

AchieveNJ AND THE MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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ACHIEVEMENT AND THE MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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Abstract

In 2013, an external evaluation conducted by Rutgers University found that principals struggled with implementation of the reforms set forth by AchieveNJ, New Jersey's new educator evaluation system. One important struggle for principals was the time crunch of implementing the new reform, while still carrying out leadership functions deemed effective by research. Now in year three of the reform, it is unclear if AchieveNJ is improving, or undermining, the work of school principals. This qualitative study attempts to explore and answer the following questions regarding the effects of AchieveNJ on principal practice:

1. How do principals use teacher evaluation reform to develop teachers?
2. How has AchieveNJ helped, or hindered, the principal from carrying out the leadership functions research claims to be effective?

This study consists of semi-structured interviews with six middle school principals in New Jersey. Attempting to control for various socio-economic and staffing variables, three principals were selected to represent highly effective middle schools in New Jersey, while the other three participants were from less effective middle schools in the same district. Interviews aimed to determine how principals enact teacher evaluation reform and whether AchieveNJ helps or hinders the principals from conducting important leadership functions found in the literature. The most important finding in the current study is that principals' methods of carrying out teacher evaluation may not be what separates effective middle schools from less effective middle schools in New Jersey. Principals in the more effective schools report engaging in the same activities as their counterparts in the less effective schools. Principals in the study reported little differences in the way they carry out teacher evaluation in the years prior to and since AchieveNJ. Additionally, principals in the study reported little or no differences on how they utilize teacher

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evaluation to carry out the leadership functions addressed in the literature review. There are also contextual differences amongst schools that may affect a principal's comfort level, and the process in which they carry out their daily work.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Teacher evaluation is the latest craze in an ongoing effort to improve America's public schools (Neumerski et al., 2014). When the federal government offered states nearly \$4.5B in Race to the Top funding, one of the key requirements was that states had to improve the way teachers and principals were evaluated. This included the implementation of performance-based reviews and common standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Teacher evaluation reform is nothing new. It has been argued that reform efforts in education are often cyclical and triggered by political finger-pointing directed at schools (Tyack, 1995).

Evaluation reform is predicated on the idea that the teacher, and subsequently, their ability to teach, plays an important role in student outcomes (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007). According to the underlying theory of action, teacher evaluation reform can weed out ineffective teachers, help provide feedback and support, and assist in creating a results-oriented school culture (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2013). One thing the literature is less certain about is how principals utilize evaluation reform to develop teachers and increase their effectiveness in the classroom (Baker, Oluwole, & Green, 2013).

AchieveNJ, New Jersey's teacher and principal evaluation reform, has attempted to improve the state's public schools through the use of various measures of teachers' (and principals') effectiveness. New Jersey lawmakers have taken steps to increase accountability for principals and teachers on student achievement, leaving the role of the principal more important than ever (Murphy, Hallinger, & Heck, 2013). Teacher evaluation reform in New Jersey is intended to give principals greater tools for identifying effective instruction and to provide "meaningful opportunities for professional growth (New Jersey Department of Education,

2013).” It is also intended to facilitate easier removal of ineffective teachers from the classroom. One thing the literature has mostly overlooked is how teacher evaluation affects the principalship.

In year one of AchieveNJ, many principals struggled to achieve the New Jersey Department of Education’s vision. In an external evaluation of the pilot districts conducted by The Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University, in conjunction with the New Jersey Department of Education, many principals communicated issues associated with conducting reliable observations and communicating the new rubrics to their teachers. Perhaps the greatest concern found by the research team was the time crunch associated with implementing the new evaluation reform. Principals uniformly spoke about their struggles to meet the demands of the new reform while still maintaining the other tasks associated with the principalship (Firestone, Blitz, Gitomer, Kirova, Shcherbakov, & Nordin, 2013). However, in year three of the reform, much of the initial shock from the implementation dip (Fullan, 2001) should have subsided, but the questions about whether teacher evaluation is improving or undermining the work of instructional leaders remains as strong as ever. This qualitative study attempts to explore this and build upon the work of the Rutgers University evaluation team to answer the following questions regarding the effects of AchieveNJ on principal practice:

1. How do principals use teacher evaluation reform to develop teachers?
2. How has AchieveNJ helped, or hindered, the principal from carrying out the leadership functions research claims to be effective?

The following pages will explore how principals around New Jersey are experiencing their practice in the second year of AchieveNJ. Specifically, this study aims to explore how

teacher evaluation reform has affected the principal's ability to perform, what the literature has shown to be, effective leadership practices. The changes found in AchieveNJ were designed to improve schools through increased accountability by creating improved measures of teacher and principal effectiveness. The goal of this study is to compare how principals in highly effective schools and average schools differentially utilize teacher evaluation reform to drive the improvement of instruction in their schools.

Conceptually, the measures should force principals to spend more time involved in activities proven to advance teaching and learning in their school. Yet, the organizational duties associated with the profession still exist, and in many ways, the procedural aspects of AchieveNJ can get in the way of the intended vision. While conceptually solid, the increase in classroom observations, time spent in pre and post observation conferences, and developing and approving Student Growth Objectives (SGOs) all add to the principal's day. Effective principals don't just "get it all done," but instead, get it done in way that positively influences student achievement.

By examining the process by which principals enact leadership, this study should provide principals with information that can be used to improve their ability to lead and manage a school. One intended user is the principal who understands the importance of their role as instructional leader, but is struggling with finding the time to do it while fulfilling the requirements of AchieveNJ. Another intended user is the veteran principal with a long career as a building manager, skilled in organizational management, who wishes to improve his/her ability to lead a school and improve student achievement. A third user is the school district leader responsible for leading teacher evaluation in the district. Finally, the state government, responsible for writing the regulations and policy regarding principals' responsibility for teacher evaluation, should find the study useful as it continues to develop policy intended to improve schools.

Findings indicate that there may be more to effective schools than how teacher evaluation is implemented. This study found little difference in how principals of highly effective schools and less effective schools enact the reforms of AchieveNJ. There are also contextual differences that exist that may affect the principal's comfort level or how they accomplish their daily work.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

For the purpose of this study, the review of the literature will be divided into two parts. The first part will explore evaluation reform. Instead of a walk through the decades of reform, I will focus on some of the concerns with evaluation reform raised across the literature. Here I will attempt to understand the theory of action for the current evaluation reform. The second part of the review will turn toward the literature on the tasks and activities of effective school leaders. In this section I will discuss what the literature says effective principals do to improve their schools. The tasks and activities associated with effective leadership will then be considered through the lens of a school principal attempting to accomplish them during an era of evaluation reform.

