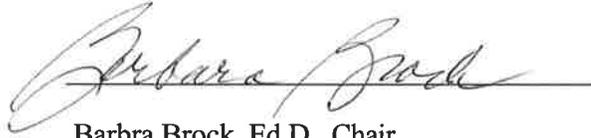


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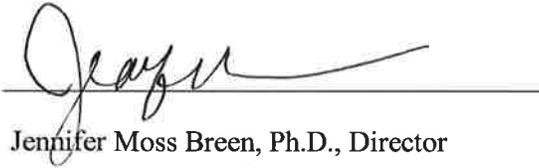
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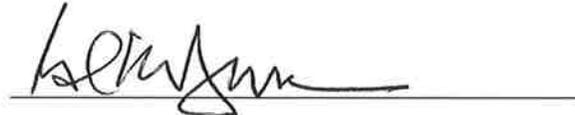
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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FROM  
ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

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By  
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in  
Interdisciplinary Leadership

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## Abstract

A phenomenological study was conducted to explore the collaborative leadership experiences of assistant principals in large public high schools. Five themes emerged to help further the understanding of collaborative processes that support teachers in preparing students for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Within the context of student learning outcomes examples, assistant principals worked collaboratively with others. The learning outcomes included more writing across the subjects, increased student participation in work-experiences, an increase in college-going experiences, improved critical thinking in math courses, more access to online/blended courses, English learner techniques in better managed classrooms, and more rigorous life science courses for low achieving and students with learning disabilities. From these examples, aspiring and practicing school administrators might have a clearer description of decentralized decision-making in a school culture of collaborative leadership. Assistant principals can be viewed as model collaborative leaders that have a voice in reforms preparing students for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. The researcher provided recommendations for school administrators interested in leadership practices that are not top-down adding to existing school leadership studies on collaborative and distributed leadership.

*Keywords:* Collaborative leadership, high schools, assistant principals, student learning outcomes, administrative teams, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills

## Dedication

For assistant principals and other school leaders who courageously attempt to lead public schools into the 21<sup>st</sup> century through open and trusted collaborations with others who genuinely care to impact authentic student learning.

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank my husband, committee members, Creighton faculty, and cohort members who supported me in this endeavor to advance public education through candid conversations. My husband, from a rural, community college education did not understand this path, yet resiliently sat by in my long and quiet journey of learning through research that I have come to value. I want to thank past and present Creighton faculty and educational leaders who listened, taught and advanced the Jesuit charism mission. If it were not for the Jesuit beliefs, community of saints prayed to and faith guiding me, I would not have begun or finished this project.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

**Introduction**

As school leaders, principals and assistant principals are expected to support teachers in preparing high school students for 21<sup>st</sup> century living demonstrated through learning assessments (Daggett, 2010; Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, & Pittenger, 2014; Hannay & Earl, 2012; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006). Little agreement exists on how to assess student learning even though educational policies since *A Nation at Risk* (1983) have compelled schools to improve student learning by raising standardized test scores (Cohen, Moffitt, & Goldin, 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; Ravitch, 2016; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006). Student learning outcomes are used in a variety of ways, including as evidence of student preparedness for college or careers (Rice, 2011). Whether a school community is seeking to raise test scores, improve school culture, or shape student learning for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, a question remains as to which leadership practices best serve high schools supporting teachers in student learning. Many suggest decentralized processes found in distributive leadership as a model for school leaders to follow (Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2013; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Hulpia, Devos, Rosseel, & Vlerick, 2012; Klar, 2012; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008).

Collaboration, found in distributed school leadership practices, has been touted as a process that school leaders should utilize to support teachers in preparing students for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning outcomes (Bierly, Doyle, & Smith, 2016; DeWitt, 2017; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Hulpia et al., 2012; Lawson, 2004; Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Assistant principals are part of

an administrative team that share responsibilities with the principal and other stakeholders to facilitate student learning at large public high schools (Colwell, 2015; Devos et al., 2013; Militello, Fusarelli, Mattingly, & Warren, 2015). Mindful of the previous research in this area, the objective of this phenomenological study was to gain insight into assistant principals' perceptions of collaborative leadership and explore how this leadership practice relates to supporting teachers in preparing high school students for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

### **Statement of the Problem**

School leaders are being called to focus on organizational reforms that will help increase student test scores (Cohen et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; DeBoer, 2012; Ravitch, 2016). This focus on reform to improve student test scores distracts school leaders from leadership practices that support teachers in addressing student learning outcomes. Too much focus on organizational structure reform initiatives has left gaps in understanding examples of leadership practices already being used that prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Collaborative leadership incorporates organizational processes within school organizations (DeWitt, 2017). Assistant principals are part of the collaborative leadership team that supports teachers on instructional strategies (Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Kantor, 2015; Militello et al., 2015; Moolenaar, Daly & Slegers, 2010). The details of how assistant principals in large public high schools experience collaborative leadership and how their perceptions and actions relate to improved student learning outcomes remain unknown. In the absence of such knowledge, the opportunity for assistant principals to use and promote collaborative efforts influencing student learning outcomes will remain

minimal. This study provides evidence from the experience of collaborative leadership from the assistant principal perspective as a legitimate design worth exploring to support teachers who prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Colwell, 2015; Devos, et al., 2013; Dewitt, 2017; Gruenert, 2005; Lawson, 2004; Leonard & Leonard, 1999).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of collaborative leadership from the perspective of assistant principals in large public high schools and explore how it relates to student learning outcomes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were created to explore insights into understanding collaborative leadership as it relates to supporting teachers in attaining learning outcomes from the assistant principals' perspective in large public high schools.

Research question (1): What is the assistant principals' experience of collaborative leadership on a high school leadership team?

Research question (2): How does the assistant principals' practice of collaborative leadership relate to supporting teachers in attaining student learning outcomes?

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study was to generate results to develop recommendations that provided a deeper understanding of collaborative leadership from the perspectives of assistant principals at public high schools relative to student learning outcomes. The recommendations that were developed from the results of this study can be shared with aspiring and practicing school administrators to demonstrate how collaborative leadership is used to support teachers as they prepare youth for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and living.

### **Methodology**

A phenomenological research approach was used in this study to guide collection and analyses of data. Data collection was completed by interviewing participants about their experiences in the common setting of large public high schools. Assistant principals in large public schools were the participants in this study because they have similar professional duties in leading others due to their position in middle management under one principal. A phenomenological approach was chosen because it best aligned with the researcher's intent to obtain a deeper understanding of collaborative leadership from the assistant principals' experience to support teachers in attaining student learning outcomes for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Seidman, 2013). A notable strength of phenomenological research is that perceptions and personal examples, as the lived experience of the participants, provide evidence about how collaborative leadership works in large public high schools (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013).

This phenomenological study consisted of first gaining IRB and organizational approvals from multiple school districts. After approvals were granted (see Appendix A) the researcher recruited participants from large public high schools in the southwestern United States. Seven assistant principals were interviewed on their experiences of collaborative leadership and how those experiences related to achieving student learning outcomes. The researcher conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews using an interview guide designed to help gather data on the two research questions (see Appendix B). The analysis procedures used were Creswell's (2013) textual open coding and Van Manen's (2017) reflective approach of examples drawn from the open coded themes presented.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

The following terms will be used throughout the study:

*21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills:* The essential skills for success in today's world, such as critical thinking, creative problem solving, communication and collaboration (P21, 2016).

*Assistant principals:* An educational administrator who is licensed by the state to assist the principal in large schools as an instructional leader and in implementing school policies and goals (Colwell, 2015).

*Collaborative leadership:* A process where interdependent stakeholders take time to build trusted relationships and share decision-making power based on their unique competencies that mobilize resources to solve problems, meet common goals, and capitalize on creative opportunities (Archer, 2013; Bronstein, 2003; Lawson, 2004).

*Department chair:* This is the title given to the lead teacher in a subject area of instruction in high school, also referred to as department coordinator, department head or being part of the leadership team.

*Formal school leaders:* For this study, any school administrators, assistant principals, or principals trained in a professional program whose duties include instructional leadership, hiring and evaluation of school personnel, budget management and other school responsibilities, requiring a bachelor's degree, certified program, or above leading to licensure or credential (California Department of Education, 2014; Colwell, 2015).

*School culture:* The assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the school norms that guide the work of the educators within it (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, &

Mary, 2006).

*Student learning outcomes:* The measurable goals for learning established by an educator or policy upon which the school curriculum is based. Goals can be defined as knowledge, skills, abilities and values that students will need to be successful in their futures that are evaluated by teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases**

Given the design and size of the study, delimitations included demographics, participant sampling and types of school used to study collaborative leadership practices. The study covered two counties in a state in the southwestern United States, so it cannot be inferred that the descriptive elements reported would transfer to assistant principals in other parts of the United States or globally. A narrowly focused group of assistant principals were selected for this study; those with three or more years of experience and who worked in public high schools with 1900 or more students. The collaborative leadership experiences may not carry over into smaller high schools, in private or independent high schools or special charter schools. However, three participants did reveal that they had additionally worked in previous high schools, which may or may have not met the 1,900 - student count requirement. The size of previous high schools that may have fallen into another size and descriptive category was not explored or reported.

Limitations included transferability of results to other types of school leaders. It would be difficult to ascertain if collaborative experiences would be similar with principals, central office administrators or other types of school leaders. Participants were composed of males and females and had backgrounds in several subject areas within a

high school learning environment. The phenomenological study reported experiences representative of these seven participants only. It cannot be concluded that assistant principals in smaller schools, rural areas or in private or charter schools in other parts of the United States will have the same experiences.

The researcher had past experiences as an assistant principal and worked to lessen personal biases throughout data collection and analysis. The researcher informed the participants she had worked in public high schools to build rapport and to allow the interviewees to report their experiences in a trusted, open, and equitable setting (Seidman, 2013; Englander, 2012). To ensure that the researcher captured the lived experience and unique examples free from her own bias, the researcher bracketed out her own opinions, thoughts, and preconceived ideas on the topic through journal memo-writing and discussions with her committee.

### **The Role of Leadership in this Study**

The results of this study were used to generate a set of recommendations to better understand collaborative leadership from the perspectives of assistant principals as part of an administrative team. It may be important to focus on assistant principals as collaborative leaders that can contribute to helping understand distributed leadership in schools for several reasons. First, by finding descriptive themes in collaborative leadership related to student learning outcomes, the position of assistant principal as middle manager can be acknowledged and valued as a legitimate formal leadership position. Second, the set of recommendations can be shared with aspiring and practicing school administrators who might benefit from wanting to understand what collaboration means in school leadership positions. Finally, the recommendations developed based on

the results of this study could contribute to the collective understanding of leadership practices already in place in large public high schools. Staff and students would benefit from the role modeling of formal school leaders who collaborate in an organization that is designed to prepare youth for life-long learning and living (Hannay & Earl, 2012).

### **Significance of the Study**

Colwell (2015) stated that the assistant principal is a key administrator who leads collaboratively in schools. It requires a team of school leaders to attend to all the goals necessary for a large school community to be successful (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Hulpia et al., 2012; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). Assistant principals as a part of the team may be able to demonstrate leadership practices that tie student learning outcomes to areas of their expertise such as test scores in subject areas, technological capabilities, or other factors like critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration needed for the workforce. Few educational studies exist on the collaborative nature or team dynamics that assistant principals utilize to influence learning strategies within high schools elevating the positive impact their work can have on school organizations (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Militello et al., 2015). In the absence of this knowledge, assistant principals as viable, skilled, school leaders might continue to be overlooked as legitimate capable drivers of essential reform to prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experience of collaborative leadership from the perspective of assistant principals in large public high schools and explore how it relates to student learning outcomes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A

phenomenological approach was used to guide data collection and analysis of the experiences of seven assistant principals. Phenomenology was selected because it best aligned with capturing the experiences and authentic examples collected through interviewing to help describe the processes and structures in collaborative leadership that are already being practiced. The results of this study were used to create a set of recommendations for formal school leaders and aspiring school leaders to better understand the dimensions of collaborative leadership and to gain knowledge for future research aimed at looking deeper at the variables of collaboration and its relationship to student learning outcomes. Chapter 2 will explain some of the tensions in organizational and leadership theories related to K-12 policy, management, collaboration, and the structure of large public high schools. It will also explain a little about the assistant principals that works in these structures.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

School leadership theories, conceptual models, and research have infiltrated school administration studies to try to identify best practices for improving student learning outcomes in public schools. The following literature review includes organizational theory applied to educational policy, school leadership theories impacting student learning outcomes, and assistant principals as leaders in public high schools. Interdisciplinary perspectives are included from governance, education, health services and business to understand leadership in the organizational structure of public high school systems. Misalignments and gaps in understanding some tenets of school leadership still lie in best practices that appropriately prepare high school students for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and living (Crowson, 2011; Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, & Hough, 2017; Spillane et al., 2004). Transformational leadership theory, leader-member exchange, distributive leadership, and communities of practice research will be discussed as a background to understand why a study on collaborative leadership from the assistant principal perspective might help school administrators support teachers in preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Student Learning Outcomes for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

“Student learning outcomes” is a broad phrase incorporating several concepts on the end result of learning. Assessments, one path that measures student learning have gained increased attention with reform efforts since *A Nation at Risk* (1983). A review of literature on student achievement scores has revealed that other factors within a school organization are associated with student improvement. This section will explain

leadership influences on student achievement, assessments, and other student learning outcomes. While K-12 educational policy emphasizes raising student achievement scores, it is worth paying attention to higher education and business leaders' claims that students leave high school ill-prepared for college and careers (Daggett, 2010; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2014; Fullan & Quin, 2016; Ravitch, 2016).

Traditional understanding of student learning outcomes in high schools refers to standardized achievement scores in the subjects of English, mathematics, science and social science. This data can be found on school report cards and in state education data systems since reform efforts began (Cohen et al., 2007). The reported student achievements scores have given reason to pause and rethink efforts known as assessments and accountability. The Education Trust (2016), for example, discovered that nationwide averages revealed no significant gains in math and English in high school in the past 40 years. Smaller studies found that higher achievement scores in math and English occurred in schools where principals focused on building innovative, collaborative, and caring school cultures (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Klar, 2012; Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016; Moolenaar et al., 2010). This lends itself to the idea that measurement of learning by student achievement scores alone is not a sufficient indicator of student success (Darling-Hammond 2007; Day et al., 2016; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010).

**School climate and school culture research.** Studies have shown that school climate and school culture are associated with organizational environments positively impacting student learning outcomes (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Gruenert, 2005; Klar, 2012; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The link between student achievement to school climate and

culture includes forms of participative-decisions making is found in collaboration (Gruenert, 2005; Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Townsend, Acker-Hocevar, Ballenger, & Place, 2013). Studies on collaborative cultures had a mediating effect on student learning outcomes (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). A collaborative school culture for one organization meant developing structures over time where a team of administrators created opportunities for collective responsibilities with teachers focusing on student needs (Klar 2012). Positive school climate refers to relationships among formal school leaders and teachers that foster innovation and new teaching strategies (Moolenaar et al., 2010). Several educational leaders have thus called on educators to collaborate towards reform efforts for improved student learning outcomes in K-12 literature (Colwell, 2015; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; DeWitt, 2017; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; International Center for Leadership Education, [ICLE], 2012; Kuhn, 2015). Collaborative efforts in schools need further investigation to develop a clearer understanding of what collaboration means and what the collaborators deem as vital for student learning.

**The 4 C's.** The need for new ideas on measurement of student learning outcomes have been raised since there is no consensus on how to best appraise student learning (AVID Summer Institute, 2016; Cohen et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; Kuhn, 2015; Michlitsen & Wright Sidle, 2002; Mouza, 2008; P21, 2016; Townsend et al., 2013). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, students have immediate access to information through the Internet which has created a need to determine measurement of learning in a new way (Mouza, 2008). Assessments need to look beyond memorizing or the access of detailed information. There is a continued need to create learning to close the gap between information and skills learned in school and the skills needed to succeed in a 21<sup>st</sup> century

workplace (P21, 2016). Business leaders and educators acknowledged collectively that students need other competencies to succeed. These have been known as the “4 C’s”; communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (AVID Summer Institute, 2016; P21, 2016; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). Questions remain on exactly how school leaders should work with teachers to assess students’ abilities to think critically, communicate effectively, problem-solve creatively, and to collaborate in the classroom.

