the Response to Intervention (RTI) model that groups students according to deficits. The teacher then provides the level of instruction necessary to remediate these deficits. Once improved, the child is promoted to the next leveled reading group. This deficit-oriented approach is often associated with lower expectations and commonly found in high-poverty schools (Ford & Grantham (2003); Gonzalez (2005); Trueba (1988). Elementary B also uses the RTI model to approach reading instruction. Elementary B groups students with IEPs in one reading group, unless data suggests a student with an IEP is higher functioning and can be successful if moved to a higher reading group.

Prioritizing the teaching of literacy skills within an uninterrupted block of time ranging from 75-90 minutes emerged as a theme during data analysis. During the teaching of reading, teachers favored the use of guided reading groups that support low student-to-teacher ratios and permit the individualized targeting of weak reading skills. To teach reading, teachers and principals perceived that centers are an effective strategy that encourages the differentiation of instruction that ultimately impacts achievement performance. As the research suggests, (Chall, 1967; Noble, McCandliss, & Farah, 2007; Weber, 2013) phonics was consistently reported in both schools as an important foundational skill that influences grade-level reading. Both first grade teachers and building principals reported exposing students to a variety of phonics approaches believed to impact reading achievement (Diuk & Ferroni, 2011; Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009).
The tracking, reviewing, collaborating, and implementation of instructional changes associated with the review of student reading data emerged as a necessary practice to support student readiness. Vertical alignment of the reading curriculum emerged as another theme perceived to impact reading achievement performance, although the practice did not infiltrate the culture to the degree of other practices. Collaboration emerged as another theme pertinent to the successful preparation of students for state testing, especially during the weekly TBT process within each building. Respondents also agreed that instructional tools and programs that mirror skills on Ohio’s Reading Achievement Assessment are beneficial to the data collection process that enables them to best prepare students for the third grade reading achievement assessment.

**Professional development.**

Research (Marzano, 2003; Yoon et al., 2007; NRTAC, 2010) indicates that professional development is most effective when teachers collaborate as a unit. In accordance with the research, all teachers and principals viewed professional development as valuable to student achievement outcomes if spending time collaborating with colleagues about students, instructional methods, data, curriculum, and changes leading to improved student performance outcomes.

**Leadership**

*High expectations.*

Elmore (2003, 2004) suggests that high-performing high-poverty schools with high achievement have leaders who articulate clear expectations for student learning and convey a sense of urgency surrounding improvement. Respondents from Elementary A
reported mixed perceptions on the presence of high expectations. The desire to have high expectations and the intent to establish high expectations was reported by all respondents, but frustration with outside factors, specifically home-based factors, appeared to impact the staff’s ability to perceive high expectations as an internalized norm. High-poverty schools with low achievement (Elmore, 2010) often attribute student learning challenges to the home-based factors. The consequence of this mindset is the reduced likelihood of challenging deficits in teaching practices that inhibit student learning (Elmore, 2003; 2010). All participants from Elementary B, however, reported the cultural understanding of high expectations and specifically related these high expectations to the special education population.

**Accountability.**

Respondents from Elementary A perceive that feelings of accountability need to increase. No employee referenced job loss or any other punitive measure in relation to low student achievement performance. Superintendent A referenced that he himself is taking measures to increase his own accountability with his board of education, but historically, a permeation of accountability has not been felt from the board of education level down to the building level. Superintendent A did hold a district staff meeting recently where he cited Hattie (2003), emphasizing that he (Superintendent A) needs 90% of the staff on board with accountability for student learning, and the other 10% will need employment elsewhere. Superintendent A expressed the intent to lead positive change and increase the accountability felt in the district, but given that 2015-2016 has been his first full year as superintendent, such change will take time. All participants from
Elementary B consistently referred to being held accountable for the high achievement of students. Within the culture, employees expect to lose their jobs or be reassigned to a different position or building if classroom achievement appears to consistently decline.