Part I: Evaluation Reform

The history of success regarding teacher evaluation reform is shaky at best. The history of principals being able to positively influence teachers is even shakier (Firestone & Wilson, 1983). Since 1971, when Hanushek and others worried about the efficiency of schools asked the question, “Do teachers count?” researchers have debated how to effectively measure teachers’ worth. While most now agree that teachers directly affect the learning outcomes of students (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007), there is still discussion over whether evaluation reform improves teachers. Perhaps the question we should ask is, “Do principals count?” While I do not intend to extend the debate on the utility of teacher evaluation reform, I believe it is important to consider the following arguments: 1. Teacher evaluation serves to hold teachers accountable for their and their students’ performance. 2. Teacher evaluation helps principals develop teachers to improve their performance in the classroom which, in turn, equates to increases in student achievement. These two arguments, which form the foundation of the current reform in New Jersey, will be

discussed in the following pages.

Search Criteria

The search for relevant literature pertaining to evaluation reform begin with the Rutgers Online Library and branched out to the Sage Collection, Google Scholar, and an archive of various journal articles read acquired over the last three years in the doctorate program at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Key terms included: evaluation reform, teacher evaluation, evaluation and accountability, developing teachers, evaluation and the principal.

Accountability or Development? (or both?)

Theoretically, a valid tool for measuring teacher effectiveness should help principals to weed out ineffective teachers leaving room to hire better replacements. This is not the case when seen in practice. As far back as 1914, very few teachers received low ratings (Hanus in Donaldson & Papay, 2014) because of evaluation reform. The New Jersey Department of Education's own 2013-2014 Implementation Report demonstrates that only 3% of teachers were rated partially ineffective or ineffective after the first year of the reform. Research on the recent push for standards-based teacher evaluation reform, has also pointed out that many of the models fail to acknowledge "school-level factors" like non-random distribution of students across teachers (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2013). This can lead to accountability being misplaced based on the class load the teacher is assigned.

Many reform initiatives are destined for failure before the first period bell. Many past reforms failed to address important issues that the reforms of today claim to have overcome (Youngs, 2013). When the University of Chicago examined the implementation of teacher evaluation across five school districts in Illinois in 2012, they found that cultivating buy-in from teachers and principals was a key challenge (White, Cowhy, Stevens, & Sporte, 2012). The

difficulty seen in Illinois stemmed from an inability to achieve consensus with regards to what “good teaching” looks like. This, coupled with leaving key stakeholders out of the conversation, can add up to disaster.

Many principals are still struggling with the time crunch associated with the accountability measures. In New Jersey, principals have complained that they simply do not have the time to get it all done (Firestone et al., 2013). This time crunch comes in the form of increased observations, pre-and post-observation meetings, approving and meeting on student growth objectives, and lengthy summative or end of year observations. In New Jersey, the AchieveNJ reform has added significantly to the principal’s workload. In a school with 80 teachers there are a minimum of 240 observations, 80 pre-observation meetings, and 240 post observation meetings. In addition, there are a minimum of 160 meetings regarding student growth objectives (one in the beginning of the year and one in the end), and 80 end of year summative meetings. All of this must be accomplished while still taking care of the organizational responsibilities that go into running a school (finances, student discipline, meeting with parents, hallway supervision).

While principals may not buy into evaluation reform due to the stress imposed by the increase in accountability measures, teachers have their own reasons for apprehension with the new reforms. Many school districts have turned to value-added modeling (VAM) to determine teacher effectiveness. In these systems teachers are evaluated based on their students’ performance on standardized tests compared to a similar cohort. While these systems are more commonly used, they have been called “unstable” by some (Baker et al., 2010) and “too imprecise” by others (McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, Louis, & Hamilton, 2004). Still others have cautioned about the causality associated with VAM. Braun (2005) acknowledges that the

lack of randomization in schools can create data that skews in favor of teachers who teach in more affluent schools and higher achieving students. In other words, teachers are at an advantage (or disadvantage) based on the students they teach (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012).

Another factor that plays into the accountability factor for teacher evaluation is trust. Bryk and Schneider (2003) have found that trust is a key component to fostering a school that is focused on collaboration and development. Some have argued that accountability measures can get in the way of this relation building. Principals who can build trust with their teachers during the current era of reform may have significant impacts on the success of their school (Price, 2012). In their study of 37 secondary schools in Belgium, Tuytens and Devos (2014) found that in schools where teachers reported positive perceptions of the new teacher evaluation reform, the principals worked to develop trusting relationships with their teachers. One principal explained, “the conversations work if you try to approach them as honest possible. (p. 165)”

Development Through Reform

Effective principals are not only concerned with instruction, but observe it, talk about it, provide feedback on it, and plan to make it better through all members of the organization (Elmore, 2000). The purpose of this study is to determine how principals handle the development of their teachers while coping with the accountability measures of the reform. If the requirements of AchieveNJ meet their intended purpose, principals should be using the tools to develop teachers. In New Jersey, one purpose of reforming classroom observations was to increase the number of classroom observations and to provide teachers with meaningful feedback for teachers to be used to improve practice. In a similar reform in Chicago, principals found the implementation of evaluation reform created post observation conferences that were more

focused on instruction. Using Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, the principals and teachers found their conversations now had "focus and direction" (Sartain, Stoelinga, & Brown, 2011, p. 22). This was not always the case though. Some principals found that the conferences took too much time. In these schools, teacher attitudes towards the reform were often negative as well. Similarly in New Jersey, after year one of the evaluation reform pilot, principals reported positive impacts of observations, but only one third to two-fifths of teachers reported similar positive feelings (Firestone et al., 2013). Beyond the agreed utility of reform, there is still the issue of how it is being used. In Delaware, for example, after year one of the Delaware Performance Appraisal System (DPAS) 99% of teachers received ratings of "Satisfactory" or better (Delaware Department of Education, 2014). As year three of the reform comes to a close in New Jersey, it remains to be seen whether or not classroom observations are used the way the New Jersey Department of Education intended them to be.

Another part of the evaluation reform is student achievement data. While some researchers (Baker et al, 2010) have cautioned against using student test scores to evaluate teachers, others have found reason to do so. Using data from the Cincinnati Public Schools' Teacher Evaluation System (TES), Kane (2011) found that student achievement on state tests was linked to teacher performance in the classroom. In classes where the teacher was in the top-quartile of classroom practices (as measured by TES), students gained at least three percentile points over students in classes with bottom-quartile teachers. The author does caution readers as about causality considering the "nonrandom sorting of students" (Kane, Taylor, Tyler, & Wooten, 2011, p.612), an argument favored by Baker (2010).