### **Organizational Theory Applied to Education**

The need to understand the effect organizational leadership structure in education has on student learning outcomes is paramount. Aspects of the industrial age, bureaucratic model, and postmodern thought still exist in education today, where complexity leadership theory and contingency theory might have more relevance to explain the structures and processes impacting public high schools (Hatch, 2013; Lindsey, et al., 1999; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). There is ongoing debate within many disciplines about what type of leadership and decision-making structure, centralized or decentralized, leads to the best results (Crowson, 2011; DeBoer, 2012; Hanaway, 1993; Townsend, et al. 2013). This section will provide an overview of organizational theories, what centralized and decentralized decision-making structures look like, and the factors that put pressure on school systems to adopt one decision-making structure over another. The section ends with examples of how decentralized decision-making ideology has been implemented in relation to school leader behaviors and impacts on outcomes.

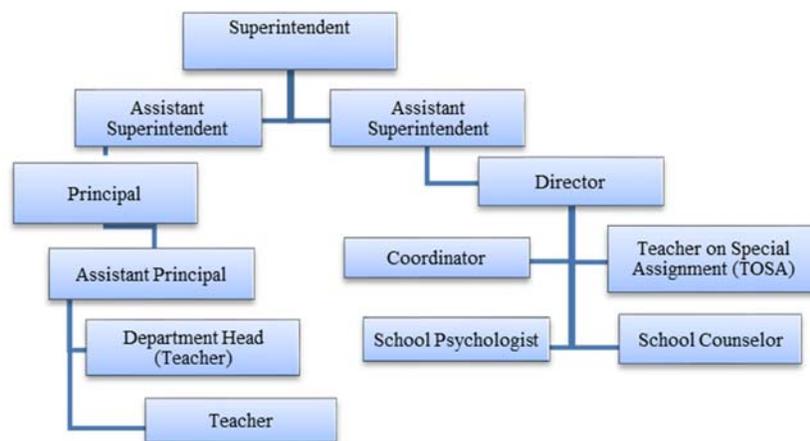
### **Industrial-age Influence, Postmodern Thought and Contingency Theories**

The organizational theories associated with leadership studies in education

encompass industrial-age, postmodern, and contingency thought. School organizational structures still mirror industrial-age thinking of the 1920's described by Max Weber, (in Hatch, 2013) as systems with labor divided into departments where policy-making decisions are centralized and then communicated down through formal reporting relationships. School leaders in defined positions sometimes operate in an authoritarian, top-down manner influenced by governance and policies impacting decision-making processes around student learning (Wong & Sunderman, 2001). The most prominent positions are school administrators on the top of the hierarchy and teachers below them.

A typical administrative school district structure in California looks like this:

Figure 1: Adapted from Figure 5.2 in *An Introduction to California School Administration* (Swartz, 1993)



An example of a school district personnel structure in a hierarchy.

**Industrial-age Influence.** *A Nation at Risk* (1983) enacted modern-thinking by calling for more standardization, structure and rules to render improved, quantifiable results in student achievement through assessments. Administrators, aware that governing agencies supply their financial resources to support their reform efforts, have spent considerable time implementing policies to create improved student learning. Some have commented that this reliance on government structures created obstacles to the very reforms they attempt to direct (Cohen et al., 2007; Crowson, 2011; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Wong & Sunderman, 2001). Over time, school system management tensions can be understood as post-modern approaches that emerged in opposition to modernist concepts found in industrial-aged organizations (Hatch, 2013).

**Post-Modern Thought.** Post-modernists are interested in management practices that look at relationships and processes (Hatch, 2013). Studies in the postmodern era researched the collective efficacy of leaders and how they, as a team might impact others such as those demonstrated in distributed leadership practices (Day et al, 2016; Devos et al., 2013; Friedrich, Vessey, Schelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009; Klar 2012; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Spillane et al., 2004). Knowledge-sharing, collective efforts built on relationship building by educators and the flattening of hierarchy in school team decision-making generated beneficial school climates (Day et al, 2016; Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, & Seashore Louis, 2007; Townsend et al., 2013). The debate on best school leadership team practices continues as schools structurally organized in a top-down hierarchy struggle to implement federal education acts with a team approach (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Townsend et al., 2013). In postmodern thought, context is of equal

importance when understanding collective decision-making processes within an organization.

**Contingency Theory.** The context for learning and the people involved in the school organization must be considered when looking at organizational structure and processes for change (Day et al, 2016; Klar, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2010). Contingency theories and situational leadership showed that leadership practices and decision-making should be focused on a specific goal within the context of their organization (Northouse, 2016). The environment and the leader-follower dyad or groups review the context and then change something within organizations (Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2011; Hatch, 2013). For public high schools, the context is student data generated by learning or student experiences derived in the organizational structure of the school. School leaders review the student data and instructional processes to determine which student learning outcomes need addressed as framed by educational policy.

### **Federal Acts Influencing School Practices**

*A Nation at Risk* (1983) reported that U.S student achievement was on the decline compared to other countries recommending higher standardized curriculum and improved test scores in math and English (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2013). To guide educational reforms, No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) required schools to prepare a plan to improve student learning outcomes, follow the plan, and annually report results to local and state officials. Educational policy discussions have become passionate because public schools are portrayed as failing their children, reinforcing centralized decision-making to tighten controls on school operations (DeBoer, 2012).

Diane Ravitch, former assistant secretary of education, left the policymaking branch disillusioned with the results of the reform efforts in which she played a significant role in public education. Ravitch (2016) in hindsight contends that high stakes testing is not a good measure for student preparedness for the real world.

**NCLB impact on school reforms.** NCLB (2002) reforms specifically emphasized increased accountability. Schools were expected to implement challenging standards in reading and mathematics with the provision that they increase test scores or face corrective action (Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). These provisions had school leaders focusing on new standardization, accountability in the form of assessments and training teachers to adapt to new standards and assessment processes. Cohen et al. (2007) reported that NCLB's promotion of new standards, with the caveat of improving instructional practices, left educators lacking the know-how to do so. In addition to implementation uncertainty, no significant evidence has been produced showing gains in math and English assessments as low student assessment scores persist (Ravitch, 2016; The Education Trust, 2016).

**ESSA influence on school leadership.** ESSA (2015) contained similar provisions for standardized curriculum, high quality assessments that are summative in math, reading or language arts and science, and accountability where test scores are publicized through report cards (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). A study in California examined accountability systems and found that school personnel were confused on how to implement bureaucratic policies (Marsh et al., 2017). This situation shifted attention to implementing policy rather than focusing on what is realistically best for student learning outcomes in schools. Young, Winn and Reedy

(2017) acknowledged that ESSA included a provision that school leadership development matters. The provision encouraged the implementation of leadership development to find new ways to address state and local policies by investing in leadership programs.

However, concern was expressed that state and local government might use that policy to under- or over-reach leadership development implementation due to lack of knowledge or will to act on this premise efficiently. The federal acts creating educational policy explains the on-going call for fresh findings and changing mindsets in school leadership studies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

**Centralized decision-making in schools.** Since school systems rely on government funds to operate, they are more apt to align their management styles to centralized decision-making (Hannaway, 1993; Rost, 1995; Wong & Sunderman, 2001). Centralized decision-making is associated with school operations of an authoritarian nature, steadfast on better teaching and improved assessments, rather than using innovative ideas to solve problems (DeBoer, 2012; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Townsend et al., 2013). Another reason school leaders use an authoritarian approach is because they struggle with knowing how to implement policies locally to improve student learning outcomes in ways other than with an authoritarian slant (Cohen et al., 2007; Crowson, 2011; Marsh et al., 2017; Young et al., 2017). The threat of reporting results that do not demonstrate improved student assessments creates compliance pressures making it difficult to utilize innovate school policies that are truly transformational (Crowson, 2011). Decentralized decision-making has been offered as an alternate process to influence school reforms (Crowson, 2011; Hannaway, 1993; Klar, 2012; Supovitz & Tognata, 2013).

**Decentralized decision-making relative to collaboration.** Decentralized decision-making refers to a group of people making decisions that affect their organizational work because they are closer to the situation needing changed (Robbins & Judge, 2014). Decentralized school organizations create freedoms to innovate when they allow teachers and others to be a part of the decision-making process (Crowson, 2011; Klar, 2012). These studies, however, encapsulate limited programs or case studies within the larger bureaucratic system of complex school districts. The downside of decentralization is that small examples of innovation do exist, but it is difficult to translate these processes to the larger, complex school system. The types of leadership studies considered as decentralized decision-making include collaborative models found in distributive leadership (Crowson, 2011).

Small microcosm case studies within a larger system might help reveal innovative leadership practices that make a difference (Halverson & Clifford, 2013). The need to understand the organizational structure and effective school leadership is paramount since, the gap is growing between the knowledge and skills students learn in public schools compared to the skills required to succeed in a 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; ICLE, 2012; P21, 2016; Ravitch, 2016). The debate continues over best school leadership practices where schools are stuck between tensions created by centralized and decentralized decision-making to improve student learning.

### **Leadership Theories in Schools**

In response to the accountability requirements that school administrators and teachers face today, leadership theories from business, politics, health and behavior science and education have been proposed as ways that school administrators can lead

towards improved school outcomes. Transformational leadership ideology was one route to initiate school reform (Bierly et al., 2016; Day et al., 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003). Transformational leadership, a well-studied theory on individual abilities, set the stage for subsequent leadership theories that show how more than one heroic leader helps influence others such as in leader-member exchange and distributive leadership (Haslam et al., 2011; Hulpia et al., 2012). These leadership theories explore how relationships with others are developed to lead to a common goal. More progress is needed to understand how school leaders collectively impact complex organizations such as public high schools (Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2010; Spillane et al., 2004; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Communities of practice opened the door to popular trends in studying professional learning communities in school organizations (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational leadership theory is one means to change the status quo in school performance where test scores have not improved (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Bierly & Shy, 2013; Day et al., 2016; ICLE, 2012). Transformational leader behavior, adopted from the business sector, describes one as having agentic qualities such as persistence, ability to complete tasks, originality in problem-solving and tolerance for stress in the pursuit of changing the status quo (Burns, 2003). These qualities might assist a school leader in tackling school reform because improved assessment scores are expected but seem elusive. Individual qualities attributed to one person's influence in a formal leadership position cannot be ignored, yet one person cannot change complex organizations in isolation (Haslam et al., 2011; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Rost, 1995; Spillane et al., 2004).

The four components of transformational leadership are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Northouse, 2016). These four transformational leadership cornerstones explain aspects of transformational leadership that shed light on relationships formed that influence organizational climate through communication and collaboration with others (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Kramer & Crespy, 2011; Moolenaar et al., 2010). The interactive process among a team of leaders where transformational attributes are apparent should become the focus of how a team of leaders create change instead of focusing on the qualities of one leader. Leader-member exchange (LMX) explains the process of interaction as collective teams work towards a specific goal (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

### **Leader-member Exchange**

School leadership teams employ one primary leader and other leaders to work towards a goal (Tian, Risku, & Collin, 2015). LMX theory examines collaboration by explaining the social interactions that might occur among school professionals to ensure student learning (Somech & Winderow, 2006). LMX explains that if subordinates are more knowledgeable than the top leader, they should allow a more participative style of decision-making. Uhl-Bien (2006) showed that organizational members are social beings who work interdependently to bring about change flattening the superiority of one authoritarian leader. When formal school leaders apply positive social interactions and interdependent decision-making among stakeholders, a clearer description of collaborative relationships surfaces for those in leadership positions (Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009).

### **Distributed Leadership**

Gronn (2000) initiated the conceptual model of distributive leadership in education to show the value of dividing tasks in leader-follower relationships. A substantial amount of research on distributed leadership exists for educational leaders to consider (Devos et al., 2013; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Harris, et al., 2007; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Hulpia et al., 2012; Friedrich et al., 2009; Klar, 2012; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Spillane et al., 2004). It is pragmatic to share the increased workload in complex organizations such as in large public high schools (Tian et al., 2015). A school leadership team (Bredeson, 2013) practiced in pooling unique abilities and knowledge into a specified goal might have a better chance of reform than one heroic leader.

Halverson and Clifford (2013) analyzed distributive practice on how a biology course could be redesigned in one school. This case study showed how formal leaders allowed teachers and outside stakeholders to redesign curriculum with formal leader support. Hulpia, et al. (2012) found similar results among a collective group of teachers, using participative decision-making supported by a team of leaders. In a more participative style of decision-making, the members became more committed to the goal that positively impacted school culture. These two studies demonstrated positive change in high schools where decision-making was distributed among teachers and leaders other than the principal.

Studies in high schools where formal leaders develop trust through distributed practices had promising results (Smylie et al., 2007; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Hulpia et al., 2012). Trust meant giving specific leadership decision-making over to teachers, which increased commitment to participatory activities. This resulted in an improved

work environment where teachers were more engaged in improving student learning since formal school leaders created the time and protected space to collaborate. Through researching collaborative practices, a study might be able to provide evidence that leaders other than the principal can build trusted relationships and make decisions that affect student learning outcomes (Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Marks & Printy, 2003; Smylie et al., 2007; Supovitz & Tognata, 2013).

Some problems exist in distributive leadership studies. Studies in secondary school leadership searched for measurable effects of decision-making processes on student learning outcomes (Bruggencate, Luyten, Scheerens, & Slegers, 2012; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003). Although some found distributed leadership practices moderately linked to student achievement improvements, others have failed to find a direct correlation from leadership behaviors on student learning (Witziers et al., 2003). Another problem with distributed leadership is the lack of clear definition as to its approach on school organizations. Even though unclear definitions exist and there is no assurance of efficacy in distributed leadership in large school systems, small studies found that when a group of interested school leaders come together with teachers, positive things can happen (Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Hulpia et al., 2012). The small group of school leaders that come together around a student goal have been referred to as communities of practice.

### **Communities of Practice**

Organizations that utilize distributed leadership and operate in knowledge sharing would be remiss not to allow communities of practice to lead the way in fostering new approaches (Bredeson, 2013; Hannay & Earl, 2012; Hulpia et al., 2012; Kensler, Reames,

Murray, & Patrick, 2011; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). At the turn of the century, models for leadership recognized learning communities as a professional approach to change or reform an organization. Printy (2008) studied two high school principals in relation to communities of practice and found they might be too far removed from instructional practices to forward student learning. This finding suggests that assistant principals may be able to shape communities of practice that improve learning with teachers.

Educational leaders have developed guidebooks to implement professional learning community processes through workshops and consultation to school districts seeking reforms through collaborative efforts (Dufour et al., 2006). Creating a collaborative culture in schools has been the nexus for the interdependent work to achieve improved learning results (Dewitt, 2017; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour & Marzano 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Kensler et al., 2011). A study on how collaboration occurs, to fill in the gaps of understanding effective school leadership practices, might help identify conditions and variables related to improved student learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge era (Leithwood et al., 2010; Spillane et al., 2004).

### **Assistant Principals in Large Public High Schools**

Large public high schools were used for this study because it takes an administrative team to attend to the many school operations with a high priority on improved student learning outcomes. In California, 1,313 public high schools exist with the responsibility of educating 1,741,575 students in public schools that potentially enroll up to 4000 students (California Department of Education, 2017). Public high schools vary in size, but larger schools with 1900 or more students have two or more assistant principals. A leadership team in a public high school refers to the principal, assistant

principals, teacher-leaders and others such as athletic and activity directors, subject department heads or other interested staff such as counselors or teachers in specialized fields (Bredeson, 2013; Colwell, 2015). Additionally, school personnel from the central office provide oversight of school leaders. School personnel in these different positions might have different ideas of what collaborative leadership is (Gruenert, 2005).

The social structure of school operations contains the relationships built among all stakeholders within the school itself and with central office administrators (Spillane & Kim, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The school administration has its own hierarchal structure; the principal, assistants to the principal, department heads for each subject taught, and then teachers. A large public high school can house close to 200 teachers and other licensed educators such as counselors, nurses, and psychologists. Logic tells us that one principal could not have all the solutions to improved learning and social capital building for such a large staff and student population. Assistant principals are added to the administration team and are also given the tasks of instructional leadership and school operations for all students (Colwell, 2015).

### **Assistant Principals**

Assistant principals share leadership responsibilities with the principal in large public high schools (Colwell, 2015). Some evidence shows that assistant principals, rather than principals, have more direct experiences with classroom teachers through collaborative processes (Colwell, 2015; Kantor, 2015; Leonard & Leonard, 1999). One of the few studies of school leadership solely from the assistant principal perspective, claimed that educational policymakers are perplexed at the disconnect between what high school assistant principals are capable of doing and what they actually are asked to do

(Militello et al., 2015). In some instances, the assistant principal is given the unpopular tasks such as monitoring student discipline, preventing them from getting involved in the more political or visible roles that principals do (Kwan, 2011; Kantor 2015). It has been noted that because assistant principals are formal leaders more closely tied to the details of what is happening, they are better situated to build trusted relationships with teachers that lead to change efforts (Colwell, 2015).