**Instructional leadership.**

Principal A is not viewed as the instructional leader of Elementary A. Superintendent A assumes the role and shares it with the school’s literacy coach. Research indicates (Eberts & Stone, 1988; Brewer, 1993, Waters, Marzano, & McNaulcy, 2003) that the two primary factors of leadership that influence successful student outcomes are when building principals serve as the instructional leader and have the capacity within the system to resolve conflicts. Superintendent B from District B personally acknowledges his lack of direct involvement with curriculum, but this lack of involvement has not hindered reading achievement in the district. In contrast, Superintendent A’s active involvement with the curriculum has not revealed a positive impact on achievement results. It should be noted, however, that Superintendent A is just finishing his first full year as superintendent. As the research suggests (Eberts & Stone, 1988; Brewer, 1999; Waters, Marzano, & McNaulcy, 2003), the principal as the instructional leader yields the highest capacity to positively impact performance outcomes.

**Climate.**

CET emphasizes the relationship between classroom climate and academic achievement. Research findings (Valeski & Stipek, 2001) suggest that students’ positive perceptions of the learning environment is associated with higher scores in English.
Given the importance and value of relationships to the Appalachian culture (Ball, 1969; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Hann-Morrison, 2011; Pusateri, 2013), the impact of the teacher/student relationship may be a primary factor that ultimately impacts student achievement. Both schools reported a strong ethic of care surrounding the concern for students. A high priority in both schools was addressing the basic needs of students (food, clothing, school supplies, emotional support) that research reveals often go unmet in a high-poverty culture (Elmore, 2004; Hamm & Reeve, 2002; Hattie, 2003).

The staff from Elementary A appears to be struggling with the feeling of hope. At this point, the staff appears to struggle with feeling hopeful themselves and this may be influencing the achievement performance of their students. A school that fosters hope is an essential component of a successful learning environment that supports sustained academic achievement (Cleveland, Powell, Sadler, & Tyler, 2009; Lopez, 2012). Superintendent A, however, spoke in great detail about his intent to create a culture of hope for students that trickles from the principal, to the teachers, to the home. His desire is for the students at his school to feel confident and capable to pursue their dreams and feel academically prepared to compete against students from wealthier areas if and when the situation arises. The teachers and principal from Elementary B convey a purposeful effort to foster hope and high expectations for self. A school culture that fosters hope is often characterized by successful student achievement (Cleveland, Chambers, Maninus, Powell, Skepple, Tyler & Wood, 2011) McDermott and Snyder (2000) have found hope to be a predictor of achievement in elementary school.
Although meeting the needs of students was reported as a positive part of the building climate, Elementary A and Elementary B varied when reporting perceptions of building climate that related to the needs of adults. Overall, Elementary A reported dissatisfaction with building climate and cited frustration with lack of student achievement, perceived lack of follow-through with the implementation of professional development material, perceived lack of follow-through with student data analysis, and lack of fidelity with instruction as reasons why. The teachers noted disharmony among the staff and a noticeable divide between the lower elementary grades and the upper grade levels. These feelings of frustration and the apparent division of staff impact the overall climate of Elementary A.

In contrast, the respondents from Elementary B praised their building’s climate. Both teachers and the superintendent from Elementary B praised the principal and spoke highly of her influence on the building’s climate. The principal readily praises her staff to within the building, to the superintendent, and publicly in other forums. As the research suggests, the positive perceptions of climate contribute to the high levels of achievement at Building B.

**Trust.**

The research indicates that effective leaders encourage levels of professional trust that fosters mutual respect, teamwork, and shared leadership (Fullan, 1996; Fullan & Knight, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Yukl, 2002). Only respondents from Elementary B mentioned trust and its value to the district culture. Trust is part of the climate in Elementary B and
is present between levels of administration, administration and teachers, and between teachers themselves. The principal, specifically, trusts the capacity of the superintendent to make decisions as needed for the district. The principal trusts that teachers are instructing with fidelity, and the teachers vocalize the faith that the principal has in their skills. This capacity building impacts the achievement at Elementary B.