In New Jersey, an additional measure of student achievement (beyond state standardized tests) are student growth objectives (SGOs). Here, teachers measure the academic growth of their

students over the course of the year. In New Jersey, SGOs make up 20% of a teacher's 2014-2015 summative rating. This number is up from 15% during the previous year. While some called the first year of implementation "not a good experience" (McGlone, 2014), the state department of education maintains the importance of using SGOs and has attempted to help school districts with some of the problems found in year 1 (AchieveNJ SGO Guidebook).

Central to the success of student growth objectives is the building principal. For SGOs to be meaningful, the principal must communicate their importance to teachers, assist with the development and selection of assessment criteria, and ensure that the learning or growth objectives are rigorous and attainable (Bornfreund & McCann, 2014). In Delaware, an early adopter of student learning objectives as part of evaluation reform, teachers measure student growth in three ways. Measure A accounts for state standardized test scores, measure B are content specific assessments, and measure C are goals set by the teacher for student and agreed upon by the principal (Delaware Department of Education, 2014). To assist in the implementation of student learning objectives, the Delaware state department of education has created a library of assessments for teachers to use in the process of creating student learning objectives.

Part II: Effective School Leaders

Part two of the literature review focuses on activities and tasks the literature claims effective principals do. Principals are the second most influential force in determining what kids learn in schools, second only to classroom teachers (Leithwood & Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom 2004). While many school leaders strive to fit into what they think a good school leader looks like, it is far more valuable to consider what effective school leaders do on a daily basis. Specifically, we must ask the question: "What can school leaders DO to improve learning

in their school?” To accomplish this, I will borrow from Leithwood and Sun’s (2012) framework for effective leaders. In their meta-analysis, the authors explored the impact of 11 specific transformational leadership practices on student learning. While the authors found that the majority of these practices indirectly affect student learning, the practices are important in developing a school where instruction and learning are the central mission. These practices have implications for principals grappling with the current era of school reform in the state of New Jersey. Several of these practices, and their standing in the literature, will be discussed below.

Search Criteria

Leithwood & Sun’s (2012) framework for effective leaders became the nucleus for searching for articles to be included in the review. The majority of studies, reviews, and meta-analyses used were acquired over the course of the doctorate program at Rutgers. Additional articles were found using the Rutgers online library search tool, *Searchlight*, and chosen based on their relevance to the research questions. Filtering for peer-reviewed studies, the following key terms were used to find literature that to locate studies: instructional leadership, transformational leadership, effective leadership, principal leadership, principal practice, principal impact.

Setting Directions

When exploring the literature regarding principal effects on student learning, it is often the indirect effects that have the most impact (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). An effective school leader must create the foundation for improving their school. There must be a sense of urgency. Before a school leader can begin to work on improving their school, they must first be able to diagnose the problem(s) and clearly communicate them to the stakeholders with

the understanding that the problem requires fixing.

Perhaps, the most influential of these practices for a school leader is to mold the school's mission (Hallinger, 2005). The principal and all stakeholders must work collaboratively to develop a unified, clearly defined, vision of what they want the school to look like. Collectively, they must determine the values and expectations they want for the school. It is not acceptable for today's school leaders to be satisfied with the status quo. There must be a clear understanding of the vision and the steps necessary to achieve it. Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe (2008) found that it is not only important that the principal set the directions for the school, but that the content of the directions is even more important. The authors urged principals not to get caught up in the need to implement change just for the sake of change, but to focus that change in meaningful ways. The principal must make student learning the primary mission for the school (Hallinger, 2005).

Clearly stated expectations are an important part of developing a unified vision. Effective transformational leaders can motivate their staff to higher levels of commitment and performance through modeling the behaviors they expect (Marks & Printy, 2003). Schools that focus on learning also communicate high expectations for students. All children deserve the opportunity to achieve at high levels. In developing a foundation that is built upon establishing a culture of learning, it is crucial that school leaders work to foster an incremental, or growth, theory of learning in their building. Students who believe that their success in school hinges upon their own efforts are more successful than those who believe that no matter how hard they work they will hit a ceiling (Blackwell, 2010; Dweck, 2007). These findings are important when molding the culture of the school. A staff with a fixed mindset, that does not believe that students can learn beyond a fixed threshold, often end up with lower achieving students (Dweck, 2007). Effective school leaders communicate high expectations for all students to the staff,

students, and families with optimism and a shared sense of responsibility. Further, the school leader monitors the organization's progress towards the goal and holds the mission at the center of all decision-making (Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Developing People

Today's effective school leader not only develops a vision for the school, but "walks the talk" (Leithwood & Sun, 2012, p. 400), modeling the behaviors that will move the school toward achieving the goal. Additionally, today's effective school leader does not attempt to walk alone. As responsibilities for the principal accumulate, the responsibility of school improvement must be shared with others in the building (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). To do this, effective instructional leaders distribute leadership to their staff to improve the instruction and learning in the school. Leadership can come from outside of the formal hierarchical structure of schools (Spillane, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003). This is important, as research indicates that informal teacher leaders are often relied upon by colleagues to be instructional leaders (Marks & Printy, 2003; Supovitz, 2008). In fact, Supovitz's (2008) study of 14 high schools found that teachers sought out instructional leadership most frequently from colleagues they considered experts, not formal leaders. This evidence suggests the value of developing strong teacher leaders capable of empowering others to become leaders as well.

Administrative or managerial activities, not related to improving student learning, should be delegated to other members of the faculty when appropriate. This allows the principal to invest the greatest portion of their time in classrooms observing instruction, providing individualized support for teachers, and monitoring student progress (Hallinger, 2005). Leithwood et al. (2004) used England's National Literacy and Numeracy to explore sources of leadership and found that important forms of principal support included increasing enthusiasm,

lowering frustration, and providing supportive feedback. Principals who do this find their schools achieving higher than those not regularly involved with planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching (Robinson et al., 2008). They understand the importance of relationships (Fullan, 2001) when attempting to bring lasting change, and realize that investing in people is paramount.

It is also important for principals to develop and trust in the expertise of their teachers. By supporting ongoing professional development, situated in the context of the school, the principal can develop teams of instructional leaders that can collaborate to develop other leaders focused on improving student learning (Elmore, 2002). Discourse surrounding effective teaching can provide the intellectual stimulation that can inspire teachers to want to improve their practice (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). School's where teachers are empowered to be instructional leaders benefit from higher levels of learning and achievement (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Redesigning the Organization

Managers maintain the organization, but leaders move it forward (Spillane, 2004). School maintenance is not enough. With student achievement being an important part of teacher and principal evaluations under AchieveNJ, the principal must be a school leader that focuses on instruction. Effective school leaders work to continually improve their school by developing an environment and culture that promotes learning. Specifically, an effective leader works to create a culture where adult learning is valued equally with student learning. For decades, educators have been locked into what Spillane (2004) refers to as “the egg carton”, isolated from their peers. This can hinder the flow of information from one teacher to the next, and keep people from having important discussions about pedagogy and learning. Curry (2008) found that the creation of critical friends groups, a school-based professional community, could increase

collegiality, awareness of research-based practices, and the capacity to undertake instructional improvement.