### **Leading from the Middle (LFTM)**

Recent leadership studies have shifted from focusing on one charismatic leader to realizing that other leaders within an organization are equally capable of influencing organizational change (Day et al., 2016; Friedrich et al., 2009; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Tian et al, 2015). Case studies on the impact of LFTM in Canada found that putting the right drivers (decision-makers) in the position to innovate and reform schools improved climate and performance (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Assistant principals from a variety of subject area backgrounds are formal leaders situated in large public high schools to be considered as having influence by LFTM. Assistant principals, as middle managers, must collaborate with teachers, the principal, and other school stakeholders to ensure that proposed student learning outcomes are met (Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Militello et al, 2015).

### **Collaboration and Communication**

The nature of collaboration is not new, but the concept has gained renewed attention in complex organizations in the knowledge era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (DeWitt, 2017; Kuhn, 2015; Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Rost, 1995; Tian et al, 2015 Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Collaborative efforts have been offered as models to assist those in need in the

health sciences and in education. For example, Bronstein (2003) noted that social workers, educators, and juvenile justice workers need to interact openly to address the mental and social health of juveniles. Lawson (2004) stated that interdisciplinary collaboration may be the most theoretically sound and optimal method of addressing the complex interventions that lead to youth successes. DeWitt (2017) described collaborative leaders as a group of stakeholders bringing their expertise together and learning from each other towards the expected goal. These ideologies of interagency collective work demonstrate sound examples for possibilities that school leaders can employ in large public high schools.

Communication is an essential component of collaborative leadership in schools today (DeWitt; 2017; De Vries, Bakker-Pieper, & Ostenveld, 2010; DuFour et al., 2006; ICLE, 2012). Collaboration for the sake of student success involves communication among internal and external stakeholders focused on a common goal (De Vries et al., 2010; Kramer & Crespy, 2011). Communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century takes several forms such as face to face, through the telephone or cellphone, over the Internet, via social media and in writing. In the center of the communication, is the purpose of improving a situation through problem-solving, creating more efficient practices and supporting efforts to improve the situation of others. Regardless of the form or purpose of communication, those who consider themselves collaborative have stated that they communicate constantly (De Vries et al., 2010; Kramer & Crespy, 2011).

Specific attributes were associated with communication styles by collaborators. Communications held by a collaborating leader were described as trustworthy, relationship-building, and conflict resolving (DeWitt, 2017; Gruenert, 2005). Team

leaders who sustained their positions claimed they formed trusted communication among their members (Gordon & Seashore Louis, 2009; Moolenaar et al., 2010; Smylie et al., 2007). School leaders must communicate with teachers who then communicate with each other who in turn communicate with students to infuse knowledge for learning. De Vries et al. (2010) found that communication styles that were human-oriented demonstrated support, assuredness, and precision which outweighed charismatic and task-oriented leaders in schools. Embedded in the preferred human-oriented leadership is cooperation of shared decision-making where groups of teachers and leaders are encouraged to listen to each other and openly share their ideas or areas of expertise (Gordon & Seashore Louis, 2009).

### **Summary**

Educational leadership literature has sought to identify best practices that principals and assistant principals might utilize to create reforms leading to improved student learning outcomes. Organizational reforms constituting central decision-making have created tensions that make it difficult to reach the goals of improved student learning leaving school administrators confused on how to best approach reform (DeBoer, 2012; Hannaway, 1993; Rost, 1995; Wong & Sunderman, 2001.) Decentralized decision-making, found in distributed leadership highlighting collaboration, may be better suited for progressing school organizations communities of practice (Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Supovitz & Tognata, 2013). Reviewing parts of transformational, leader member exchange and distributed leadership theories has grounded this study to respond to the call for a more in depth understanding of collaborative processes of leadership (Leithwood et al., 2010; Spillane et al., 2004.) Large public high schools are complex,

dynamic organizations that require a team of formal leaders to carry out policies and instructional strategies (Klar, 2012; Spillane & Kim, 2012; Tian et al., 2015).

Collaborative groups of people who communicate in communities of practice has been elevated as a possible model to support students in 21<sup>st</sup> century learning (Dewitt, 2017; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour & Marzano 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). As a result, a phenomenological approach, where the researcher interviewed assistant principals about their leadership experiences was an appropriate methodology to provide evidence on the details of that process. Chapter 3 will describe the research approach and methodology used in this study.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

This chapter will provide a description of the phenomenological methodology used in this study. A description of the participant recruitment process, data collection tools, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures will be provided. Lastly, the chapter will explain the ethical precautions that were implemented in this study.

### **Phenomenological Methodology**

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach used to develop insights or a deeper understanding into a common event experienced from a heterogeneous sample of people (Creswell, 2013). Based in Heidegger's philosophy that deeper understandings can emerge from phenomenological inquiry (Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 2017), assistant principals were interviewed for insights and examples of their personal collaborative leadership experiences. Deeper insights, with explicit examples from assistant principals in similar settings can help identify more details on the collaborative experience. These details, insights and examples related to student learning outcomes can fill in the gaps of what prior literature has called researchers to do (Leithwood et al., 2010; Spillane et al., 2004; Leonard & Leonard, 1999). The methodology was aimed at interviewing assistant principals on their collaborative leadership experience to fill in the gaps.

Two research questions guided the study: (1) what is the assistant principals' experience of collaborative leadership on a high school leadership team? and (2) how does the assistant principals' practice of collaborative leadership relate to supporting teachers in attaining student learning outcomes? Question one was designed to uncover

what Creswell (2013) calls textual description. For this study the textual description was of assistant principals' collaborative leadership experiences on an administrative team. Question two was designed to elicit what Van Manen (2017) calls the sciences of phenomenological research, the examples. The contextual examples reported directed the insights or deeper understandings of collaborative leadership related to student learning outcomes.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The data collection tools used in this study were semi-structure interviews, a protocol guide (see Appendix A), and journaling. Information gleaned from interviews is the primary source of data often used in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2013; Englander, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). The data collection tools were developed to gather responses with examples from the assistant principals to analyze what emerged in response to the two main research questions (Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 2017).

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The participant invitation letter contained a preliminary definition of collaborative leadership to ensure a common starting point for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). Each participant was sent the interview protocol two days prior to their scheduled interview so that they would have time to reflect on the research questions (Englander, 2012). Face to face, semi-structured interviews allowed for the assistant principals to reconstruct their collaborative leadership experiences (Seidman, 2013). Face to face interviews helped the researcher to clarify responses immediately, probe when more detail was needed, and to observe the subjective responses for subsequent

journaling.

A protocol guide with prompts was used by the researcher during the interview to help keep the assistant principal focused on the central topic and gather rich details about their experiences and examples (see Appendix A). For this study, the interview protocol consisted of two main measurement questions, with short prompts. Question one aimed to understand the roles, process, and structure of the administrative team experience. Question two was designed to focus each participant on a specific student learning outcome of their choosing and guide them in sharing their own experience of using collaborative leadership to help achieve that outcome. In each interview, question one was asked first; and question two was asked second. Research question one was asked directly as it was written. Research question two was reframed whereby the researcher asked each participant to think of a student learning outcome first that they could personally speak to and then to describe that experience in reference to the outcome. This allowed for the participants to report authentic examples and allowed the researcher to probe that unique example to get at a deeper understanding of their unique collaborative leadership experience (Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 2017).

In phenomenological interviews, the researcher must decide how much of their own experience to share with the participant (Creswell, 2013). To develop trust and rapport, the researcher used brief comments such as “I understand that” and “it is what we do” indicating that she understood the explanations of their experiences. The researcher also used prompts to nudge participants to add more details of their experience (Seidman, 2013). While the researcher provided short understanding comments and nudging questions for clarification, she concentrated on active listening from her years of

counseling experience to ensure that the interview details came across as clearly as possible from the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Journaling and reflection were then used to ensure that interpretive analysis was that of the participants and not from the researchers past experiences in large public high schools.

### **Journaling and bracketing**

Journaling was used to record the researcher's thoughts, observations and preconceived ideas on the topic. The process of journaling helps to bracket biases that might influence analysis and interpretation of qualitative research (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Ortlipp, 2008). After each interview, the researcher recorded personal feelings and thoughts about the experience in relation to the participant's responses in a notebook. Further perceptions and sentiments were written in the margins of one set of the transcriptions in the first phase of analysis to separate those from the participants display of sentiments. Researcher thoughts and feelings were reviewed at a later date in comparison with the participant's in the reflective step of analysis to ensure that the interpretations of the recorded experiences were not the researchers and those of the participants.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

### **Approval Process**

In order to complete the IRB process, several documents were submitted for approval. The researcher generated three of her own documents to submit to IRB for approval for use in the study: 1) an invitational letter coupled with Creighton's IRB Participant Rights (see Appendix B); 2) a 2-question participant screening survey (see Appendix C); and 3) the interview protocol (see Appendix A). Prior to submitting for

IRB approval, documentation from each school district providing approval to conduct the research within the districts was obtained (see Appendix D). Between April and July, the researcher called 13 school district Superintendent offices to seek permission to conduct a study in two southwestern United States counties that included large public high schools. Seven school administrator or principal approvals were obtained for the study (see Appendix D). Two gatekeepers were principals and five were district office administrators (Appendix D). All documents, including the approval letters, were sent for IRB approval. Once IRB approval was received, (see Appendix E), participant recruitment started from the approved school districts.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Qualitative researchers suggest that phenomenological studies utilize three to 15 participants with a common experience (Creswell, 2013; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Drawing on research that suggests collective leadership requires at least three years of monitoring to measure academic achievement effects (Leithwood & Mascall, 2018), the sample choice was assistant principals with at least three years of experience. The researcher felt that at least three years of experience would create an adequate amount of time from which to reconstruct and describe experiences in rich detail for analysis. A 2-question screening survey (Appendix B) was sent to each potential participant. The two questions were related to: (1) length of work experience and (2) contact information. Only participants who reported that they met the minimum three-year criteria by circling the 3-5 years' or 6+ experience range and who lived within a 100-mile radius of the researcher were interviewed for the study.

For this study purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants (Creswell, 2014). In initial recruitment, the researcher searched seven public school district websites and Data Quest on the California Department of Education website. From the seven school districts, the identification of 16 public high schools met the criteria of large public high schools, meaning they had a population of 1900 or more students. The researcher then reviewed each high school's website to ensure that at least two other assistant principals were employed there as part of an administrative team. The contact information of the assistant principals from each of the sixteen high schools was logged by the researcher. The researcher also attempted to discern through searches on the school website and on LinkedIn how many years of experience the assistant principals had. If it was evident that an assistant principal had two years' experience or less, they were omitted from the recruiting population. An additional consideration in choosing which public high schools from which to recruit was determining whether the school was within a reasonable driving distance of approximately 100 miles of the researcher's residence.

After the initial web-based screening, a total of 21 assistant principals were invited to participate through email and US mail. One assistant principal was promoted to principal. Two declined. Two reported they did not have three years' experience, and nine did not respond to emails or phone calls. Seven assistant principals responded to the participant invitation, met the screening criteria, and agreed to be interviewed in the two-week window of time the researcher made available to complete the face-to-face interviews.

All interviews were conducted in the school office of the respective participant.

The interviews ranged in duration from 40 minutes to 60 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, each participant was presented a \$15-dollar Starbucks gift card or \$15-dollar Barnes and Noble gift card as a thank you for their time. The audio files for each participant were sent to Rev.com for transcription into a word document the same day the interview took place.

### Participants

Participants consisted of seven assistant principals from public high schools in two counties in a southwestern U.S. state. Three of the participants worked in one of the two counties while the other four worked in the other county. Three participants were female and four were male. Participants' assistant principal experience ranged from three years to 11 years. The prior educational profession of the assistant principals included three social science teachers, an English teacher, a business teacher, a math teacher, and a counselor. Every assistant principal worked with at least three other assistant principals on a team within their schools. Six of the seven assistant principals reported that they had held the position of assistant principal at more than one high school.

Table 1

#### *Characteristics of Assistant Principals in Schools*

Assistant Principal	Gender	Years Experience	Subject Background	# of other Assistant Principals	County	Student Enrollment 2016-2017
AP1	Female	3	English	3	Riverside	1986
AP2	Male	6	Social Science	4	Riverside	2666
AP3	Male	4	Math	3	Riverside	2688
AP4	Male	11	Social Science	3	Orange	2558

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AP5	Female	4	Counseling	3	Orange	2946
AP6	Female	3	Business	3	Orange	2323
AP7	Male	7	Social Science	5	Orange	3235

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During initial data analysis where the researcher began coding for themes in response to the two research questions, she determined that questioning more participants would not add additional themes or codes to add to the study. Therefore, the data collected from the seven participants met one criterion of saturation (Creswell, 2014).

### **Reliability and Trustworthiness of the Data**

Reliability and trustworthiness, as a form of validity, were considered in this study. In phenomenology, reliability of the data is done through matching the transcriptions to what was recorded and allowing for member-checking (Creswell, 2014). After the transcript was reviewed by the researcher for typographical errors, the clean transcript was sent to each participant for member-checking. Six of the seven participants replied back that the transcripts were accurate within two-day's time. One participant did not reply back until three weeks later, which delayed the time that her responses were used in the analysis. In qualitative research concepts of trustworthiness and credibility in the responses are determined when the researcher sees participant responses as similar and with triangulation of data found in previous studies (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). For this study, trustworthiness was verified when the details of the collaborative leadership process emerged. Furthermore, five of the seven participants freely explained in similar verbiage that collaborative leadership was not "top-down", exemplifying how the participants had similar responses of credibility.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher began analysis by simply reading through the transcribed responses to get a general sense of the experiences. Next, in response to the two research questions, phrases were extracted from each of the transcripts that described the experiences or provided examples of collaborative leadership. To aid data analysis each participant was labeled AP1, AP2, AP3, AP4, AP5, AP6, and AP7 so that no identifying information would be included in the results. Analysis consisted of initial open coding of each transcript to extract meaning units (Creswell, 2013). Codes were developed by organizing the responses by participant labels under each research question. Then the codes were separated from the participants and regrouped into common themes across participants. The descriptions and statements fell into five themes. After initial themes were generated, additional analysis was conducted using Van Manen's (2017) reflective approach.

Phenomenology is the science of examples (Van Manen, 2017). For research question two, assistant principals were prompted to choose a student learning outcome from their own experience to be the context from which to provide details about their collaborative leadership experiences (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2006). The researcher went back through the transcriptions in search of examples and insights that illustrated details for each theme. Van Manen (2017) explained that the researcher searches for meanings through the reduction of the data. Therefore, the second phase of the data analysis consisted of spending time reading and reflecting on the themes and examples that were presented until insights emerged developing summaries for each theme that were then

synthesized into a composite description for each research question from this sample of assistant principals.

### **Ethical Considerations**

IRB guidelines were followed regarding confidentiality and anonymity of the participants throughout the study. Anonymity was secured by removing any identifying details from the data. Names of participants were replaced with codes. Names of schools and districts were not written into the study. Confidentiality of the transcribed interviews was maintained by keeping information stored in a secured room and audio files were kept on a separate storage device.

In phenomenology bracketing is important to keep the data analysis as free from personal bias as possible (Creswell, 2013). Because the researcher had worked in some of the school districts where interviews were conducted, bracketing, through journaling, was used to remove the researchers own experiences and preconceived ideas of collaborative leadership from this study. Discussions with the dissertation committee throughout analysis also assisted in keeping the analysis and findings as free from personal bias as possible.

### **Summary**

The qualitative research approach of phenomenology was used for this study on the central topic of collaborative leadership experiences from assistant principals' perspective in large public high schools in the southwestern United States. Data were collected from seven participants in face to face, semi-structured interviews based on responses to two research questions. Data-analysis consisted of open coding and reflective approaches detailed by Creswell (2016) and Van Manen (2017). Guidelines

were followed to maintain ethical standards of practice and rigor including IRB approvals, bracketing, discussions with dissertation committee and confidentiality of participants and collected data. The next chapter will provide the findings that emerged from the interviews, journaling and analysis of the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

**Introduction**

This phenomenological study explored the experience of collaborative leadership from the perspective of assistant principals in large public high schools and how that practice relates to student learning outcomes in the 21st century. The study sought to answer two main research questions. First, what is the assistant principals' experience of collaborative leadership on a high school leadership team? And second, how does the assistant principals' practice of collaborative leadership relate to supporting teachers in attaining student learning outcomes? The aim of this study was to generate insights and descriptive examples that can be used as a set of recommendations to guide school leaders who choose collaborative leadership processes as one design to improve their organizational structures. This chapter will present the findings of this qualitative research study.