*Learning community.*

A staff needs to feel part of a successful learning community being led by a vision that is realistic and attainable. Effective leaders rally the staff, and the leader conveys a deep commitment to nurture the growth of the whole student (Senge, 1990). Although both schools have a vision familiar to the participants at their respective buildings, only the vision at Elementary B appears to directly impact the reading achievement of its students. All participants emphasized the importance of successful achievement results to the building and to the district.

Both Principal A and Principal B ascribe to parts of Senge’s systems thinking (1990). Both principals encourage *personal mastery*. The principals encourage staff members to learn from each other and to share instructional strategies that work and those that yield less than desirable results. Principal A and Principal B both support *team learning*. Both principals are involved in the TBT and BLT process and support a collaborative work culture that encourages open discussion pertaining to student achievement, reflective classroom practices, and risk taking. Principal B emphasizes the examination of *mental models* and creates leaders within the staff. The staff carries out their vision with fidelity and feels trusted by Principal B. The *vision* at Elementary B,
successful reading achievement, is understood as a cultural norm and relayed by all participants. The vision appears realistic and attainable to this staff. The level of commitment expressed by the staff to attain the vision is paramount. Although Elementary A has an officially adopted vision, the staff does not have buy-in and the building struggles to work toward a common vision due to climate issues and frustrations with home-based factors.

**Transformational leadership.**

Principal A displays some qualities of a transformational leader. She is considerate of her followers and knows her staff and community well. She strives to mentor her teachers (Hoy & Miskel, 2013) and direct them in meaningful ways that positively impact student performance.

Principal B is a transformational leader. Studies indicate (Fullan, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1992; Yukl, 2002) that transformational leadership is present in high-performing schools. Principal B empowers her educational community to make decisions through shared decision making, works to devise creative strategies that enable staff to move forward, allocates the resources necessary to support high achievement, and responds to internal and external challenges that threaten the precedent of academic achievement.

**Self-efficacy.**

The respondents from Elementary A possess low levels of self-efficacy, and as researchers (Bandura & Adams, 1977; Tollefson, 2000) have found, achievement results align. Low levels of self-efficacy inhibit the ability of staff members to find creative
solutions to persisting issues within the school setting that negatively impact student achievement performance.

The respondents from Elementary B are highly efficacious professionals. As the research suggests (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Tollefson, 2008; Wastson, 1991) the confidence they have in their abilities to prepare students for Ohio’s Reading Achievement Assessment impacts student expectations and performance. The teachers and the principal expressed confidence in the practice of differentiation to meet the needs of struggling students and special education students. Hoy and Miskel (2013) emphasize that staff members who report such high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to maintain an optimistic and problem solving approach resulting in higher achievement, even when confronted by behavioral challenges and other obstacles that arise.

**Collective efficacy.**

It takes efficacious individuals working collaboratively to create a climate characterized by high collective efficacy. A fundamental part of collective efficacy is the spirit of collaboration involving the effectiveness of core practices, shared decision making, degree of effort toward reaching established objectives, and endurance when objectives fail. Elementary A reported low levels of collective efficacy. Given their reported concerns with the lack of follow-through pertaining to data analysis, concerns with the fidelity of instruction, struggle with accountability, and low levels of self-efficacy, the struggle with collective efficacy aligns with the research (Bandura, 1977; Goddard, Hoy, W., & Hoy, A., 2004; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1994) that suggests strong collective efficacy is dependent on the culminating processes of not only collaborating,
but relating and functioning in ways that support achievement. All respondents from Elementary A reported regular collaboration about student performance and data, but collaboration in isolation is not enough to improve student achievement. The staff from Elementary A does not currently possess the endurance necessary to work through failed initiatives. Presently, the outside factors associated with the culture of poverty and the historical presence of low achievement results are challenges impacting their ability to improve.