An important part of redesigning the organization is building collaborative processes (Leithwood, 2005). Effective principals work to foster trust with their teachers through shared leadership, responsibilities, and common cause (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Leadership should be stretched over the organization. Whether it is by building common planning time into the master schedule, or blocking out days in the student calendar for staff development, the effective school leader understands that collaboration is crucial to improving the organization. Principals construct opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful discussions surrounding instruction and learning through the creation of professional learning communities. Principals who work collaboratively with teachers enable an environment where teachers are willing to take innovative risks regarding instruction (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Collaboration does not exist only within the immediate school community. The effective school leader understands that the school is a part of the community at large and views it as a valuable resource that must be sought to help with improving the school (Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001). Khalifa's (2012) ethnography of an urban alternative high school suggested that principals who see themselves as community leaders, supporting community causes and being visible in the community, could improve academic outcomes. This can be accomplished by inviting and encouraging parents to participate in the development of the school vision. Strong school leaders partner with, and empower, parents in the community. By allowing parents to work collaboratively with the school they take ownership in its successes and failures (Noguera, 2001). This can lead to positive change in the school culture (and climate) and improve student achievement.

Improving the Instructional Program

Improving instruction is the “technical core (Leithwood & Sun, 2012)” for strong principals. He/She does this directly, by providing individualized support for teachers in the classroom, and indirectly by distributing leadership to other members of the school and encouraging participation in professional communities (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Supovitz et al. (2010) found that principals who focus on instruction and work to develop communities of practice are more likely to have teachers that will continue to work to develop their practice. This requires content knowledge on the part of the principal. Stein and Nelson’s (2003) case study suggests that effective principals develop subject matter knowledge, specifically, they must learn how subjects are taught and how they are learned.

As New Jersey rolls out new legislation (AchieveNJ) on teacher and principal evaluations, strong principals will use the great quantities of new data (SGO’s, new teacher observations, SGPs) to improve instruction. Data should be shared with teachers to drive instruction. Many administrators simply give the staff the data and expect them to know what to do with it (Kerr et al., 2006). Strong principals understand that they should not inundate their staff with data without providing proper professional development on how to analyze and use the data to improve instruction. Supovitz (2012) found, in his review of 117 articles, that often data is not used properly. He argues that data often does not indicate how to improve instruction. In successful schools, principals and teachers work jointly to determine what data is useful and then analyze the data to improve the instructional program in the school (Young, 2006). There must be a focus on how to use the data to actually improve student learning.

Beyond utilizing data, strong principals use other tools to improve the instructional program. For example, allocating resources in a meaningful way, designed to enhance student

learning is an invaluable skill. Since time is an important resource in schools, strong principals make conscious decisions about instruction when developing master schedules. Principals can improve student outcomes just by staffing the teachers in the best positions. This requires a lot of dialogue with teachers and a deep knowledge of the staff and where they could be most effective. By reviewing observation data during the process teachers can be placed where their students could have the best chance at success. Another strategy used to improve instruction is peer observations. When developing the schedule, it was important to consider collective leadership of the organization to develop the program. Developing the instructional program is what separates school leaders from all other leaders (Leithwood & Sun, 2012), and instruction and learning must remain at the heart of any decision made in the school. This idea seems simple in conversation, but when one looks at the enormous amount of work that goes into running an effective school it becomes more difficult to “keep your eyes on the prize (student learning).” Thus, a strong principal possesses the skills to manage a safe and orderly school, but also understands that “beans, balls, and buses” are secondary to student learning.

Conclusion

Today’s effective principal is an instructional leader who possesses the skills to transform their school into a place where learning and instruction are most important. They complete these important tasks in addition to their managerial responsibilities, not at the expense of. Today’s principals understand that they must support their teachers’ growth and maintain the organization simultaneously. Through the development of a clear vision for the school and setting learning-focused goals, the principal can have significant positive effects on their building (Hallinger, 2005). By distributing leadership across the organization, the principal can develop other instructional leaders who help with moving the school towards the vision. Participation in

professional learning communities and collaboration with members of the greater community are important practices of effective school principals. Ultimately, a strong principal creates a place where students, teachers, and administrators can learn. Improving the instruction in the school is at the heart of all decision making and resources should be allocated appropriately to improve the program. The effective principal of the future is the lead teacher and should strive to develop other lead teachers in order to ensure all children have an opportunity to be successful.

How does this all fit into the current teacher evaluation reform? How does the principal get it all done? How does the principal make classroom observations and student growth objectives meaningful? How do they convince their teachers that SGOs are a useful tool to improve instruction? How do they even convince them that they should want to improve instruction? I hope to answer these questions and more utilizing the methods below.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Qualitative Methods Design

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative design was used to explore and understand how teacher evaluation reform has impacted the principal's ability to perform leadership tasks. A case study design allowed the researcher to investigate how teacher evaluation reform is being played out in actual schools (Yin, 2013). Data was collected using face to face semi-structured interviews and telephone conversations with middle school principals (Creswell, 2009). Interview data was analyzed to gain insight into how different principals have enacted leadership through the AchieveNJ reforms. All interviews were conducted in the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016. Data analysis occurred during the fall and winter of 2016.

***Sample and Setting**

In determining the sample for the study, the goal was to develop a comparison of effective principal practice in middle schools around the New Jersey. This could then be used to offer advice and suggestions for improvement. For the purposes of this study, I define "middle school" as one covering any configuration of grades between, and inclusive of, five and eight. Since it is difficult to measure the "effectiveness" of schools, and subsequently their principals, for the purposes of this study, I define "highly effective school" as a school performing better than expected on state assessments given the students they serve and the resources they have available. A statistical analysis (Appendix A) measuring the relative efficiency of schools was used to determine a sample of schools for consideration. Using student growth percentiles and school staffing data, the analysis provides a snapshot of a school's relative efficiency measured

by standard deviations over or under expected growth. By controlling for variables such as free and reduced lunch, the percentage of English Language Learners, and total salary expense per pupil, I hoped to avoid interviewing only principals in schools with a wealthy populous that could influence the outside of school learning of students. I also did not want to see only the schools with the best resources. The regression analysis used was selected because it provided an opportunity to see schools for more than just high test scores and bounteous resources. From this, a purposive sample of approximately 20 principals was created for which to begin recruiting.