The presentation of the findings includes themes and subthemes describing what collaborative leadership is and what it is not as expressed by the seven participants. The findings are organized according to three themes that answered research question one, and two themes that emerged from research question two. Presented under each theme are several subthemes containing details participant responses in the form of quotes. Researcher commentary based on participant emotional reactions and tone of voice. These observations were logged in a journal immediately after each interview and were used throughout data analysis. Each theme ends with a summary of the descriptive examples. The presentation of the findings concludes with a composite description of collaborative leadership for each research question as experienced by this sample of

assistant principals.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

As is common practice in qualitative inquiry, the researcher asked for clarification of responses during the interview (Seideman, 2013) to gain a clear description of collaborative leadership. During this study five of the seven participants felt the need to verbalize what collaboration was not to describe what collaboration was from their personal experiences. Responses stating that collaboration was not a top-down decision-making process were reported. When the researcher asked for clarification from AP1 about discussions with her staff, she stated, “So you are asking if we’re a top-down leadership or if it’s a collaborative leadership.” She stated, “No, it’s collaborative here...it’s shared.” AP3 explained that the model his principal used was “shared leadership...it’s not that top down feeling of it’s coming from administration.” AP4 explained that he valued the culture of his district for this reason:

I want to make sure to understand a variety of perspectives out there, and understand how other people are seeing certain situations, so we can come to an elegant outcome. I do believe there is strength in that approach. If you are constantly talked down and dictating how things are going to go, I don’t think that creates a strong organization (AP4).

AP5 stated that her new school was “very collaborative” and added that it was “refreshing” because not every school was like that. She had worked in schools where the “leadership style was more top-down where few discussions occurred to solve problems.” AP6 explained that in her prior school the “leadership style was very structured and top-down” where school decisions were only made by the principal and things did not change

unless he decided to change things. The researcher observed that the participants were emphatic in this distinction, suggesting that their experience of collaboration does not include a top-down feeling or principal only decision-making process of leading.

The five themes that emerged from the data analysis to answer the two research questions were: (1) assistant principals participate in and initiate different types of meetings, (2) communication is emphasized in collaborative leadership, (3) assistant principals' perceptions and fit on the administrative team is a part of their collaborative leadership experience, (4) collaborative leadership practice helps support teachers as professionals, and (5) assistant principals focus on impacting students' experiences with the influence of other stakeholders. All seven participants discussed their unique experiences, and some used similar descriptors; yet each used different examples and had their own thoughts and feelings about collaborative leadership.

Table 2

*Research Questions, Themes and Subthemes*

<b>What is the assistant principals' experience of collaborative leadership on a high school administrative team?</b>	
<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes for each Theme</b>
<b>Themes 1: Assistant Principals Participate in and Initiate Different Types of Meetings</b>	-Formal meetings -Informal meetings -One on one meetings
<b>Theme 2: Communication is Emphasized in Collaborative Leadership</b>	-Frequency, significance and stakeholders -Trusted, open and transparent -Reflecting, listening and decision-making -Technology use -The loop and messaging out

<p><b>Theme 3: Assistant Principals Perceptions and Fit on the Administrative Team is Part of their Collaborative Leadership Experience</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Feelings about assistant principal work</li> <li>-Thoughts on assistant principal work</li> <li>-Fit within administrative teams</li> </ul>
<p><b>How does the assistant principals’ practice of collaborative leadership relate to supporting teachers in attaining student learning outcomes?</b></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Themes</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subthemes for each Theme</b></p>
<p><b>Theme 4: Collaborative Leadership Practice Helps Support Teachers as Professionals</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Start from a place of belief and trust in teachers</li> <li>- Assess teachers’ skill and mindsets to proposed student learning outcome</li> <li>-Provide resources to guide teachers toward the student learning outcome</li> <li>-Recognize and support teacher autonomy</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme 5: Assistant Principals Focus on Impacting Students’ Experiences with the Influence of Other Stakeholders</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Assistant principals make decisions to address students’ experiences</li> <li>-Support from central office administrators is necessary to act on improved student experiences</li> <li>-Community members and parents of students are influential</li> <li>-A focus on the common good of students</li> </ul>

**Theme 1: Assistant Principals Participate in and Initiate Different Types of Meetings**

All seven participants talked about meetings which were composed of different formats, groupings, and purposes as described throughout the interviews. Participants were a part of an administrative team that attended regularly scheduled meetings planned on a specific day of the week. Participants explained that other types of meetings occurred resulting from a concerned group of staff to solve a problem, to create a new system within the school structure, or to support teaching practices. Other face to face, one on one meetings occurred with various stakeholders as well. The two types of

meetings that were described by participants are characteristic of formal and informal meetings.

**Formal Meetings.** Formal administrative team meetings occurred weekly throughout the school year. Those included in the administrative team meeting were the principal, all assistant principals, or in two cases, the athletic director, activities director, or the English language coach. One purpose of the administrative team meetings was to review the calendared activities for the week and to decide who would oversee each event. AP1 explained that once calendared events were covered, other non-administrative team members, such as the athletic director, who oversaw extracurricular events were excused. AP1, AP2 and AP3 were specific on the details of their administrative team meetings. AP1 stated “we meet on Mondays... and present our pieces of what we have for the week.” AP2 stated, “we have very open calendars...where we can see everybody’s calendar and we talk about everything that is going on...a drama or sporting event.” AP3 stated, “we use that time to split up whatever extracurricular attendance we have to do.” AP3 added “if the team does not meet then confusion occurs, and something can get overlooked.”

Administrative team meeting discussions also included subject department meetings or all staff meetings with a concentration on how to prepare for them. Discussions centered on instructional strategies of teachers, implementing new practices, events impacting teacher work, directives from the central office administrators, and follow-up on continuing issues. AP1 stated that each assistant principal presents their part; curriculum, activities, master scheduling, security, and pressing events because they are all part of the school activity decision-making. Three participants explained that the

second meeting of the week was shorter where they debriefed about the past weeks' events. AP3 explained that while team meetings took up a lot of time, they were critical, so everyone knew what everyone else was doing. AP7 added that the assistant principals and principal helped keep each other accountable for what was happening. AP1, AP2, AP3, AP4 and AP5 were delegated leadership responsibilities of events or designated leader of an upcoming department chair meeting or long-term focus group meeting.

*Staff and department meetings.* Other types of formal meetings that occurred regularly included all staff meetings, department chair meetings, subject department meetings, and focus meetings of interested staff coming together to solve a problem or create a new practice. All staff meetings and subject department meetings occurred regularly. For example, AP3's department meetings met every two weeks; AP4's met monthly; and AP1's met weekly. Either an assistant principal or the principal led the department meetings with an agenda of school events and items focused on instructional strategies or school-wide change efforts. Participants were consistently involved in department chair meetings and periodically in department meetings. AP1 stated she attended English department meetings where she collaborated with the English department chair on training of other teachers. AP6 attended special education meetings where all teachers in the department were present in discussions about getting teachers to use teaching strategies typically seen in teaching the English Learner (EL) student population. AP7 oversaw the special education department that held regular "academy meetings" with teachers and central office administrators to discuss student attendance, discipline and academic credit recovery plans. The researcher observed that each participant was confident and energized about the work that had to be done in these

meetings that they attended and led.

***Focus group meetings.*** Two participants described long-term focus groups that were created to implement new school practices that impacted all staff and students. AP4 and AP5 led new focus groups that met regularly over a period of two to three years. AP4's focus was changing the bell schedule for the school by adding a seventh period in the school day. AP5 implemented a schoolwide college admissions experience that was taken to all academic department meetings intended to include every student in the school. In both cases, the participant was the formal leader of the focus group of interested subject area teachers.

The long-term focus groups were not led in isolation from the administrative team. The expectation from the administrative team meetings was that an assistant principal would "loop out and back with constituent groups," as stated by AP4, so all staff were informed. AP4 stated that the principal asked him to lead the teachers on changing the bell schedule. AP5 decided, on her own, to meet with the principal to implement the new schoolwide college admissions experiential program. Participants explained that informal meetings were additionally needed to attain the change goal.

***Informal Meetings.*** Meeting one on one with stakeholders or small groups of people resulted from the formal meetings. Participants reported conversations with several stakeholders as they worked towards a goal. AP2 and AP5 talked to community members to strengthen the student programs they oversaw. AP1, AP3, AP4, AP6, and AP7 talked about meetings with teachers and other administrators in the school that involved needing further discussions that fell under their supervision. The amount of detail participants used to explain one on one meetings or small group meetings was

equal to the details describing formal meetings suggesting that they were just as essential in the process. Informal meetings were mostly one on one meetings where stakeholders included a variety of educators and community members.

Table 3

*One on One Essential Meetings*

Assistant Principal	How Met	Met with Stakeholder	Purpose of meeting
AP1	Face to Face	AP of Career Technical Education AP of Curriculum	Help student in crisis Review master schedule
AP2	Phone Face to face	Director of Hotel Chain Teacher	Check on internship students Teacher evaluation
AP3	Face to Face	Math Department Chair Teacher	Create new curriculum Observe instruction
AP4	Face to Face	Superintendent Summer Teacher	Discuss educational philosophy Online blended teaching schedule
AP5	Face to Face	Counselor Mayor Principal	Implement new student program
AP6	Face to Face	Special Education Teacher AP of Curriculum	Support new teacher Assist in writing accreditation
AP7	Face to Face Email	Principal Science Consultant	Form trusted administrative team Update Science curriculum

***One on one meetings.*** Every participant reported one on one, essential meetings that occurred either face to face or through the internet or phone. Table 2 names the stakeholders represented in the one on one meetings. One on one, face to face meetings were an extension of the larger group meetings. AP3 talked about the many times an assistant principal or principal went to a classroom to talk to a department chair about a decision being made or to ask them what the rest of the teacher feedback was about an issue. AP4 met one on one with teachers involved in summer school blended-online

design to discuss how the teaching “day” would be different from traditional day. AP5 met with one counselor and with teachers to deal with pushback in an effort to convince them that the plan was positive for students.

Participants talked about one on one meetings they had with other assistant principals. AP2, AP3 and AP7 discussed meetings with new assistant principals to the team to support them in their new role. AP3 and AP7 stated that sometimes the new assistant principal did not last past a year, suggesting that when the new assistant principal does not fit into the administrative team culture, they are let go. AP4 worked together with another assistant principal on the summer online blended courses. AP1, AP2 and AP6 explained how they conversed with another assistant principal in decision-making on student discipline issues. AP6 added that conversing with other assistant principals made her more aware of what the other assistant principal was doing as not to duplicate services or to ensure followed through actions were taken.

**Theme One Summarized.** Experiencing collaborative leadership means participating in and initiating formal and informal meetings. Formal meetings occurred regularly, with structured agenda items, on school activities and other issues such as change in organizational or instructional practice. Informal meetings were one on one meetings or smaller, impromptu group meetings resulting from issues requiring more discussion than what occurred at formal meetings. One participant described how different formal meetings occurred in this one response.

A perfect example is that today we were discussing what would be on today’s agenda for our leadership team meeting after school. We had our administrative team meeting in the morning. Then, after school, we had our department

coordinator meeting. One item for conversation was where we were on school-wide writing. I was sitting right next to the English department chair who is the coach for that and discussing what she would present tomorrow for about 10 minutes to the staff for school-wide writing (AP1).

An example of an informal, one on one meeting:

...she was part of the collaborative team, but she was kind of quiet... a little bit negative... I had to pull her in... I said to her, 'I grew up poor, like really dirt poor, my parents only got up to an elementary education in China' and I think that opened her eyes... I think I changed her viewpoint a little bit (AP5).

Collaborative leadership means participating in and sometimes initiating different types of meetings with the people employed in the school and outside of the school, leading to the next theme which describes communicating with others.

## **Theme 2: Communication is Emphasized in Collaborative Leadership**

The second theme that emerged based on the participants' experiences of collaborative leadership was communication is emphasized. When analyzing both formal and informal meetings, every participant stated or inferred the significance of communication as an important part of collaborative leadership. The communication is emphasized theme was discussed explicitly by six of the seven participants. AP6, recently employed in a new high school, was just beginning to experience the more open communicative process and inferred its significance through her commentary. Five subthemes emerged for communication as being trusted, open and transparent in conjunction with organizational culture. The importance of listening, reflecting, decision-making, the use of technology, and messaging out from the meetings were subtheme

qualities related to the communicating that had to occur.

**Frequency, significance and stakeholders.** As explained in theme number one, communications occurred formally, informally, in large groups, small groups, and one on one. In response to research question one, a list of short phrases explained the frequency of communication that occurs with others:

- a) A lot of conversation takes place (AP3),
- b) In constant communication (AP1),
- c) Constantly have conversations (AP4) and,
- d) We text every day (AP2),

Communication was also referred to as conversations or talking to others. The researcher noticed that communication was a significant part of the collaborative experience. AP4 stated that he would “talk to the group to get teachers to open up.” AP2 claimed, “the more we communicate the better.” AP3 explained that as part of the administrative team they would “talk about what was on the horizon and what approach they might take”. AP7 stated that in “personal conversations” among the team it was important to “keep each other accountable.” Finally, AP3 stressed the significance of communication by stating that “you are expected to have the skills to work together, to think critically, to communicate with one another and to prepare our kids...”

All participants communicated with others in their school organization. In addition to communicating with other assistant principals, the principal, teachers, and counselors within the school, each participant said they conversed with educators at the central office. AP1, AP3, AP4, AP6, and AP7 specifically named a central office person that they conversed with in pursuit of a goal or in building and sustaining organizational

relationships. Those named were the superintendent, the assistant superintendent of educational services, the executive director of human resources, the director of technology, and an instructional coach. AP6 specifically explained that in her pursuits of providing professional development for a new teacher that there was a “chain of command”, referring to the principal, the district, and the department chair, to make it happen.

Communications with stakeholders outside of the immediate schools were specified as well. AP2 and AP5 conversed with community members. AP6 and AP7 conversed with consultants. AP2 named several business executives he communicated with regularly and a workforce association member in the local community. AP5 communicated with the city mayor to obtain \$10,000 for her outcome. AP6 mentioned that the central office administrators hired outside consultants to support school administrators in change efforts. AP7 connected an outside science curriculum consultant with his science teachers through meetings and emails.

**Trusted, open and/or transparent.** Communications in relation to collaborative leadership was described by all the participants as trusted, open and/or transparent during their experiences. AP1, AP3, AP5, and AP7 stated explicitly that they felt trusted by their principal because there was open communication. The remaining four participants inferred trust with others in daily interactions. AP2 stated that “the more we have communication lines open, the more effective we will be as a team.” AP3 used the term of transparency as essential when working with teachers to build trust. AP4 explained that he is free to take risks as a part of their decentralized school district culture. AP5 stated she can converse with her current principal at any time “like he was a friend.” AP6

explained that she worked with a third principal that “was very open here... more collaborative where the ideas flow a lot more freely.” Open and trusted communication was explicitly stated or inferred by each participants’ responses to the two research questions.

Four participants explained how lack of trust and openness impacted the teams’ ability to be collaborative. AP2, AP5, and AP7 described the influence of a new administrative team member or how newly formed team dynamics negatively impacted the collaborative efforts through a lack of trust and openness. AP2 stated that “trust is a big thing...we try to help and coach the new ones as much as possible...” AP5 explained that she had worked in non-collaborative places where the people “were afraid of the principal and did not feel supported”. AP7 spoke in detail about how creating trust was vital in the formation of an administrative team to effectively collaborate on student issues. He stated that in years prior, some assistant principals did not “trust, get along with, respect or just jive with the principal”. This resulted in “putting out fires” as they weeded out administrative team members who were not trustworthy to the administrative “cone of silence.” Since AP2, AP5, AP6 and AP7 experienced previous team dynamics, comprised of different administrative team members, they compared open, trusted communications as better than less trusted communications in forming an administrative team that was collaborative.