High levels of collective efficacy positively impact achievement at Elementary B. Professionals at this school collaborate regularly, but they exhibit the capacity to problem solve and develop courses of action that further the organization’s goals. The participants exhibit high levels of endurance when confronted with conflicts (student behaviors, outside factors pertaining to a high-poverty culture, etc.). As Goddard et al., (2004) found, the staff at Elementary B believes that all students can achieve; consequently, the staff is more diligent in working toward the expectation.

**Outliers**

**Approach to improving reading.**

Elementary A supports full inclusion of their special education students for 90 minutes of instructional core reading. Despite these efforts, Elementary A continues to struggle with their third grade achievement results. In contrast, Elementary B does not utilize full inclusion for reading. Elementary B has the vast majority of special education students divided into groups among themselves and taught by a single reading teacher. Participants from Elementary B strongly perceive that ability grouping according to
students’ performance levels positively contributes to their standardized testing performance. Despite the research (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Gonzalez, 2005; Trueba, 1988) indicating that such deficit approaches lower the expectations of students, student achievement data suggests that third graders from Elementary B perform at superior rates beyond their rural high-poverty counterparts.

**Climate.**

Although Superintendent A was viewed as more visible, more personable, and more directly involved with the staff and students than Superintendent B, this appeared to be a non-factor when considering student achievement. Despite the perception that Superintendent B views himself as possibly “not well-liked” by many people, this perception of the district leader appears to have had little, if any impact, on the overall climate that supports Elementary B’s strong achievement performance.

**Professional development.**

Neither the high-performing school nor the low-performing school credited district professional development as a primary factor that influences reading achievement. District designed professional development was viewed as a weakness by nearly all respondents in the high-performing school and was reported as slightly more favorable in the low-performing school. The high-performing school revealed an average of three professional development days/year and these days are primarily used to fulfill state mandated requirements. Despite the relationship between professional development and student growth measures (Arnold et al., 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998; Marzano,
2003), the high-performing school reports high achievement despite reporting overwhelming weakness in their district professional development opportunities.

**Literacy coaching.**

Research supports the role of a literacy coach who provides teachers with professional development, training, and modeling that can ultimately impact student achievement (Dole & Donaldson, 2006; Hattie, 2003; NRTAC, 2010). Contrary to these findings, the low-performing school utilizes the services of a literacy coach, and the high-performing school does not utilize this role. Superintendent B of the high-performing school expressed complete disregard for the position and stated that such a position would absolve the principal of her responsibility and reduce her level of accountability. This finding suggests that when high levels of accountability are stressed within a building and the teachers and principal exhibit a strong locus of control, the purpose for a literacy coach may not be as strong.

**Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this qualitative comparative case study offer particular insight into the perceptions that educational professionals in two rural high-poverty Western Appalachian Ohio schools have of the school-based factors perceived to impact achievement on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment. Pertinent ideas for future research related to reading achievement in high-poverty rural areas emerged throughout the study. The feedback from the participants, questions that resulted from the interviews and the meditation of the researcher generated thoughts for future research.
The field would benefit from additional research into the perceptions perceived to be characteristic of high-performing high-poverty schools. The replication of this comparative case study with educational professionals serving a high-poverty urban population would add meaningful insight into the perceptions that educational professionals have of the school-based factors perceived to impact successful reading achievement performance. A study emphasizing the perceptions of teachers, principals, and superintendents serving urban students could underscore the similarities and differences in educator perception relative to the rural and urban settings.

The field could also benefit from a longitudinal study of rural educators’ perceptions of the school-based factors perceived to influence standardized testing performance. The present study was not a longitudinal study; consequently, results should be interpreted with caution. A longitudinal study, however, affords the researcher the opportunity to track a particular class. Tracking a class of students throughout several grades would provide thick, rich, descriptive data from the initial implementation of reading instruction until the culminating achievement assessment in third grade. Such a study would incorporate the perceptions of several grade level teachers and possibly more than one principal.