It is important to note that there were problems with recruitment in the study. Early in the recruiting process, it became apparent that achieving the intended sample of principals in the effective schools would not be possible. Having contacted 25 principals in the top 30 schools (charter schools were not included) by email and telephone, only three agreed to participate in the study. With the goal of a purposive sample of principals representing “highly effective schools”, recruiting was limited to schools near the top of the list of the regression analysis which consisted of 345 schools. Any further and the study risks schools being too similar. Therefore, the sample became smaller than originally intended, and consisted of two principals in the top ten and one principal in the top 20 of the “highly effective” schools in the original recruitment plan.

At this point, it became important to expand the search for principals willing to discuss their experiences with AchieveNJ. If principals of schools in the top of the list were unwilling to participate, a revised strategy that would address the research questions was considered. Ultimately, I had decided that a comparison of principals from highly effective schools and less effective schools would be used. Referring to the original regression analysis, there was one

large k-12 district where four of its five middle schools were in the lowest 25 schools in the analysis of 345 middle schools. Here, I considered how principals in less effective schools in the same district, might utilize AchieveNJ compared to the principals in the more effective schools. It became an opportunity to make this study rooted in a localized problem. Perhaps there is something to take away from the highly effective schools and use to inform the less effective schools. Thus, the study evolved from a case study of how principals in effective schools utilize and enact teacher evaluation, to a comparison of highly and less effective schools. Four principals in the less effective middle schools were recruited for the study. One principal declined. The other three principals lead schools found outside of the top 100 schools in the regression analysis. One principal's school was in the middle third and two principals were in schools in the bottom third of the 345 schools included.

The final sample consisted of six principals working at the middle school level. One principal was in a school made up of grades five through eight, while the other five were in schools consisting of grades six through eight.

The confidentiality of the schools and principals was important to the integrity of the study. Participants in the study are identified as numbers only and will be referred to as H1, H2, or H3 for the highly effective schools and L1, L2, or L3 for the lesser effective schools. While the principals in the study work in schools near the top of the regression analysis, they are not easily identifiable. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the schools, school level data will be displayed only as averages within the sample (Appendix B).

Data Collection

Information for this study was collected from six principals using face to face interviews with the principals. Interviews were conducted with the six principals in order to explore how teacher evaluation reform has impacted their ability to perform leadership functions.

Principal Interviews

All interviews were face to face, individualized, and explored how principals enact effective leadership activities while fulfilling AchieveNJ requirements. Principals were given the option to have interviews conducted in their schools to ensure their comfort in their natural setting (Creswell, 2009). Two of the six interviews were conducted face to face, while the other four were conducted via telephone at the principals' convenience. I wanted to know how new accountability reforms set forth by AchieveNJ have increased or reduced instructional leadership. In addition, if and how, has AchieveNJ affected the way leadership functions have been enacted by the principal? I wanted to know what evaluation looked like in the school, prior to AchieveNJ. The individual interviews allowed participants the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences without being overshadowed by more outspoken members of a group. All interviews were limited to 45 minutes and conducted during, or at, the conclusion of the school day, depending on the preference of the interviewee. Interview questions explored principals' perceptions of important tasks and opinions on instructional leadership and management. The interview guide (Appendix C) was piloted with principals in the doctoral program, as well as colleagues working in my district, who also have experienced changes brought forth by AchieveNJ. All interviews were recorded via cell phone application then transcribed verbatim for analysis using an online transcription service. Transcriptions were checked for accuracy and edited accordingly. Finally, all transcribed data was checked for error by a colleague prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed to determine how principals enacted effective leadership activities while trying to meet the requirements of AchieveNJ. First, all of the transcribed interview data was read and reread to gain an understanding of what the data looks like. Next, it was coded (and sub coded) and organized using Dedoose software. Codes (Appendix D) reflected the leadership tasks found in the literature, as well as practices prior to and after the implementation of AchieveNJ, as well as other themes that were found. Next the codes were analyzed to see if relationships existed amongst codes (Creswell, 2009). Identifying major themes or patterns that exist across codes was also done prior to making any assertions. These summaries assisted in making assertions regarding the ways the principals experienced the new reform. Finally, assertions made from the summaries were related back to the research questions regarding how principals are being impacted by AchieveNJ. Member checking with a colleague with qualitative expertise was used to improve validity and reliability. All qualitative recordings will??? be destroyed upon completion of the evaluation.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation of this study is the relatively small sample of principals. Although the interviews were lengthy and rich, it was still only six perspectives. This limitation created other limitations within itself. For one, the limited number schools willing to participate created some disparity among school and district size. Some were small K-8 districts, while the schools in the less effective group were a large k-12 district. The variations in size could explain the variations in central administrative support, but it would make sense that the larger district would have greater resources at its disposal. There were also variations in school demographics. Coincidentally, the three participating principals representing the highly effective schools led

schools that were predominantly Asian or White, while the three schools in the less effective group were ethnically diverse.

Another limitation to the study was the fact that it was only the principals' perspective. It is not unfair to assume that all the principals interviewed wanted to be seen in a positive light. This added some threats to validity with regards to their self-reported daily practice. Similar future studies should require reporting from teachers or central administrators. This proved difficult for the current study as it was not easy to schedule focus groups around the state during school hours.

The regression analysis could also be misunderstood. The analysis was intended to offer a glimpse of schools doing better than intended with the resources they have. It was not meant to be a definitive deciding factor of effective schools vs. ineffective schools. However, I did not want to interview principals in schools where socioeconomics might influence student achievement and the regression offered an opportunity to speak to principals in schools that are doing better than expected on standardized tests when controlling for various socioeconomic factors.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Principals in the study spoke candidly about the effects of AchieveNJ, and teacher evaluation, on their daily practice. The most important finding in the current study is that principals' methods of carrying out teacher evaluation may not be what separates effective middle schools from less effective middle schools in New Jersey. Throughout the lengthy interviews, principals in the more effective schools shared many of the same sentiments as their counterparts in the less effective schools. Principals in the study (across all schools) reported little differences in the way they carry out teacher evaluation in the years prior to and since AchieveNJ implementation. Additionally, principals in the study reported little or no differences on how they utilize teacher evaluation to carry out the leadership functions addressed in the literature review. Finally, contextual differences exist amongst schools that may affect a principal's comfort level, and the process in which they carry out their daily work. In the following sections I will first describe how principals carry out their evaluation practices, then describe how principals carried out the leadership tasks and any similarities or differences that may have been related to teacher evaluation. Lastly, I will discuss the contextual differences found and their implications on principal practice.