**Listening, reflecting decision-making, and being comfortable with conflict.** In the words of AP4, “there are many facets to communication...” Five participants provided details on other components of communication such as listening, reflecting, decision-making and being comfortable with conflict. AP5 said that she tried to “listen

more than talk” when parents or teachers approached her. She let them vent, validated their feelings to try to determine how she might help within the constraints of her position. AP3 inferred the importance of listening because he stated that teachers “felt comfortable” coming to him with a concern or he would frequently go and ask teachers for information. AP1 explained how the team reflected on past week school events and activities. AP6 reflected more deeply on the concept.

AP6 reported personal reflections on the difference between her current school administrative team and her prior administrative team to change school practices. AP6 explained that in her current team meetings, the new principal asked the team, “Why do we do it that way?” This reply initiated deeper conversation for a possibility of change in the organization if the response was, “That’s just how it’s done.” AP6 expressed enthusiastically that “everyone is open to change here.” Her prior school experience was different where the principal was “very institutionalized, where traditional structures were kept” and open, reflective communications from administrative team members were not considered. Participants described how listening and reflecting were a natural part of the decision-making process where conflicting ideas might arise.

Four participants explained that communications should include all stakeholders in a consistent and unrelenting way when addressing an issue. AP3 detailed that when issues are “on the horizon,” lots of trusted communications occur among the administrative team and with the teachers involved. He commented that, “we need to be real with each other...and be transparent...we have to get to the point where we can have healthy conflict.” AP1 relayed similarly that people on staff felt “very comfortable being able to come and say ‘This is going that way. This is going this way. What’s your opinion

on this?” AP4 explained that when communicating with teachers an assistant principal must seek to “understand different perspectives.” AP5 had to deal with “teacher push-back” on implementing her schoolwide goal from teachers in the special education department. Comfort with conflict came when participants held frequent communications as they interacted with teachers, counselors and other administrators on their teams.

**Technology use.** Another subtheme of the communication is emphasized theme was technology use in relation to communication among school staff and with the community. AP2 claimed that school staff used “the cloud” through google drive sharing information and documents with the administrative team. They shared files directly with teachers and students, so everyone could contribute to schoolwide items of concern. Shared documents allowed others to see who contributed and where credit could be given. AP2 led his school in social media communications to the students and parents. He reported that this school had a Twitter, Instagram and Facebook account, with plans to create a Snapchat account to communicate more quickly with their high school students. Other technology used included two-way radios at school activities, texting by cell-phone for quick communications among the administrative team and emailing all staff on pertinent issues. AP3 and AP7 reported the importance of “cc’ing” school members to ensure that all interested and affected stakeholders were included in the communication loop.

**The loop and messaging out.** The term “loop” was used by AP3, AP4 and AP7 as they described communications that required movement of information from one person or set of people to another. AP2 and AP6 explained a thoughtfulness of messaging out after a meeting as a part of the loop. Loop meant that communication would start in

one meeting, then information was taken to another group for discussion and then would come back to the original assistant principal to take to the administrative team. AP3 explained that an important function of his administrative team was to “carefully package” information and create a message explaining why they had to make a decision without teacher input so that the decision would not “blow up in their faces.” AP6 explained similarly that the administrative team filtered information then decided when would be the best time to present new information to the staff.

AP2 commented, “you have to be very careful about what you put out there because it is public knowledge.” He gave the example of how a picture of a non-working, dirty drinking fountain made it to the local news station because a student sent it by Instagram. This news media report caused a challenging situation for administrators who then had to respond to the parents and students about non-working water fountains. His hope was that through social media, the administrative team could “promote positive atmospheres” by sharing out great school happenings to get ahead of any negative press. AP7 summed up the loop concept and importance of messaging out as described here:

My entire job is going around chatting with people, making sure people are in the loop. When something goes wrong, it’s usually because somebody failed to get the right person in the loop and get the right feedback or the right timing of the feedback. I think it is important for any team to keep each other accountable for that (AP7).

**Theme Two Summarized.** The communication is emphasized theme had five subthemes explaining the nature of communication. Five participants referred to less desirable communicative team experiences clarifying the significance of trusted, open

and frequent conversations as a part of the collaborative leadership experiences. Essential communication components included the process of listening, reflecting, and being comfortable with conflict in decision-making. Finally, keeping others in “the loop” kept others informed and accountable as they resolved issues, tackled a change goal, or messaged out with as many staff as possible on details of a change process. The communication is emphasized theme was described by all participants as an essential and purposeful part of their sustainable collaborative work.

### **Theme 3: Assistant Principals’ Perceptions and Fit on the Administrative Team was a Part of their Collaborative Leadership Experience**

The collected data on assistant principal’s perceptions included feelings and thoughts about the work they did and on their own fit within the administrative team as an integral part of their collaborative leadership experience. All participants expressed opinionated thoughts and feelings about work done by assistant principals. Lengthy descriptions were reported about past and present administrative team relationships of each participant’s response to research question one. All participants were aware of their role and personal strengths in connection with the administrative team.

**Feelings about assistant principal work.** All participants expressed feelings about their work which ranged from positive feelings to stressful feelings. The following positive words and phrases were reported. AP1 “enjoyed” and “loved” her work because it was a “shared leadership culture”. AP2 claimed that he gets “extremely excited” about seeing students succeed and “loves” the work to the extent that he “gets chills thinking about” their accomplishments in the internship program he oversaw. AP3 claimed that he “enjoyed the process...that they developed a ‘work together culture’”. AP4 claimed that the “work was fun, exciting and challenging.” The researcher observed that these four

participants and AP7 sincerely enjoyed their work, however AP5, AP6, and AP7 explained the pressure of assistant principal work.

AP5, AP6, and AP7 either expressed the feelings of “pressure” or did not report other feelings in their responses. AP5 felt “a little stressed” from the looming deadline of changing the master schedule of over-crowded student classes. She also felt pressure in her prior administrative team because she “felt powerless” when she was unable to solve problems presented to her. AP6 felt stress attributed to being the most veteran person at a prior high school, where status quo was “institutionalized” and the principal was the main decision-maker. AP7 explained the assistant principal work was like “a pressure cooker” where a lot of time is expected on the job; and it is “very, very, very hard work, but it is good work.” The researcher also observed the stressful nature experienced by the participants since they communicated their responses in an energetic, explicit, and demonstrative manner one might feel in a pressured situation.

**Thoughts on assistant principal work.** Participants expressed thoughts on working with others in their roles as assistant principals. AP2 explained that if the administrative team does not work positively together, it reflects on the whole team and the staff. AP3 “experienced change in teams, seeing two administrators make their way out...there’s a phase when you have to learn to work with someone.” AP4 added “I didn’t want to be interpreted as administration is trying to jam this down our throats. I want to make sure I got it right.” AP4 had this approach when discussing his work with teachers.

Thoughts on what collaboration with teachers meant to them were also expressed. AP1 explained that when leading teachers “it takes time, an investment and a real depth of understanding.” AP3 stated that the teachers “feel comfortable coming to them” and

that they have a “good working relationship with the teachers.” AP4 stated that it was important to let teachers lead a change and communicate the message out of what happened on a focus group meeting. More lengthy responses centered on school and administrative changes impacting collaborative leadership.

**Fit within administrative teams.** All participants reflected on how they fit on prior administrative team experiences and in present team experiences. Discerning their fit on the administrative team appeared as a necessary reflective process to make the connections needed to proceed on their goals. AP5, AP6, and AP7 talked extensively about how they fit into new and changing administrative teams.

AP5 explained her recent change of schools and administrative team experiences in this way:

I was hired at High School 1, as AP of Guidance, then [another] assistant principal at High School 1 was promoted to principal. At this school, High School 2, they did not have somebody with my expertise, so they flew the position twice. The principal here wanted a female because all the other assistant principals were male. He wanted a female who had experience with Guidance. I was one of two or three people he was thinking of from other high schools. Human Resources [HR] asked my principal at High School 1 [if he would let me go to High School 2]. He said, “No because High School 1 had turnover.” We hired two new assistant principals and so he didn’t want to lose somebody who was seasoned. So, HR asked me to go to lunch...she said “You can make a choice. You can tell me no, but what do you think?” I just said, “You know what, I am an employee of the district...I’ll do what is ever best for the district.” The reason I’m giving you

the background of this relationships is...I wasn't sure how I would fit in. I was very comfortable at High School 1, knew all the players...but here I think my PPS [Pupil Personnel Services credential] helps. I listen. I am empathetic. I want to help. I think those qualities work really well with this team...of being here with all the other males. I think is actually a pretty good dynamic (AP5).

AP6 described her team fit from two different high schools in this way:

So, I'm finding that I've had two very different experiences at one site as a vice principal. I was the most veteran vice principal...the most veteran person on that campus, so I became that one person with that institutional knowledge and that go-to person, which can be very stressful at times. But it's kind of like last man standing, I have that historical view and I have the knowledge of the teachers and the knowledge of the facilities and rooms and those type of things, and the traditions and history of the school.

Now moving to this school, becoming the newer administrator and not from the area, I don't have that institutional knowledge to fall back on. So, that's a different role for me to take, and there's somebody else that has that, which is great, because not every school has that, but we do in one of our other administrators. He's been here over I believe 16 years, as a teacher and administrator. So, he's kind of the go-to person which I feel for him, because that was my role at the other site (AP6).

AP7 discussed how change in team members related to collaborative leadership lessons:

I've been a part of, thankfully, quite a few different leadership teams over my time. Each has taught me a lot about how people work together and some positives, some negatives. I think our leadership team at my current site, ... is a wonderful example that encapsulates a lot of those lessons whereby we have had some significant turnover and some significant opportunities to analyze what's going on, to see new leadership and to understand the collaborative process more.

But, I think that when our new principal came in...our team had some collaborative issues. I think that there were a couple of members of the assistant principal team who for some reason didn't trust, didn't get along with, didn't like, or I think they respected, but didn't jive with our principal. They had preexisting close relationships with people at the district office, and so you think of your meetings as a cone of silence where we're a team that just backs each other and can be honest and open (AP7).

The examples described how much thought was put into their own place, talents, and length of experience on administrative teams. The researcher did not expect this amount of detail on this topic but concluded that the amount of thought put into their fit on administrative teams precludes their ability to confidently lead collaboratively as presented in this study. Discerning personal fit on changing administrative teams had to be included is an integral part of the collaborative leadership experience. AP3 reported that for him it was the first time in four years the same administrative team was together. He expressed enthusiastically that "We know what our focus is. We hit the ground running."

**Theme Three Summarized.** In summary, the researcher noted that the

participants' ability to lead collaboratively included how they thought and felt about their work and personal fit on changing administrative teams. In general, the participants described their work as enjoyable and stressful. AP3 summarized the purpose of discerning fit in this way "assistant principals and the principal have to work as a unit." This comment might explain why AP5, AP6, and AP7 had lengthy descriptions on forming team member relationships. These perceptions helped lay the groundwork for research question two as if this had to be sorted out in the minds of the participants before they could proceed confidently on working with teachers towards improved student learning outcomes. The next two themes focused on how collaborative leadership practice helps support teacher learning and which ultimately led to focus on student impacts.

**Student learning outcome contextual example.** To gather detailed examples of how each assistant principal practiced collaborative leadership that supported teachers in working towards improved learning for students, participants were prompted to answer research question two. In an effort to contextualize the data an authentic example was collected from each participant. Each participant was asked to think of a student learning outcome they had personal experience in leading at their high school. Table 4 lists the student learning outcome detailed by each participant.

Table 4

*Student learning outcome contextual example by each participant*

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Assistant Principal	Student Learning Outcome Example
AP1	Schoolwide writing for all students in every subject

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AP2	Increased students in Career Technical Education classes and internships
AP3	Improved critical thinking in new math courses
AP4	Increased students in online/blended courses aligned with rigorous curriculum
AP5	Increased college information experiences for students schoolwide
AP6	Improved learning environment of English language learning strategies schoolwide
AP7	All students take Biology (rigorous college preparatory course), omit Life Science option

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*Note.* Assistant principals' personal example of implementing a student learning outcome from their collaborative leadership experience at a high school where they worked.

#### **Theme 4: Collaborative Leadership Practice Helps Support Teachers as**

##### **Professionals**

Subthemes in this section included details about how assistant principals supported teachers as professionals using collaborative leadership. The subthemes that help explain what collaborative leadership meant for the participants were: (a) start from a place of belief and trust in teachers, (b) assess teachers' skills and mindset on the proposed student learning outcome; (c) provide appropriate resources to guide teachers towards the student learning outcome; and (d) recognize and support teacher autonomy. Each participant reported how the collaborative leadership practices they used helped support the teachers and shared their perceptions on the results of the work done.

**Start from a place of trust in teachers.** Participants expressed belief and trust in their teachers, acknowledging that experienced teachers were leaders in their subject areas and must be a part of leading changes. AP1 referred to teachers as "highly professional." When she attended their meetings, she was there to assist them since they were "the experts in lesson design." AP6 knew that her current teaching staff had an average of ten years' experience. She claimed they were "amazing in the classroom, are

doing a great job and students are achieving at high levels.” She added that “if something is not broken, there is no need to try and reinvent something that is working.” AP7 stated that the science department was “the best he had ever seen...they annually reviewed, revamped and redid their science curriculum.” He trusted them to develop a plan to integrate low-achieving students into the more rigorous curriculum of Biology as they omitted the Life Science course option.

**Assess teachers’ skills or mindset in relation to proposed student learning outcome.** Participants were cognizant of where the educational staff were under their subject area of supervision skill-wise and in mindset to assess what steps had to be taken to lead them towards a student learning outcome. AP1, a former English teacher, was aware that the teachers in mathematics and physical education might not have had adequate training on how to use rubrics to grade student writing. AP2 worked with six Career Technical Education teachers; (a) two public safety teachers, (b) two medical health teachers and (c) two culinary teachers. His role was to “work closely with the teachers” and provide them with “the keys to the car,” meaning, to connect each teacher with internship places for students to perform. AP4 detailed how he and summer teachers had to restructure teaching assignments and explained to teachers, not having taught online before, that their instructional delivery to students would change. AP6 worked closely with a new teacher in special education to assist her in managing student behavior through improved teaching strategies from a Kagan workshop.

Four participants showed an in-depth awareness of the teacher starting place to begin movement towards their goal. AP3, a former math teacher, knew that math instruction had to change based on new standards. He stated that the teachers “were not

taught the way they are expected to teach.” In response to this dilemma, he accompanied them to central office meetings where “80 teachers gathered to create new math curriculum.” AP4 and the teachers collectively explored the online course material, assessments and student grades to possibly alter what they taught and how they taught to improve the student learning outcomes. AP7 stated the Biology teachers had to have an open mindset to reach low achieving and learning-disabled students for the first time as they omitted the Life Science option. Since he attended their department meetings, he was aware that they had to develop teaching strategies to integrate real-life and relevant topics. AP5 expressed a challenge in working with teachers. As a former counselor she explained that she initially had “push-back” from the teachers on her student learning outcome of increasing student college-going experiences. They did not want to embrace her plan because “not all students will go to college.” These actions demonstrated the participants’ awareness of details needed to guide teachers in new directions.

**Provide resources to guide teachers.** In order to guide teachers to the specific student learning outcome, all participants described how they put resources in place through collaborative processes. The resources consisted of trainings or valuable connections to others that supported the goal. Secondly, each participant individually attended to and communicated with the teachers and staff regarding student data to achieve the goal. AP1 explained that she collaborated with English teachers to provide “an arsenal of props” to help other teachers learn to scale score writing samples with rubrics. AP3 attended math curriculum development meetings and held discussions with teachers to support them in learning new math strategies. AP4 met with social studies teachers to look at student data on how to implement an alternate online/blended learning

program. AP5 provided student data in the form of student responses to surveys to teachers on how students' opinions to their schoolwide college going experiences.

Participants found that over time, they could allow the teachers to continue utilizing the change goal without their direct support as their plan was implemented.

Participants named different types of outside resources to guide teachers towards their goal. AP3, AP6 and AP7 used educational consultants as academic experts towards getting their student learning outcome accomplished. AP3 went together with the math teachers to the central office for over a year to develop math new curriculum that was led by a math specialist. AP6 sent a new teacher to workshops to improve her teaching. AP7 connected a science consultant with his teachers by creating the email science group in preparation for an on-site workshop to support his plan of omitting the Life Science course. The outside consultants or trainers were used to further the skill level of the teachers or to change the mindset of an organizational structure so that the students would have a new learning experience to prepare for them for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

**Recognize and support teacher autonomy.** Because participants were present at the teacher work meetings, they recognized that they were more of a guide or support for the teachers rather than one telling them what to do. Participants met and communicated with staff until the student learning outcome was sustainable without their direct influence. AP1 explained that after three years, the administrators allowed the teachers “more autonomy” in using their own grading rubrics since initiating the schoolwide writing program. AP3 and the administrative team allowed a “a cohort of six teachers to go out and get trained” on project-based learning and then they “stepped away to let the teachers share” what they found with each other. AP4 explained how a teacher group led

a change in the bell schedule that impacted the whole organization. He felt that messaging out on the details and process came from teachers and not him. His role was to oversee and check the communications to make sure all details were included. AP7 added that in his school the teachers “had a big interest in not only directing what happens but being the leaders who do the work.” He explained that he supported their work, guided it, and “sharpened the edges.”