A qualitative research study surrounding educator perceptions and achievement that involves the triangulation of data collection would benefit the field. This particular comparative case study consisted of eight interviews. A comparative case study consisting of interviews, observations, and document analysis would provide additional
insight into the similarities and differences perceived in high-performing and low-performing schools.

Significant information could be acquired from research involving the perceptions that community members and/or parents have of the school-based factors perceived to impact successful student performance outcomes on the state’s assessment. Such research could incite changes in community participation (parent groups, volunteerism in the elementary, increase in positive rapport, etc.) within the school that could be perceived to positively impact student achievement.

More research could be conducted to further clarify the superintendent’s role and its relationship to student achievement. Such research could incite districts to modify their hiring practices. Modified hiring practices based upon the results of such studies could impact achievement in some low-achieving districts.

Further research should be conducted to determine if low-performing schools in Appalachia would benefit from implementing selected practices found in high-performing schools. Further research could also be conducted comparing the perceptions of educators found in schools which meet the state’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and those which consistently struggle to meet these standards.

In 2014-2015 Ohio began to implement an on-line testing system as compared to paper/pencil. Since the on-line testing system is new, the opportunity for further exploration of school-based factors perceived to impact achievement testing performance exists. Further research could explore perceptions of school-based factors perceived to
influence on-line testing performance. These perceptions could further be compared to perceptions associated with paper/pencil achievement performance outcomes.

Assumptions and Limitations

One of the most significant assumptions of this study was the importance given to students’ performance on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment when classifying a school as either high-performing or low-performing. Although Ohio’s TGRG is used to evaluate school performance and schools receive grades based upon the success of third graders who pass their achievement assessment, the performance on this assessment only offers a snapshot of the perceptions that educational professionals have pertaining to their school. The classification of these two schools as high-performing and low-performing pertains only to the perceptions associated with this one particular assessment.

Although the TGRG is only one of many accountability standards in Ohio, the emphasis on this particular standard cannot be minimized. Only third grade has the retention of students tied to achievement performance. It can be assumed that buildings bearing the responsibility of this particular statistic are under intense scrutiny, especially given the public’s access to school report card data.

Some limitations of the study are specifically related to the assumptions presented here. This study only examined the perceptions of educators as related to third grade reading achievement results. The results of the study could have varied dramatically had the perceptions of educators been revealed about a different grade level achievement test or a completely different issue other than achievement testing. Another limitation of the
study concerns the addition of on-line testing. This new testing venue that schools have recently added to third graders and staff may have influenced the perceptions of educators in some way.

Final Thoughts

Accountability for student achievement was an educational expectation that gained emphasis in the 1990’s and continues to maintain its stronghold in the education system today. Educational professionals generally express the desire to meet the standards of accountability, but some professionals working in high-poverty areas and their districts appear to consistently struggle to attain successful achievement results despite continuous improvement efforts and assistance from state support teams. The participants from one elementary school in this study, however, clearly revealed that rural high-poverty schools in the Appalachian region are capable of consistently meeting and exceeding Ohio’s third grade reading achievement standard. If staff members from rural high-poverty Appalachian schools engage in honest reflection and open communication within their districts, joint efforts between administration and staff can support and improve student reading achievement outcomes.
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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

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):

7

Project Title: A Study of Educational Professionals’ Perceptions of School-Based Factors that Influence Successful Student Outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment

Primary Investigator: Cherie Jennings Crabtree
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Krisanna Machtimes

Department: Educational Leadership

Rebecca Cale
Office of Research Compliance Staff
Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Shelly Rex, BS
Robin Stack, CIP

Approval Date: 01/31/16
Expiration Date: 01/30/17

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: Informed Consent Form

Title of Research: School-based Factors Perceived to Impact Successful Student Outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment

Researcher: Cherie Jennings Crabtree

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 the study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study is being done because few studies have examined the perceptions that rural educators have of the school-based factors perceived to impact successful student outcomes on Ohio’s third grade reading achievement assessment.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer a series of interview questions.

You should not participate in this study if you feel discomfort with being audiotaped or feel discomfort with honestly expressing your opinions and thoughts.