Teacher Evaluation Carried Out

Previous evaluation practices. Principals throughout the study shared their evaluation practices before the implementation of AchieveNJ. In both groups of schools, principals spoke of positive and negative practices that existed prior to AchieveNJ. One important buzzword that was ushered in with AchieveNJ was the use of data to drive decisions and instruction. This is one area where the more effective schools differed from the less effective schools. All three

principals in the effective schools spoke of districtwide data use before AchieveNJ. Principal #H1 explained how the district utilized data driven administrator goals while Principal #H2 spoke extensively about how data analysis is an integral component of their school district. “I do feel like we’ve always...we’re a very data-driven district. It’s just by design...we meet monthly with our superintendent and go over specific aspects of data...It’s just always been something that is of relevance and importance to us, so that’s why SGOs really haven’t weighed heavily on our improvement strategies.” Similarly to Principal #H2, Principal #H3 shared how their district already had a method of tracking student growth prior to SGOs. “Before the student growth objective (SGO) we really monitored student growth based on in class data. We based it off of common assessments. The common assessments were very, very important at the grade levels.”

Principals in the less effective schools also spoke about data use, but to a more limited extent. Where the principals in the more effective schools spoke of systematic data use, required or encouraged at the district level, data use in the less effective schools was more school-based and dependent upon the principal’s abilities or desires. For example, Principal #L1 utilizes common assessments across the school, a practice that was implemented by the previous principal. The data is then used to drive instruction, filling gaps where needed. This practice was not discussed by the other principals in the district.

Several principals, in both groups, spoke about practices that might be considered negative prior to AchieveNJ that have since changed. For example, Principal #L3 spoke about the culture in the district being about improving test scores instead of improving teaching and learning. Principal #L3 added, “We’ve really gotten away from that. I’m looking for innovative lessons where students are engaged.” Principal #H3 spoke about how AchieveNJ has improved

the observation process. “I mean we would have post (conferences) just to really sign off on the document, but it was nowhere near as formalized as it was with AchieveNJ.”

Current evaluation practices. The principals in both groups of schools are bound by compliance. A common theme expressed by most principals in the study was that many components of AchieveNJ were completed just because they had to be. This negative viewpoint could have distorted some of the conversation. For example, the Student Growth Objectives (SGO) requirement put forth by AchieveNJ was of particular note. Principals in both groups of schools reported little confidence in the SGO as an effective tool for improving learning and instruction. Principal #H2 explained, “It was like anybody who didn’t attain a four on their SGO, I mean basically you weren’t showing up to work.” Principal #L1 shared a similar opinion of the SGO system stating, “In all honesty we haven’t done much with it up until this coming school year.” While the principals in the study may not see the value in the SGO system, one could argue that the addition of SGOs has added a layer of informative assessment that may not have existed prior to implementation. Similarly, principals unanimously found little utility in the SGP system of assessing teachers. Principal #H2 defended “dynamic teachers” who “get the lowest SGPs because of the population he/she has.” Others, like Principal #H1 have little confidence in the assessment tool (the PARCC exam) saying, “I don’t put any credence in it whatsoever. It’s all over the place.” Others shared their frustration with the slow turnaround in SGP scores from the state. In the second year of AchieveNJ, some principals did not receive their teachers’ SGP scores until February of the year after the test was given. This means that, principals were receiving final PARCC test data for the previous school year, as they were preparing to administer the test in the current school year. Principal #L2 argued, “it’s just so outdated by the time it comes to us that it has, truthfully, little meaning to me.” Principal #H2 declared, “What I

do think is problematic with the process is, I don't have my test score SGPs back yet, so I don't have final evaluations for my math and English teachers." Another area up for debate by the principals was the number and length of classroom observations. Of importance was the need to observe your best teachers three times per year. Principal #L3 argued, "observations are a lot less important because they're (effective teachers) a proven commodity." Principals #H1 & #H2 are in districts that applied for the waiver reducing the number of observations of tenured teachers to two. Principal #H1 has used the time spent on a third observation conducting walkthroughs (informal observations), but questions the shortened observations (from 40 mins to 20 mins) saying, "It's still just snapshots. Am I really seeing what I need to see?" On the other hand, Principal #H2 argues that the numbers of observations "has impeded our ability to really focus in on what educators would say matters most."

One area that was mostly agreed upon by the principals in the study that differed from the initial Year One study conducted by Rutgers, was the issue of a time crunch. The principals in the study, now in year three of the new teacher evaluation reform, had found ways to get it all done. Principal #H1 said, "I feel like we make time for what we want to make time for and it's all about planning." Principal #L3 added similarly, "ultimately if it falls on my list of responsibilities, it's going to get done." The principals in the less effective schools were more cognizant of the work they do outside of the school day. Principal #L1 added that they do a lot of work from home to ensure it all gets done. "I do a lot of it from home. I'm in front of the computer from the time I get home for hours sometimes, because that's where I do a lot of that paperwork stuff." Principal #H2 added, "It [AchieveNJ reforms] cuts down on the amount of time that I like to spend out in the school; the amount of time to be in the classroom longer. A lot of it goes home."

Teacher Evaluation and Leadership Functions.

Setting directions. One area of the literature that the principals in the study did not feel was heavily impacted by AchieveNJ was goal setting and creating a vision for their schools. However, through our discussions, the principals identified elements of teacher reform that are helping with communicating and achieving their visions. Principal #H1's district had required data-driven administrator goals before AchieveNJ did, but agrees that AchieveNJ has formalized the process. Principal #H2 does not attribute goal setting in their school to AchieveNJ, but does believe that the added accountability of the reform assists with moving the teachers towards their vision for the school. Principal #H3 believes that an important part of setting directions occurs during the informal discussions between teachers and administrators. They work to tie every conversation into the vision for the school, but does not directly credit AchieveNJ for this happening. Principal #H3 claims, "in working towards some of those goals, having specific benchmarks has allowed us to work with teachers towards those goals. Principals in the less effective schools also discussed setting directions through teacher evaluation reform. Principal #L2 spoke of achieving their vision for the school through classroom observations, "Well, once the teachers have a sense that these are goals of the school, then they understand that those are things we're looking for in every lesson, and it gives us a starting point for conversations in the post-observation conference." Principal #L1 communicates their goals for the schools, improving instruction, with a daily email each morning about "changing instruction and not always being the same." They also communicate their vision through department and faculty meetings.

The principals' unwillingness to credit AchieveNJ with helping set directions could be due to negative opinions of the reform in general. While principals discussed ways the reform is tied to goal setting and communicating vision, they opined that they are doing this for reasons

outside of AchieveNJ. It is clear, though, that the principals in the study are utilizing tools like pre- and post-observation conferences to get this done.