**Theme four summarized.** Participants expressed an acute awareness of where teachers stood in relation to each of the student learning outcomes listed in Table 4. Four subthemes explained how the participants approached their teachers from a place of trust, where teachers were considered as professionals, capable of learning new skills, changing their mindsets, and were given autonomy to advance in the new student learning or organizational goals. Three participants summarized their role. AP2 explained that his role was to “keep them going on the right direction, put them in contact with others and give them opportunities.” AP3 explained that the only way to see true progress is when “teachers are supported, given resources, and a way to improve.” AP7 expressed that “let the people who know the work, do the work.” The participants had a committed focus and unrelenting drive to achieve the new goal even when teachers required lots of support and guidance. The participants exuded confidence in their efforts with staff that led to the final theme.

#### **Theme 5: Assistant Principals Focus on Impacting Students’ Experiences with the Influence of Other Stakeholders**

Theme five resembles theme four because the collaborative leadership processes were similar, however participant examples focused on student impact rather than working with teachers. Improved student learning stems from theme four, adjusting

teachers' abilities and mindsets, and making connections with other stakeholders outside of the immediate school. The student learning outcomes listed in Table 3, demonstrated that each participant genuinely wanted students to gain a new learning experience that they believed was necessary for their success while in high school or in life after high school. The types of improved learning experiences the participants helped plan for students were improved writing abilities, ability to critically think through a problem, online learning, applying curriculum to real-life experiences, work experience training, and college information for future decision-making. The researcher noted that not one participant reported the need to improve test-taking as a way to improve the student learning outcome.

The subthemes that arose for this theme included a) assistant principals make decisions to address student experiences, b) support from central office administrators is necessary to act on improved student experiences, c) community members and parents of students are influential, and d) a focus on the common good. Participants expressed a sincere hope that work they did impacted students in a positive way.

**Assistant principals make decisions to address student learning.** Decisions made to ensure a positive student experience stemmed from meetings and communications around student data as described in themes one and two. For example, AP1 explained their team meeting discussions on an opening year pep rally. They decided to have a more creative and activity-based pep assembly to “raise the spirit of the students but to also keep the school safe.” This decision meant that each administrator had to be distinctly positioned in the gym where they communicated via two-way radios to ensure a smooth student event. AP2 joined an outside community organization to

specifically gain more internship experiences for the students in Career Technical Education. AP3 made frequent visits to classrooms to observe if students were learning to critically think more with new math curriculum. AP4 explained that to improve summer credit recovery courses, he had to redesign the daily schedule and allow students to meet with different teachers for one course. AP5 desired that all 2960 students had college-going experiences. Yet, when teachers of special education students pushed back on her idea, she over-rode their concerns by sending special education to four-year colleges anyway. AP6 frequented a specific classroom many times to ensure students would have an effective learning experience from a new teacher. AP7 decided to omit a Life Science course for low-achieving and special education students and enroll them in Biology instead. All participants had to make decisions, sometimes difficult ones, to improve students school experiences.

**Support from central office administrators is necessary to act on behalf of improved student experiences.** Participants explained that they required the support or backing of others to attain their goals. AP1, AP3, AP4, and AP6 noted that they needed district administrator's approval and financing to improve student learning experiences. AP1 and AP3 specifically stated that "push" from the district staff helped direct the student outcome that they were working on. AP4 needed oversight from the directors of technology and educational services to implement the online/blended summer curriculum. AP4 also talked about the "open-door policy" of the superintendent as one who encouraged decentralized decision-making to make changes that they believed improved students' experiences. AP6 needed district approval to send a new teacher to a training on student management. Whether the student learning outcome originated from

their own ideas, such as with AP5, or the outcome originated from parent concerns as with AP4, each participant expressed needing support or backing from educators in the school organizational hierarchy (see Figure 1).

**Community members and parents of students are influential.** Three participants talked about communications with outside stakeholders, whether to gain a resource or to send positive information out, participants explained that this was an integral part of their collaborative experience. AP2 and AP5 relied on community members to accomplish their goal. AP2 stated connections with four different business organizations allowing students to perform internships at their place of business. AP5 was given \$10,000 annually from the mayor to allow her students to experience college-going activities. AP2 and AP4 discussed parents as stakeholders. AP4 explained that when parents expressed concerns on the limiting bell schedule, they listened and acted. Parents wanted students to have more classes in their school day. AP2 also stated the importance of responding to parents by using social media to inform them of school happenings to maintain a positive school culture.

**A focus on the common good of students.** The purpose of this study was on the collaborative leadership experiences, yet student impact was the final goal of the work assistant principals performed every day. Each participant showed that they genuinely cared that student learning outcomes would be positive or significant for their futures. AP2 stated “I get excited about CTE and hope the kids will go on after graduation.” He was “proud of the students.” He enthusiastically explained that “every student in his CTE classes graduated, a 100% graduation rate.” AP4 stated that he and the social science teachers “were not happy” about curriculum results impacting students. He earnestly

posed the question, is there something we need to do? He and the teachers spent lots of time “talking about student work”. AP5 triumphantly reported that “every student was impacted” by the student learning outcome. All students would have more college awareness options upon graduation. The list of phrases sums up similar sentiments held;

- a) all focused on the common good, on what’s best for students (AP1),
- b) we talk to kids, reward them, and offer opportunities to improve themselves (AP2),
- c) how can we make this better for students? (AP4),
- d) solutions must be student-focused (AP5) and,
- e) keep students learning the best material possible (AP7),

**Theme Five Summarized.** All participants showed a genuine concern on student impact. Based on these participants, assistant principals make independent decisions and rely on others to positively attain a specific student learning outcome. Every participant communicated with an outside stakeholder to complete their collaborative leadership experiential goal. AP2 summarized theme five well by stating, “It takes a village” to get the students to be successful. For him that meant talking constantly with the administrative team, the teachers, community members and the students themselves about their work-experience. The four subthemes showed that all participants made decisions within the school and collaborated with others outside of the school to feel confident that their student learning outcome would succeed.

### **Synthesis of Findings**

This study explored collaborative leadership from the seven assistant principals’ perspectives and how that experience related to student learning outcomes in their

schools. Five themes with subthemes helped answer the two research questions to form a composite description derived from the responses of the participants where collaborative leadership is not top-down leadership. Additionally, the researcher commented on how the participants expressed themselves. Six of the seven participants were enthusiastic and positive. One participant was not positive about her position because she felt powerless at times and stress from prior administrative team experiences. Most participants felt pressures in their experiences. The researcher observed that all participants were eager and confident in their responses, demonstrating assuredness in their experiences and a genuine desire to improve school learning for students.

Prior to the study, the researcher provided a tentative definition of collaborative leadership in the recruitment phase for this phenomenological study. The working definition of collaborative leadership taken from business, education and human social services was: A process where interdependent stakeholders take time to build trusted relationships and share decision-making power based on their unique competencies that mobilize resources to solve problems, meet common goals, and capitalize on creative opportunities. Upon analysis of the data, five themes emerged for assistant principals that created a similar but more explicit description of collaborative leadership related to education in large public high schools.

In response to research question one: What is the assistant principals' experience of collaborative leadership on a high school leadership team? A composite description is:

Collaborative leadership is a process where assistant principals participate in and initiate meetings where communication is constant and trustworthy among all staff. Assistant principals must discern how they fit into changing administrative

teams as they establish connections to improve student learning.

In response to research question two: How does the assistant principals' practice of collaborative leadership relate to supporting teachers in attaining student learning outcomes? A composite description is:

Considering teachers as professionals, assistant principals provide resources to teachers to help them adapt their skills or change their mindsets as they guide them towards a change goal. Outside stakeholders influence the decisions assistant principals make in the process of collaborative leadership while focused on attaining authentic student experiences for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

### **Summary**

A phenomenological study was conducted to explore collaborative leadership experiences from the assistant principal perspectives. Two research questions were used in addition to a solicited student learning outcome to examine the central topic. Five themes and subthemes emerged from the analysis. The themes included (1) assistant principals participate in and initiate different types of meetings (2) communication is emphasized in collaborative leadership, (3) assistant principals' perceptions and fit on the administrative team is a part of the collaborative leadership experience (4) collaborative leadership practice helps support teachers as professionals, and (5) assistant principals focus on impacting students' experiences with the Influence of other stakeholders. In response to research question one, participants described their administrative team experiences through meetings, communications and perspectives manifested by thoughts, feelings and details on how they fit within their past and present administrative teams. Research question two, prompted participants to supply an example of a student learning

outcome with the details of their involvement in that outcome. The composite description, with the five themes can be used as a set of recommendations for administrators seeking to use collaborative leadership practices in their large public high schools. Chapter Five will explain how to use the results of the study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Introduction**

A phenomenological study was conducted that provided evidence to fill in the gaps of understanding collaborative leadership in large public high schools. The study helped develop recommendations to prepare and inform aspiring and practicing school administrators who seek to utilize collaborative leadership processes in large public high schools. The participants were assistant principals who described their collaborative processes as part of an administrative team. The recommendations center on the assistant principal position as being an influential school leader among a team of leaders who supports teachers and impacts student learning outcomes relevant for 21st century skills. Educational policies affecting school leaders, implementation of collaborative leadership practices, and implications for all school leaders and high school students will be discussed in this chapter.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of collaborative leadership from the perspective of assistant principals in large public high schools and explore how it relates to student learning outcomes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study was to use the results to develop recommendations that provide a deeper understanding of collaborative leadership from the perspectives of assistant principals at large public high schools relative to student learning outcomes. The recommendations that emerge from the insights gained when looking at the results of this study can be shared with aspiring and practicing school administrators to demonstrate

how collaborative leadership could be used to support teachers as they prepare youth for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and living.

### **Assistant Principals as Model Collaborative Leaders**

A composite description of collaborative leadership from the assistant principal perspective evolved from this study:

Collaborative leadership is a process where assistant principals participate in and initiate meetings where communication is constant and trustworthy among all staff. Assistant principals must discern how they fit into changing administrative teams as they confidently establish connections to improve student learning.

Considering teachers as professionals, assistant principals provide resources to help teachers adapt their skills or change their mindsets as they guide them towards a change goal. Outside stakeholders influence the decisions assistant principals make in the process of collaborative leadership while focused on attaining authentic student experiences for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

Based on this description, assistant principals as a part of an administrative team, model collaborative leaders detailed in five themes that relate to student learning outcomes in large public high schools. As an administrative team member, assistant principals build trusted working relationships with many stakeholders to achieve change goals. The assistant principal makes decisions independently as a formal leader that establishes a culture of collaboration. In collaboration with all levels of educators focused on student learning experiences, other administrators could obtain a better understanding of the processes used by assistant principals as described in this study.

Eight recommendations for collaborative leadership processes should be presented to all levels of educators on the educational hierarchy (see Figure 1). The first discussion will be for aspiring assistant principals from the teaching and counseling professions. The second discussion is intended for practicing school administrators; central office administrators, principals, and assistant principals wanting to better understand the dimensions of collaborative leadership processes when working in large public high schools. Finally, implications on the interpretation of educational policies and change theory related to the role of assistant principal will be discussed.

### **Aspiring Assistant Principals**

In this study the participating assistant principals were former teachers (AP1, AP2, AP3, AP4, AP6, and AP7) and one was a counselor (AP5) who provided details of their collaborative experiences related to their areas of expertise. A teacher from a specific subject area or a counselor assisting students for college or career readiness sometimes leaves their original area of expertise and supports teachers from other subject areas or in implementing new school-wide goals as an assistant principal. As an example, AP6, a former business teacher supported a special education teacher. AP7, a former social science teacher supported change for life science teachers. Organizational changes were put in place by AP4, a social science teacher engaged in implementing a blended/online instructional delivery model of his subject matter. AP5, a counselor, conversed with special education teachers who were “pushing back” on her school-wide change goal. Aspiring assistant principals, each having developed different subject-matter expertise (AP1, AP3, AP4), technological skills (AP2), or experiential school learning

(AP2, AP5), could help changing school administrative teams with student learning outcomes relevant to their school organizations.

Teachers or counselors in preparing for an assistant principal position should be aware that the position is both stressful and enjoyable where they make interdependent decisions to influence student experiences, based on this study. The researcher believes that stressful sentiments stem from having the courage and insight to keep many different stakeholders within the school and outside of the school in the loop (AP3, AP4, & AP7). Stress also came from discerning where they fit on changing administrative teams, based on reflection of their own skills and establishing connections to help them implement new student experiences (AP5, AP6, AP7). The joy appears to originate from the collaborative experience itself (AP1, AP4) or seeing a goal completed, such as with creating experiential learning for students (AP2, AP5). Teachers and counselors preparing for the assistant principal role might reflect on personal skills and acquired expertise they would bring to the role of assistant principal. Those reflections, coupled with the possibility of being given the freedom to lead change with groups of interested teachers (AP4), would enable them to impact a larger network of educators and more students than those in their classrooms.

### **Practicing School Administrators**

The larger network of educators includes the hierarchy of school administrators typically seen in a school district organization and teachers outside of their subject area (see Figure 1). In a school district hierarchy, central office administrators are responsible for interpreting and implementing educational law or governing policies (Crowson, 2011). If they practice top down decision-making, interpreting educational law that

focuses on raising test scores and telling assistant principals what should be done (Militello et al., 2015), then the status quo of organizational practice will continue in schools. The recommendations suggest that central office administrators should consider allowing assistant principals to have decision-making influence on student learning outcomes that will prepare students for their lives after high school, if they have not yet considered or implemented this approach (AP2, AP5). Assistant principals in shared leadership with the principal are better situated to lead their school culture through collaboration because they are closer to teachers and classroom learning than those in the central office or in government (Colwell, 2015; Kantor, 2015; Kensler et al., 2011; Leonard & Leonard, 1999).

Principals, as instructional leaders of the school (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Spillane et al., 2004), need assistant principals to assist them in school operations and leadership activities in a large public high school (Colwell, 2015). A principal might ask an assistant principal to lead or might give them the freedom to decide independently to lead an organizational change goal (AP4, AP5, AP6, and AP7). Assistant principals sometimes spend more time among subject area teaching staff than the principal if the change goal they are leading is in their subject area (AP1, AP3, AP4) or is their own idea (AP2, AP5, AP6). Once a change goal is established and in process, the assistant principal loops back to the principal through communication on the details of the change goal. When shared leadership interactions occur through open communication among administrators and with teachers that guide change, positive school cultures emerge (Day et al., 2016; Kensler et al., 2011; Moolenaar et al., 2010; Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995).

Assistant principals are collaborative leaders that do not necessarily want to be promoted to principal (Kantor, 2015). Assistant principals were interviewed who sustained their positions for three years or more years (see Table 1). The focus of this study was not on promotion or job satisfaction, however perceptions emerged (see theme four) on job satisfaction as a part of the phenomenological experience. AP2 expressed a desire to promote to principal. AP5 stated that she did not want to be a principal and may leave the assistant principal position because of work-related pressures. The other participants did not discuss promotion, yet provided rich thoughts and feelings about the work, magnifying the intensity and value of the assistant principal experience. AP4, with eleven years' experience, stated that he could talk about the work he was freely given to do "all day long", exuding excitement about his role in leading change. All participants enthusiastically described their experiences on what it takes to lead collaboratively in large public high school for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Recommendations for Collaborative School Leaders regarding the Assistant Principal Role**

- Give assistant principals opportunities to lead formal and informal meetings with the expectation of communicating details back to the principal.
- Let assistant principals communicate openly with teachers and counselors in school and with outside stakeholders such as central office staff and community members to reach organizational goals.
- Allow assistant principals a trusted space to voice how they feel and what they think about changing administrative team dynamics.