Risks and Discomforts

Although confidentiality will be maintained, given the size of the school district and the sample size, you may experience anxiety when answering questions.

Benefits

This study is important to society because educational professionals may become more familiar with school-based factors perceived to impact successful student achievement. Schools may consider these results to guide possible change within a school.

Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential on the researcher’s password protected computer.

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

**Compensation**

You will receive no compensation for your time and efforts.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the investigator Cherie Jennings Crabtree, jteach8phs2003@yahoo.com; 740-708-1870.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, 7440-593-0664 or hayhow@ohio.edu.

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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

* 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: ___________________________
Appendix C: Interview Questions

Background Questions:
1. How many years of teaching and/or administrative experience do you have?
2. How many years of teaching and/or administrative experience have you had at the K-3 level?
3. How long have you held your current position?
4. What degrees and/or licenses do you currently hold?

Interview Questions

Teaching Practice
1. Describe the instructional practices used to prepare your students for Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

2. Describe the specific programs (monitoring programs/interventions) utilized to influence successful reading achievement results (75% passage or higher) on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

3. Describe your perception of how special education students receive the instruction necessary to achieve 75% passage or higher on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

Professional Development
4. Describe the professional development that has enabled you to prepare students for Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

5. Describe the changes in professional development that would allow teachers to further support and/or improve the percentage of students who could successfully achieve 75% or higher on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

6. Describe your perception of the staff’s attitude toward the building’s/district’s professional development.

Leadership
7. How does the administrative leadership influence the instruction that enables students to achieve 75% or higher on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment?
8. Explain your perception of your building’s climate and how you perceive it relates to the performance of the third graders on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

9. Explain your understanding of your principal’s vision for the building as it relates to performance outcomes on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

10. Discuss your building’s mission/vision and how it/they relate to student reading achievement.

**Efficacy**

11. Discuss the perception you have of your personal ability to influence successful performance (75% passage or higher) on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

12. Explain whether you perceive your staff collectively believes in their group’s ability to attain successful results (75% passage or higher) on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.

13. Explain the single most important school-based factor you perceive impacts your students’ ability to successfully score 75% or higher on Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Achievement Assessment.
Appendix D: Map of Ohio’s Appalachian Country

http://www.appalachianohio.com/maps.php
Appendix E: Map of Western Region of Appalachian Ohio
## Appendix F: Qualitative Data Codes

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Appendix G: School-based Factors within the Classroom- Coding Diagram

School-based Factors within the Classroom

- Achievement of Special Education Students
  - Professional Development
  - Communication
- Indirect Influences
- Direct Instruction
  - Centers
  - Phonics
  - Instructional Tools
- Reading Instruction
- Accountability
- Self-efficacy of Teacher
  - Impacts Climate Conducive to Student Success
  - Impacts Student Growth
  - Testing Preparation
Appendix H: School-based Factors outside the Classroom - Coding Diagram
Appendix I: Coding Flow Chart

First Cycle Coding

- Cold Read
- Initial Coding
- In Vivo Coding
- Provisional or A Priori Codes
  - Reading Instruction (RI)
  - Professional Development (PD)
  - Leadership (L)
  - Efficacy (E)
    - Self-efficacy (SE)
    - Collective Efficacy (CE)

Transition

- Code Landscaping (Organize Codes Subcodes)
- Provisional or A Priori Codes
- Theoretical Headings
- Major Category Codes Subcodes

Second Cycle Coding

- Focused Coding
  - Defined Relationships Between Codes & Subcodes to Complete the Hierarchy
  - Categorized & Grouped Data Based on Conceptual Similarities
  - Groups Analyzed to Develop Themes
    - Began Writing Chapter 4 Using Themes from Focused Coding

- Axial Coding
  - Refined Categories & Subcategories of Similarities
  - Refined Categories & Subcategories of Differences
  - Used Each Category’s Properties to Explore Relationships
    - Began Writing Chapter 4 Using Findings from Axial Coding