Developing People. An important part of being an effective school leader is knowing how to develop the people you have (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). The current teacher evaluation reform relies heavily on the principal's assessment of teachers' ability to instruct young people. What AchieveNJ is less definitive on is whether it is about developing people or accountability. Principals in both groups spoke, in some way, about how the shift to a numerical evaluation system created new opportunities to develop their teachers, but most were really speaking about accountability as the means to achieve this. Principal #L3 states, "It (AchieveNJ) helps us in terms of it gives us the tools to work with...if a teacher is underperforming, we have some more teeth now to how we can address that." They go on to say, "a corrective action plan has very clear guidelines as far as how that teacher has to get better, and ultimately if they don't make the progress that's expected, we have the ability to remove teachers that are not doing their job." Principal #H2 spoke about how "AchieveNJ helped with accountability." Going on to explain how "tenured staff were set in their ways and didn't necessarily move in any direction." One might assume that, with all the added accountability of AchieveNJ, the principals in the study would utilize the tools provided to remove underperforming teachers. Only one principal in the study had used AchieveNJ to remove a teacher based on performance. None of the teachers, at the time of the study, had removed a tenured teacher for their teaching performance or their SGO and SGP scores.

While the principals may not have staffed their schools because of evaluation data, the implementation of post-observation conferences does provide principals with an opportunity to develop their staff through, coaching or mentoring. All the principals in the study claimed to use

some form of post-observation conference prior to AchieveNJ, but none really spoke about the type of coaching or mentoring of struggling teachers the literature deem effective practice. At least one principal, though, believes that the substance of a post-observation conference has changed during the new reform. Principal #L3 spoke about what they consider to be the difference in post-observation conferences before and after AchieveNJ: “I think with AchieveNJ, things are a little more streamlined. Before AchieveNJ it was just...you wrote, you wrote. Now things are broken down in terms of with the scoring, doing it by different categories. I think it just provides a little bit more clarity to the staff member, where I think prior to that things were just a little more vague.” Principal #H2 spoke about the importance of reflection for improvement. “Post observation conferences are based on their reflection, as well as my finding of their strengths and needs for improvement.” Principal #L1 added, “we review what we saw, what we look for, what we think you can do better for next time and just feedback and forth over.” Principal #L2 claims, “I use those (post-observation conferences) to discuss the observation, and then as a starting point for where we want to see the class going the next time.

Several principals spoke about the utilization of teacher evaluation to provide their staff with professional development. Principal #H1 uses classroom observation to drive professional development. “We actually have something in my building called professional development period. We use some of the evaluations where we talk about a particular domain, like engagement of students, and we'll talk about engagement strategies. We noticed that a lot of our scores were low in culture of learning... How can we help staff focus on culture of learning and what does that look like? So we would focus on a professional development period on that.” Principal #H2 sees teacher evaluation as a way to help coach and develop novice teachers. They recalled a recent conversation with a non-tenured teacher where the teacher said, “I noticed that

I'm on schedule for a lot of professional development...more so than some of my non-tenured colleagues...I just wanted to know, am I okay? Is everything okay?" The utilization of observation data to guide professional development was not exclusive to the highly effective schools. Principal #L1 said, "This year, we're focusing on engaging lessons. I sat in on a lot of lessons where I was bored out of my mind for 20 minutes." They then purchased a "summer reading book" for their staff focused on teaching engaging lessons to be discussed upon their return in September. Principal #L2 uses observation data to help teachers plan their Professional Development Plans (PDP) for the following school year. "Well, we draw from the observations for the areas of improvement to decide upon their professional development plan for the following year." Principal #L3 encourages their teachers to share best practices with their peers in monthly department meetings. "The feedback, when I see something really exemplary, one of the things I like to do is recommend and ask them to present at department meetings."

Redesigning the organization. An important leadership practice for moving an organization to be more successful is the development of collaborative practices amongst its participants. To do this, principals forge relationships with their teachers. An important quality in an effective principal-teacher relationship is trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). A common struggle shared by both groups of principals in the study was the idea of developing trust between staff members and administrators in the new reform era. While all agreed that trust is important for development, how AchieveNJ plays into that trust is a tougher nut to crack. In fact, two principals in the study first claimed that trust increases with the quantified reform of AchieveNJ, but then changed their opinions as they considered their thoughts. Principal #H1 said, "I guess it helps with trust because it does have that objectiveness of boiling down to a number..." but then quickly added, "my trust has probably decreased because it has boiled down to just a number."

Principal #L2 made a similar statement when they said, “I might be going back on what I said before, but a score does make it a little more difficult to obtain that trust from a teacher.

Principals #L1 and #L3 did not see any real impact on trust caused by AchieveNJ. Principal #L3 added, “I like to think there was trust between myself and my staff before AchieveNJ and after I don’t think there’s been a major change there.” No principal in the study spoke of other elements Leithwood considers important to redesigning the organization. Principals did speak of professional learning communities and teaching teams, but these were created prior to the implementation of AchieveNJ. They also did not attribute teacher evaluation reform to increases in community involvement. This could have been overlooked during the interviews. Many of the evaluation models include elements of professional responsibilities. For example, Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching’s Domain 4 addresses teachers’ participation in the school community outside of the classroom.

Improving the instructional program. If AchieveNJ has done anything well, the principals in the study all provided positive feedback with regards to how teacher evaluation has helped renew, or at least sharpen, the focus on improving instruction in schools. Principals across the two groups did not differ in their perception, and use, of AchieveNJ to improve instruction. With the added formalities of pre-and post-observation conferences, the principals in the study all discussed an increased attention to helping teachers improve their instruction. Principal #H3 claims, “I would say it’s (AchieveNJ) created more formal opportunities for discussions about lessons.” Principal #H1 uses pre-observation conferences, a practice not widely used by the teachers in the study prior to AchieveNJ, to ask “what do they want me to look for specifically so that they can get feedback on them.” Principal #H2 summed up pre-observation conferences by saying, “during the pre-observation, we look to see what the teacher’s objective is, how they plan

on meeting it, how they plan on differentiating their instruction, and how they plan on assessing the understanding of the students.” This sentiment was not only seen in the more effective schools. Principal L2 added, “Well, I think it has helped that area of teachers ...They have to focus on instruction, and pedagogy, and all of the domains, so I think it has helped.” Principal #L1 explained their approach and focus for classroom observations by saying, “My first observation only includes domains 2 (classroom environment) and 3 (instruction), focused primarily, heavily, on domain 2. Second observation focuses again only on domains two and 3, but the focus in that second observation is placed emphasis on domain 3. The third observation includes Domain 1 (preparation and planning), 2 (classroom environment), and 3 (instruction), and we focus a lot of the efforts into Domain 1.”