- Provide freedoms for assistant principals to lead organizational change goals.
- Give assistant principals decision-making power on which student learning outcomes should be implemented.
- Acknowledge assistant principal prior subject area teaching, counseling experience, or other expertise gained that advances teacher skill for new student learning or to help change mindsets to improve student learning.
- Qualify the assistant principal position as a legitimate and influential position without the pressure of expecting promoting to principal.
- Recognize assistant principal value as a formal leader for their sustainability and trusted relationships built with others to create organizational reforms for the benefit of student learning.

### **Support for the Recommendations**

Support for recommendations that emerged from this study is found in literature on leading groups effectively through relationships (Baran, Rhoades Shanock, Rogelberg, & Scott, 2012; Haslam et al., 2011). School meetings where teachers came together focused on student data for change must be supported by school leaders similar to LMX theory (Kensler et al., 2011; Somech & Winderow, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Weinstein et al., 1995). In meetings that occurred over time, the school leader created time and space for open collaborations and provided resources for teachers to work towards new ideas that benefit student learning (AP4, AP5, and AP7). Open and trusted communications among a school administrator and the teachers helps a school organization change (Kensler et al., 2011; Klar, 2012). The school administrator influencing change can be the

assistant principal and not the principal (Leonard & Leonard, 1999). The assistant principals in this study engaged in many different types of meetings (see theme one), established trust through communication (see theme two) that focused on a change goal for students (see Table 4).

Assistant principals as model collaborative leader stems from literature on distributed leadership among teams that influence change (Day et al., 2016; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Supovitz & Tognata, 2013; Tian et al., 2015). As detailed in theme two and theme three, a key element for a school leadership team is that the assistant principals join in a trusted relationship with the principals (Supovitz & Tognata, 2013; Smylie et al., 2007) to get the support they need to successfully attain a new school goal. AP5 established a trusted relationship with her principal to implement a school-wide college-going experience program. AP3 and AP7 discussed how it took a year of untrusted relationships in a prior year to experience the benefits of trust among the collective team at the time of this study, where they could then focus on the change goal before them. Trusted relationships on leadership teams appears to be a necessary component that precludes change activities completed over time with teachers.

Assistant principals can provide resources to guide teachers towards a new teaching skill or change a mindset (Day et al., 2016; Kensler et al., 2011). AP3 and AP4 discussed the cooperative relationships they built with teachers on curriculum changes in math and in online delivery of social science. The leader allowed engaging interactions within school meetings that contributed to job satisfaction since trusted communications focused on changes to improve student learning (AP1, AP3, and AP4). AP1 had respect and belief in teachers as professionals. AP3 talked continually with math teachers to

change teaching strategies and stated they were comfortable with conflict. AP4 worked with other social science teachers to improve instructional delivery and ensure rigorous content. AP6 sent a new teacher to professional development to improve instructional practice in her classroom. When school leaders respect their staff and allow teachers to be a part of the decision-making process, collaborative cultures result (Gruenert, 2005; Smylie et al., 2007). The research on trust and evidence from this study both suggest that trusted relationships among school administrators and teachers helps positively impact student learning experiences.

Assistant principals in this study described collaborative experiences creating practices that benefited students. Benefits of improved student learning outcomes result from mediating factors of collaborative school culture and climate (Gruenert, 2005; Kensler et al., 2011; Moolenaar et al., 2010). Collaborative leaders interacted with teachers on course content and organizational processes to create new learning experiences for students (AP1, AP2, AP4, AP5, and AP7). Considering student learning that incorporates creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking skills for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning (P21, 2016), assistant principals focused on changing school structures to move towards outcomes not associated with raising test scores. AP1 and AP5 helped change teaching practices that impacted all students to improve critical thinking in school and for decisions made upon graduation (see Table 4). AP3 noted the importance of developing critical thinking in math courses. AP2 impacted student learning by providing work-experiences for Career Technical Education students. His students presented to at a county assembly, exercising their learning to communicate with

large groups of people and those in the work-force. Assistant principals given the freedom to make decisions can change student experiences in large public high schools.

### **Factors and Barriers Related to Implementing Collaborative Leadership**

Some barriers exist that would make it difficult to implement the recommendations. A first barrier would involve be school administrators in traditionally hierarchal positions operating in a top down way rather than a more team-based community of practice (Kensler et al., 2013). Top-down or team-based approaches are sometimes tied to the leadership style of those on the top (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999) and when leaders use their position to impact organizational culture or norms (Haslam et al., 2011). The factors within decision-making cultures that use a more collaborative approach are discussed in this study. For example, AP4 mentioned that his superintendent allowed decentralized, decision-making among his school administrative teams giving him the freedom to make decisions that improved student learning experiences in the area of online/blended learning. In contrast, AP6 explained that on a prior administrative team, the principal made all the decisions, which made it difficult for her to impact the whole school culture. She focused her efforts on change within one classroom with one teacher. The process a superintendent or principal decides to use, sometimes tied to their personal style, as a school leader can impact school or school district cultures.

A second barrier to collaborative leadership implementation is when school administrators in public high schools interpret policies (i.e. NCLB or ESSA) that pressure administrative teams to raise scores (ASCD, 2013; DeBoer, 2012; Hannaway, 1993; Rost, 1995; 2008; Wong & Sunderman, 2001) rather than on approaches that promote innovative solutions to improve student learning (Crowson, 2011; Kensler, et al., 2011).

Choosing an open, collaborative approach where assistant principals can freely communicate and provide new ideas from group processes in which they participate, is an approach described in this study. If central office administrators and principals are open to innovative approaches from their school leadership team, they may get the results they are seeking through the collaborative approaches. The barriers of top-down leadership and leaders requiring focus on raising on test scores through agentic approaches do not fit in the collaborative leadership approach. Five of the seven assistant principals clarified that collaborative leadership is not a top-down feeling or approach (AP1, AP3, AP4, AP5, and AP6).

### **Educational Policies Influencing the Recommendations**

If collaborative leadership had to be clarified as not being a top-down feeling or approach, then it appears a clearer description of collaboration that emerged from this study was justified. Additionally, AP5 stated that many say they collaborate, but do not really do so. To provide a clear description or to examine the details of what collaborative leadership looks like on an administrative team, educational leaders in human resources might want to also consider the insights of collaboration as described in this study. Administrative licensing organizations seeking a deeper understanding of collaboration for school leaders might find the results of this study advantageous in preparing school administrators on collaborative leadership practices.

In California, where the study took place, the California Department of Education (CDE) Executive Office has issued a memorandum and booklet delineating the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSELs) for preparation courses and for professional development activities that lead to school administrator licensure (California

Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2014). Noteworthy in the Six Standards outlining the CPSEL's is the term "collaborative," used eleven times as school leader indicators for preparation to be a school administrator. The eight recommendations listed for assistant principals as collaborative leaders can be used to clarify the eleven exemplars required for school administrator licensure in California or other organizations seeking to understand collaborative dynamics.

### **Financial/Budget Issues Related to the Solution**

Sharing the results of the study for school organizations wanting to better understand collaborative leadership processes would not entail any new or extra expenses. However, it would require central office decisions to be made on which professional development themes to fund and present to leaders as they look at new ideas or programs open to collaborative leadership practices. Once those decisions were made, funds would be appropriated for professional development meetings and workshops that school leaders would attend. According to Young et al. (2017) in ESSA, a greater percentage of federal funds exist to support leadership development; and there is flexibility in how to spend federal funds that include new ideas that develop leadership practices. It is simply a question of which programs, workshops, or professional development ideas would be funded for leadership development.

School districts, within the course of their planning, provide time for programs, workshops, and professional development (DuFour et al., 2006; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). The finances involved in the planning are not the dilemma. The school leaders involved, and decisions made that do not include participative decision-making might lead to another financial dilemma. The financial cost would be related to losing effective school

leaders due to job dissatisfaction because they were not a part of the collaborative solution (Kwan, 2015; Militello et al., 2015). School administrators seeking leadership development ideas that support collaborative practice should look more closely at the assistant principal as collaborative leader model to sustain experienced school administrators. AP5 discussed leaving the profession and explained that not all principals are truly collaborative in their decision-making. AP6 worked for a principal that made all the decisions prior to the year she was interviewed. At her new high school, she described the principal as being collaborative, asking their views on school practices. The researcher believes not following the recommendations, where assistant principals are a part of the decision-making on professional development choices, would negatively impact school district finances in a way that causes effective school administrators to leave the profession resulting in a shortage of administrators as reported by the National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], (2017).

### **Change Theory**

Many have called for fresh ideas in assessment and accountability from school leaders (Bierly & Shy, 2013; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; ICLE, 2012). Change can be difficult for bureaucratic systems such as large school districts that have become entrenched in practices led by pressures of educational policy and superintendents with a business mindset of seeking results in the form of raised test scores (Crowson, 2011; Hannaway, 1993; Ravitch, 2016). Reasons why collaborative leadership has not taken place to prepare high school students for the 21st century has been provided by Fullan and Quinn (2016):

California has always been known as having a strong top down-down education governance system. But this system in recent years, has been characterized as very dysfunctional with shifting power centers at the state level. All of this has led to a high level of stress between state educational agencies and school districts...For the state education agency in California to be truly effective, there needs to be a conscious shift in mindset of staff and the basic culture of the organization (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Change can take place if school leaders that are responsible for the school culture and vision try new directions and approaches as seen in collaborative leadership.

Government educational officials need to allow school leaders other than the principal and superintendent to be influential decision-makers in the school change process. ESSA (2016) has opened the door for more creativity in assessments and accountability through leadership development (Young et al., 2017), but the researcher believes the confusion and uncertainty on how to implement new assessments (Cohen et al., 2007; Marsh et al., 2017) will continue to plague school leaders unless new messages are sent and acted upon (Spillane et al., 2004). The new messages stem from ideology that teachers and assistant principals can provide authentic and effective contributions to school change by allowing them an influential voice in decision-making ideas for change. Results from this study and the literature have demonstrated that it is possible to have collaborative leadership, but it does not appear to be a norm or pervasive leadership approach at the time of this study.

A new approach for high school reform is to allow assistant principals as collaborative leaders more freedoms to impact student experiences in their schools, in

central office decisions, and governing relations that set state policy. This type of change mirrors decentralized decision-making where the leaders closest to the students and the learning outcomes are a part of the communication impacting policy (Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Moolenaar et al., 2010). A collaborative assistant principal would keep the principal in the loop of all the communications and decisions being made in the authentic student learning outcome goal. The principal in turn would keep the central office in the loop of the change goals. This is how a team practicing collaborative leadership would operate in a large public high school focused on the common good of students for their futures.

### **Implementation of the Recommendations**

Implementation of the recommendations might be challenging where superintendents are traditionally concerned about assessments and accountability (Townsend et al., 2013). Stories exist on superintendents utilizing top-down strategies measuring results of success through test scores as a quick fix to respond to the public and governance cry for educational change (Ravitch, 2016). Implementation of new ideas that challenge the status quo and change the learning culture will come with courageous school leaders speaking to superintendents about new directions for student learning outcomes by “leading up” (Colwell, 2015). Further, as described in theme two, the superintendent, like collaborative leaders, would have to listen, be comfortable with conflict and allow freedoms to lead and try new approaches. An assistant principal could attend a workshop promoting collaboration and professional learning communities for leaders, such as LearningForward: The Professional Learning Association. The assistant principal, modeling the recommendations in this study, would communicate with their

principal and inform them that they will communicate with the superintendent about their ideas for change.

Superintendents are usually responsible for carrying out the vision, mission and strategic plan of a school district, which could change every five years or with new superintendents. Some superintendents have had prior experience with the professional learning community models and have decided to lead their school district with this approach (Psenck, Brown, Cain, Coleman, & Todd Cummings, 2014). On the other hand, a collaborative culture might be just what a superintendent is seeking to improve student learning outcomes if they believe their district has stagnated. Another way to implement the recommendations would be to communicate openly at meetings held within the school or school organization. If regularly held meetings do not occur, then the assistant principal can request for them to become a part of the school culture.

### **Assessment of the Implementation of the Recommendations**

Assessment of implementing the list of recommendations can be done in two ways. If an assistant principal leads a change goal at their school, it would likely be a part of their personal professional development plan and annual evaluation. For example, in the CPSEL's (2014), it is stated in Standard 1, Element 1A: "Leaders shape a collective vision that uses multiple measures of data...and focuses on outcomes for all students." Element 1B states "Leaders engage others in a collaborative process where the vision is shared and supported by all stakeholders." If the school district human resources office adopts an evaluation instrument that uses the CPSEL's, then the recommendations are being used and reviewed since they align with recent administrative standards as seen in California. A second way to assess the impact of collaborative leadership is to survey the

seniors at the end of the year on the school culture and learning experiences to determine if collaborative decisions made and implemented, impacted students for their futures. The administrative team can sit together at the end of the school year, review the results, and consider how they might plan for the following year.

### **The Assistant Principal, as School Leader, Implementing the Recommendations**

In business, ideas in leadership processes among team members have emerged where people in middle management courageously communicate with those in positions above them on new ideas for organizational change (Gabarro & Kotter, 2005). School leaders can use this approach. An assistant principal usually has gone through preparation courses and/or training to become a licensed school administrator, giving them the opportunity to lead courageously. Assistant principals are leaders in their subject areas or have gained expertise in other area such as in technology or leading groups. They might enjoy leading collaboratively as described in the composite description, because they have been given the freedom to lead change and influence student learning outcomes that they believe will help students in their futures. Some call this integrity or “walking the talk.” Nevertheless, speaking courageously and as a middle manager when asked, maintaining the respect of self and others falls within the framework of ethical leadership in the researcher’s view. Ciulla (2003) stated that leaders are ordinary folks doing extraordinary things. When teachers, counselors, assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators come together and listen to each other genuinely putting student interests first, then a collaborative culture emerges, and innovative ideas are formed among ordinary folks doing extra-ordinary things.

## **Implications**

### **Practical Implications**

Practicing assistant principals would benefit from implementing the recommendations that have been generated from this study because it would give them a voice in the leadership field where they can impact student learning. Assistant principals, according to this study, lead meetings, change organizational processes, communicate with many stakeholders through trusted relationships, support and guide teachers as professionals, while focused on what is best for student futures. Whether or not an assistant principal wants to be promoted to principal should be the professional's personal decision. Nevertheless, the role of assistant principal should be dignified as being an influential school leader, where they have the capacity to influence their student learning outcomes relative to their school cultures. This study provides evidence that qualified school administrators, namely assistant principals, exist and operate as viable collaborative leaders.

Students would also benefit from these recommendations because an assistant principal close to the learning activities in a public high school, who has built trusted relationships with teachers (Day et al., 2016; Supovitz & Tognata, 2013) could make decisions that positively impact student learning (Moolenaar et al., 2010). The student experience examples included more writing across the subjects, increased student participation in work-experiences, an increase in college-going experiences, improved critical thinking in math courses, more access to online/blended courses, English learner techniques in better managed classrooms, and more rigorous life science courses for low

achieving and students with learning disabilities (see Table 4). Looking to assistant principals who collaborate with principals to influence school reform might be a direction school governance and central office administrators take to find new ways to assess student learning (Colwell, 2015; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2014; DuFour, et al., 2006; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; DeWitt, 2017; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; ICLE, 2012; Kuhn, 2015). The call for new ideas on assessment and accountability that authentically prepare students for life after high school might start with the vision of assistant principals.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This phenomenological study on collaborative leadership was a small snapshot into experiences of seven assistant principals in the Southwest United States. It added to the existing research on distributed, shared, collective and team leadership across the United States and in Canada (Devos et al., 2013; Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Harris et al., 2007; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Hulpia et al., 2012; Klar, 2012; Leithwood, & Mascall, 2008). Some have called for exploration of more details on the process of distributed leadership in schools to better understand collaborative dimensions relative to outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Seashore Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016). This study provided examples and insights into the leadership practices of assistant principals as formal leaders in the middle (Day et al., 2016) able to influence student learning outcome decisions through supporting teachers and staff associated with that end goal.

In future research, it would be advantageous to perform longitudinal studies over several years and collect data on the efficacy of collaborative leadership. Assistant principals engaging in processes that might assist students in life after high school is of

paramount importance because that action creates meaningful work that legitimizes the assistant principal role as a formal leader. Also, efficacy studies can measure whether or not an assistant principal-led student outcome made a positive difference in the school culture and in the lives of students associated with the outcome they worked on over several years. The researcher believes that with the pressures and intense work expressed by the participants, school leaders would benefit if they knew their work was meaningful and positively impacted the students they served over time.

### **Implications for Interdisciplinary Leadership Theory and Practice**

Discussions on the value of collaborative leadership processes are not new (Gruenert, 2005; Leonard & Leonard, 1999; Rost, 1995). Literature from business, governance, health science, non-profits and higher education have highlighted the benefits of team or shared leadership when a focused group of people form trusted relationships creating positive results (Baggetta et al., 2013; Burns, 2003; DeVries et al., 2010; Lawson, 2004; Kramer & Crespi, 2011; Pearce et al., 2009; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). What can be learned from this study in the information age of knowledge-sharing is that when leaders communicate often and openly, staying focused on the greater good of others, change results. The assistant principals in this study led change in their schools that they each believed would benefit students in school and upon graduation. As AP2 stated, “It takes a village” when helping high school students succeed. Assistant principals are formal leaders not on the top of the hierarchy. When they contribute their ideas and acquired expertise leading up and from the middle with principals, superintendents, community leaders or college admissions personnel, improved student experiences for their futures can happen as seen with AP2 and AP5.

### **Summary of the Study**

A phenomenological study was conducted where themes and a composite description emerged allowing the researcher to develop recommendations to aspiring and practicing school administrators seeking a deeper understanding of collaborative leadership from the assistant principal perspective. This study adds to existing school leadership theories on the benefits of distributed leadership and decentralized decision-making as evidence for elevating and legitimizing the role of assistant principal as a model collaborative leader (Colwell, 2015; Dewitt, 2017; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Leonard & Leonard, 1999). Eight recommendations that emerged would help all levels of educators in better understanding collaborative processes found in communities of practice where trusted relationships form among teachers and school leaders. According to Dufour and Marzano (2011), every superintendent, principal, assistant principal, counselor and teacher is in a leadership position, where each leader has the potential to go beyond their individual capacities to accomplish a goal collectively. Assistant principals are sometimes over-looked in this leadership path and might even have greater influence than previously acknowledged. This study provides evidence legitimizing the role of assistant principals as influential leaders in schools that care to impact student learning.

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## Appendix A (District Approvals)

**Los Alamitos  
Unified School District**

10293 Bloomfield Street • Los Alamitos, California 90720-2200  
(562) 799-4700 • Fax (562) 799-4730

*Chris Vlasic*  
*Director of Educational Services*



## Letter of Agreement

May 23, 2017:

To the CU IRB:

We are familiar with Kathleen Lommen's research project entitled A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES IN HIGH SCHOOLS. I understand that Los Alamitos Unified School District's involvement is to allow Kathleen to invite assistant principals from large schools by invitational letter to be interviewed. The names of the high schools, assistant principals and school district will remain confidential. The 45 minute interviews will be recorded, transcribed and coded.

We understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles, that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary, and that confidentiality of participants' research data is ensured, as described in the protocol.

Therefore, as a representative of Los Alamitos Unified School District, I agree that Kathleen Lommen's research project may be conducted at Los Alamitos High School.

Sincerely,

Chris Vlasic  
Director of Educational Services



**Creighton University Human Research  
Protection Program**

2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178 • Phone: 402-280-2126 • Fax: 402-280-4766  
Campus Address: Criss I, Room 104  
Email: irb@creighton.edu

**Letter of Agreement**  
**Creighton University-Sponsored Research with Cooperating Organizations**

April 2017

To: Temecula Valley Unified School District:

I am conducting a study on collaborative leadership in large public high schools in Southern California. I am requesting permission to send out invitational letters with a short survey to several assistant principals in your high schools that enroll over 2000 students. The interviewees, names of schools and the name of the school district will remain confidential. I am seeking voluntary participants that can describe their leadership practices in a confidential setting at their school site in June or early August of 2017.

If you are in agreement that I may reach out to your employees, please insert the date, your name and title on this letter of agreement so that I may include this permission in my IRB approval packet before I begin seeking participants and collecting data.

Thank you for your consideration in contributing to research on school leadership practices.

Kathleen Lommen  
Creighton University, Doctoral Candidate  
KathleenLommen@creighton.edu

**Letter of Agreement**

April 25, 2017

To the CU IRB:

We are familiar with Kathleen Lommen's research project entitled A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES IN HIGH SCHOOLS. I understand that Temecula Valley Unified School District's involvement is to allow Kathleen to invite assistant principals from large schools by invitational letter to be interviewed. The names of the high schools, assistant principals and school district will remain confidential. The 45 minute interviews will be recorded, transcribed and coded.

We understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles, that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary, and that confidentiality of participants' research data is ensured, as described in the protocol.

Therefore, as a representative of Temecula Valley Unified School District, I agree that Kathleen Lommen's research project may be conducted at Temecula Valley Unified School District..

Sincerely,

Jodi McClay  
Assistant Superintendent, ESS



## Irvine Unified School District

5050 Barranca Parkway, Irvine, California 92604-4652 • 949/936-5000 • FAX 949/936-3259 • www.iusd.org

**Alyssa McCanne**  
**5050 Barranca Parkway**  
**Irvine, CA 92604**  
**May 26, 2017**

**Kathleen Lommen**  
**Doctoral Student**  
**Creighton University**

Dear Kathleen Lommen:

We are pleased to inform you that your proposal to pursue research in Irvine Unified School District has been accepted on the condition that IRB approval is obtained from Creighton University. This letter in no way obligates any staff member, student, or parent to participate in your study. This letter does give you permission to contact the appropriate administrator(s) to recruit possible volunteers for your research. Please present this letter upon contacting any district administrator. Each administrator has the authority to respectfully decline participating based on the unique interests of their department or site. Your research must adhere to the regulations set forth by federal regulations, relevant District Board Policy, and the requirements described within the Application to Conduct Research in Irvine Unified School District. Every researcher acts independently regardless of school district affiliation.

Irvine Unified School District recognizes the value of high-quality research in advancing the field of educational practice. This project aligns with district priorities, and we look forward to reviewing your findings once complete. Please submit a final report detailing your research findings to Alyssa McCanne at the Irvine Unified District Office upon completion.

Sincerely,

**Alyssa McCanne**  
**Chair, IUSD Research Committee**



## Huntington Beach High School

*1905 Main Street, Huntington Beach, CA 92648 714.536.2514 FAX 714.960.7048*

Letter of Agreement

DATE: May 30, 2017

To the CU IRB:

We are familiar with Kathleen Lommen's research project entitled A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES IN HIGH SCHOOLS. I understand that Huntington Union High School District's involvement is to allow Kathleen to invite assistant principals from large schools by invitation letter to be interviewed. The names of the high schools, assistant principals and school district will remain confidential. The 45 minute interviews will be recorded, transcribed and coded.

We understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles, that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary, and that confidentiality of participants' research data is ensured, as described in the protocol.

Therefore, as a representative of Huntington Union High School District, I agree that Kathleen Lommen's research project may be conducted at Huntington Beach School District.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Daniel Morris".

Daniel Morris  
Principal  
Huntington Beach High School



**FULLERTON JOINT UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT**

1051 West Eastanchury Road • Fullerton, California 92833-2247

(714)870-2801

FAX (714)870-2807

www.fjuhsd.org

Office of the Superintendent

Letter of Agreement

June 7, 2017

To the CU IRB:

This letter confirms that Kathleen Lommen is able to interview assistant principals at their discretion within the Fullerton Joint Union High School District for the purpose of her research project titled, "A Phenomenological Study on Collaborative Leadership from Assistant Principals' Perspectives in High Schools." I understand that Fullerton Joint Union High School District's involvement is to allow Kathleen to invite assistant principals from large schools by invitational letter to be interviewed. The names of the high schools, assistant principals and school district will remain confidential. The 45 minute interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and coded.

It is understood that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles, that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary, and that confidentiality of participants' research data is ensured, as described in the protocol.

Therefore, as a representative of Fullerton Joint Union High School District, I agree that Kathleen Lommen's research project may be conducted at Fullerton Joint Union High School District.

Sincerely,

Jennifer L. Williams, Ed.D.

Executive Director Administrative Services

Fullerton Joint Union High School District

*Excellence in Education since 1893*

**SERVING BUENA PARK, FULLERTON, LA HABRA, LOWELL JOINT SCHOOL DISTRICTS**

## Re: Request to invite assistant principals for research

Christina Pierce <[cpierce@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:cpierce@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us)>

Mon 7/17/2017 11:50 AM

To: Lommen, Kathleen <[KathleenLommen@creighton.edu](mailto:KathleenLommen@creighton.edu)>; Melissa Weber <[mweber@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:mweber@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us)>; Ian Young <[iyoung@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:iyoung@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us)>; Matthew Centofranchi <[mcentofranchi@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:mcentofranchi@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us)>; Martin Dusold <[mdusold@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:mdusold@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us)>;

Yes no problem. I have included them on this email.

On Mon, Jul 17, 2017 at 11:40 AM, Lommen, Kathleen <[KathleenLommen@creighton.edu](mailto:KathleenLommen@creighton.edu)> wrote:

Hi Ms. Pierce,

I contacted the Superintendent's office for direction and left a message with your secretary regarding permission to invite assistant principals from your high school to be interviewed for a study on successful collaborative leadership practices.

Should you give me permission, I need the attached form filled out for me to submit to Creighton IRB before I can go further.

I can be reached at my cell [949-933-8268](tel:949-933-8268) if you have questions. Or am happy to provide you with any further documentation about my study you wish.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Kathleen Lommen

--  
Go Cougars!  
Christina Pierce  
Principal  
Beaumont High School  
[cpierce@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us](mailto:cpierce@beaumontusd.k12.ca.us)  
951-845-3171 extension 2001  
Follow us at...



## Desert Sands Unified School District

47-950 Dune Palms Road • La Quinta, California 92253 • (760) 777-4300

- DIVISION OF PERSONNEL SERVICES -

Certificated: (760) 777-8000 • Classified: (760) 777-5695 • Fax: (760) 777-4266

July 18, 2017

To the CU IRB:

We are familiar with Kathleen Lommen's research project entitled **A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES IN HIGH SCHOOLS**. I understand that Desert Sands Unified School District's involvement is to allow Kathleen to invite assistant principals from large schools by invitational letter to be interviewed. The names of the high schools, assistant principals and school district will remain confidential. The 45 minute interviews will be recorded, transcribed and coded.

We understand that this research will be carried out following sound ethical principles, that participant involvement in this research study is strictly voluntary, and that confidentiality of participants' research data is insured, as described in the protocol.

Therefore, as a representative of Desert Sands Unified School District, I agree that Kathleen Lommen's research project may be conducted at Desert Sands USD High Schools.

Sincerely,

Tony Signoret, Ed.D.

Assistant Superintendent, Personnel Services

## Appendix B

## Interview Questions with Prompts for Data Collection

1. What is your experience of collaborative leadership on your administrative team?

Prompts: Describe what you do and your working relationships with your team.

What is a typical day, week or month like with your team members?

Explain what collaboration means to you as you work with your admin team.

Explain your interactions in more depth by providing an example.

Explain in more detail how you communicate with others?

Describe a situation at your school that you collaborated on from start to finish.

How do you feel about the collaborative process?

How do you feel about being an assistant principal on an administrative team?

How is information shared among your team members?

What did you notice about your feelings from that experience?

2. How does your practice of collaborative leadership relate to supporting teachers in attaining student learning outcomes?

Prompts: Describe a situation where you supported teachers in attaining student learning outcomes.

What was the expected student learning outcome and how did you support teachers in trying to attain that outcome?

What steps did you take over time?

Explain your communication process regarding the attainment of the goal.

What were your feelings throughout the process?

Explain interactions with teachers focused on the learning outcome?

Describe the setting, timeframe and resources needed to attain the outcome.

How would you describe your collaborative leadership influence on the teachers and students in your school?

What do you mean by...?

Tell me more about that.

What did you notice about yourself and others involved in attaining this goal?

## Appendix C

August 2017

Invitational Letter to Assistant Principal

Dear Assistant Principal,

I am a doctoral candidate conducting a study on collaborative leadership in large public high schools from the perspective of assistant principals with three or more years' experience. I am inviting you to voluntarily participate in this study as I collect data to find a deeper understanding of formal leadership practices related to student outcomes used this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The 45 minute interview is scheduled to take place by me personally in September of 2017 at your work site or neutral location of your choice. Once the interview is recorded on an audio voice recorder and transcribed into a word document, I will send a copy to you by email for your review of accuracy. Your interview responses will be stored on a Mini SD card and hard copy responses will be kept in a private home-office and locked file drawer until research is complete. All participant names, school names, district locations, and any identifying information will remain confidential. Each assistant principal will be coded as AP1, AP2, AP3, etc to keep responses private and confidential. The only information that will be reported is the county in California from where you work. Your decision to be interviewed is voluntary. At any time during the process you are free to withdraw from the study and/or have your interview withdrawn. For your time I will offer you a Starbucks or Barnes & Noble Gift Card worth \$15.

The benefits of the study include your contribution to the collaborative processes that research has found to be effective in complex organizations such as large public schools. The benefit for you is the opportunity to reflect on and describe how you attained a student learning outcome in collaboration with others in your school. The possible risks are that the information you report does not align with your district expectations, causing uncertainty in or doubt of the impact on you or in the results of the study. What you say will be recorded and used for this research with every effort to keep identifying details confidential.

I have received written/email permission and approval from your central office administrator/or principal and from Creighton Institutional Review Board (IRB) and am committed to the high ethical practices expected of Creighton University. In accordance with IRB guidelines all information and documents collected for this study will remain confidential will be destroyed at the end of the study timelines.

I ask you to openly join me in the pursuit of describing practices that assistant principals from large public high schools engage in to lead students to learning outcomes for the 21st century.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Lommen  
Doctoral Candidate, Creighton University  
KathleenLommen@creighton.edu  
949-933-8268

### **Bill of Rights for Research Participants**

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.
7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.
8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research subject.
9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:
  - a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.
  - b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

Appendix D

Participant Response from Invitational Letter

1. Circle the range of years that represent the length of time you have held the position of high school assistant principal within any number of high schools.

1 – 2 years                      3 –5 years                      6 + years

2. Have you experienced collaborative leadership with others towards a student learning outcome? Use this definition to answer the above question:

*Interdependent stakeholders who take time to build trusted relationships and share decision-making power based on their unique competencies that mobilize resources to solve problems, meet common goals, and capitalize on creative opportunities.*

- Yes, I have and would like to participate in the study.
- No, thank you, I am not interested in participating in this study.

---

Name of Assistant Principal	Signature	date
-----------------------------	-----------	------

---

Name of High School \_\_\_\_\_

Available dates/times in week of September 4-7<sup>th</sup> to  
interview \_\_\_\_\_

Cell or work phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Best email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Return this form in addressed, stamped enclosed envelope or scan and email to:  
KathleenLommen@creighton.edu

## Appendix E

**Institutional Review Board**

2500 California Plaza • Omaha, Nebraska 68178  
 phone: 402.280.2126 • fax: 402.280.4766 • email:  
 irb@creighton.edu

DATE: July 26, 2017

TO: Kathleen Lommen, M.A., M.A.  
 FROM: Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral

PROJECT TITLE: [1053408-1] A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVE IN HIGH SCHOOLS

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: July 26, 2017

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2/3

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Application Form - July\_2017.5-1.114.1B App for Determ of Exempt Surveys-interview-observation.doc (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Conflict of Interest - Other - Disclosure of Financial Relationship for Sponsored P...pdf (UPDATED: 05/31/2017)
- Creighton - IRB Application Form - Creighton - IRB Application Form (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - FJUUSD.Approval.pdf (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - SignedDSUSDletofAgrmnt.pdf (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - Approval Email BeaumontHS Principal.pdf (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - Email.TMVUSD.pdf (UPDATED: 05/31/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - TMV.Letter of Agreement Creighton University (1).pdf (UPDATED: 05/31/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - HBHS.Principl.pdf (UPDATED: 05/31/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - Conditional Acceptance of Proposal to Conduct Research in IUSD.pdf (UPDATED: 05/31/2017)
- Investigator Agreement - LosAl\_42117052313110.pdf (UPDATED: 05/31/2017)
- Letter - Appendix A1.Bill of Rights .docx (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Letter - Appendix B1.IRB.docx (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Letter - Appendix A1.IRBdocx.docx (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Other - Appendix C1.IRB.docx (UPDATED: 07/21/2017)
- Training/Certification - citiCompletionReport4941226 (1).pdf (UPDATED: 05/31/2017)

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2/3.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact Christina Scheuring at 402-280-3364 or [christinescheuring@creighton.edu](mailto:christinescheuring@creighton.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral's records.