There was less agreement amongst the principals in the study with regards to the use of SGOs and SGPs for improving instruction. Principal #L3 utilizes department leaders to break down the data from SGOs and “delve into, not only the results of the students, but the students who may have struggled, what specific area they struggled on.” Teachers in each department then use the data to pinpoint areas where students struggled the most, then adjust instruction accordingly. Principal #H1 had a similar position to Principal #L3, leaving much of the SGO work to district supervisors. Principal #H1 argues, “I don’t do anything with SGOs in the sense that it’s not my content background so I wouldn’t even know if it was accurate or whether it was a good SGO or not.” Principal #H1 did say that they discuss SGOs at annual reviews, asking teachers if they found them useful and if they would tweak anything.

Contextual differences.

While there were minimal differences in how principals in both groups of schools carry out teacher evaluation and use it to enact important leadership functions, there were contextual

differences that may affect how the aforementioned get done. While these differences do not appear to affect the implementation of teacher evaluation reform, they do affect the comfort level of the principal and were prevalent during the interviews. The one important contextual difference that separated the effective middle schools to the less effective schools was the presence of central administrative support. Principals in the effective schools reported various forms of central administrative support that helped ease the transition to AchieveNJ. Principal #H1 reported that support came in the form of department supervisors that assist with professional development and goal setting and sharing observations. Principal #H1 reported: “What is unique about (school name omitted), is we also have supervisors for every department. In addition we have supervisors that just focus on curriculum...We share a lot of the observations.” Principal #H2 also reported positive support from the central administration. Principal #H2’s district has a central administrative supervisory team dedicated to the district’s three middle schools, in the areas of math, language arts, social studies, and science. This team spends one day a week in Principal #H2’s school and conducts observations, assists with SGOs, and works with the principal to strategize ways to help develop teachers. Principal #H3’s support is built into the daily routine. As a kindergarten through eighth (k-8) district, and grades four through eight being housed in their school, Principal #H3 has on-site support in the form of assistant principal, director of special services, and the superintendent. This support relieves some of the burden placed on the principal by completing some of the classroom observations. When discussing the effects of AchieveNJ on successfully running the daily operations, Principal #H3 claims that it has not hindered their ability to get it done. They added, “if I had to do this without the assistance of the VP (vice principal), or the director of special services, or even the superintendent who jumps in on some observations, I’m sure I would be saying something very

different.” Principal #H2 quantified this by explaining, “it (the number of classroom observations) was reduced a little bit for equity, we gave some supervisors more observations to do, so it was the same thing, it maybe went from 30 to 23 (classroom observations). Still a lot, but at least they're shorter.”

Principals in the less effective schools did not receive the same support that was found in the effective schools. Coupled with the increase in classroom observations (from two for tenured to three) and the addition of Domain 4 (professional responsibilities, Danielson Rubric), SGOs, and annual meetings, the burden on principals has been substantially increased. At the middle school level, a staff of 60 teachers results in the following breakdown (without the waiver): 180 classroom observations, 120 SGOs to approve (2 per teacher), 20 to 30 SGP meetings (Language Arts and Math teachers) to discuss results, 60 Domain 4 observations (an observation on their professional responsibilities), and 60 annual meetings. It is important to note that all the schools in the study did have a vice-principal. While this does allow the principal to allocate classroom observations to the vice-principal, the principal is responsible for the completion of the other required aspects of AchieveNJ. When speaking about the increase in classroom observations brought about by AchieveNJ, Principal #L3 states, “...at the secondary level where I am, you did half (of the observations), your vice principal did half, and it was pretty cut and dry. Now with that third (classroom observation), you’re doing the additional observations. Definitely significantly more now.” When asked about help from central administration, with regards to completing classroom observations, Principal #L2 added, “[we have] very little. We do most of them ourselves.” Principal #L1 echoed that sentiment claiming, “My vice principal and I do all of them. We don’t have any supervisors come in.” Other areas of support built in by central administration in the effective schools was time for staff development. All three principals spoke

about various opportunities for teachers to participate in ongoing professional development focused on instruction, embedded in the needs of the school. Principal #H1's teachers are guaranteed two half days per year to use for professional development by contract while Principal #H2's district has a team dedicated to providing professional development to teachers. Time is provided to teachers to use data to design curriculum and instruction-focused professional development. The three principals in the less effective schools acknowledge and value professional development, but the opportunities for development considered most valuable by their teachers were those created and provided by the school itself.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This discussion summarizes the major findings and considers implications for further studies.

Major Findings

This study consisted of interviews with principals from two groups of schools. Utilizing a regression analysis that controlled for socioeconomic and staffing factors, three of the principals were from highly effective schools in three different school districts, while the other three were from less effective schools in the same school district. The most important finding from this study was that there was not a great deal of variation between how the highly and less effective school principals' report implementing teacher evaluation reform or use it to strengthen their approach to leadership tasks. This indicates that the differences in the effectiveness of the schools does not appear to be the result of the implementation of AchieveNJ. Both groups agreed about being unsure on how to utilize student growth objectives (SGO) to improve instruction. Both groups also did not see the value of the student growth percentiles (SGP) or were frustrated in the slow turnaround for receiving SGP scores for their teachers. Both groups had evaluation practices in place prior to AchieveNJ that the literature would deem effective; and both groups still employ these practices after AchieveNJ.

The most glaring difference between the two groups of schools was found in contextual differences. Specifically, the two groups of schools differed in the real, or perceived, amount of central administrative support they receive. The three principals in the effective schools all acknowledged that they received significant assistance from central administration with regards to conducting classroom observations and providing professional development opportunities for

their teachers. Principals in the less effective schools had little assistance from sources outside of the school, most of them completing all of the required observations (sometimes over 400 when including Domain 4 and annual reviews) between themselves and one vice principal. This could be why the principals in the less effective schools spoke more openly about taking their work home with them to get it done. While the time crunch that was found after year one of the current reform was downplayed by all the principals in the study, the principals in the effective schools had help put in place, through additional vice principals, in-house supervisory teams, and even superintendent observations on teachers, while the other principals crafted new ways to ensure everything got done. The idea of the time crunch is interesting, and might have further implications. Why does teacher evaluation reform in the highly effective schools look similar to the less effective schools if they perceive to have greater resources provided by central administration? Would the implementation of teacher evaluation reform look similar if the effective schools did not have these resources?

All the principals in the study felt that AchieveNJ added accountability for teachers. Citing the importance of quantifying teacher performance, the principals believe that the new reform may help remove tenured teachers, who may have been set in their ways, in the direction desired by the principal or superintendent. From a policy context, this is what the New Jersey Department of Education aimed to accomplish with AchieveNJ. However, many of the practices that were discussed were compliance measures. Principals in both groups spoke about completing tasks just because they were required. For example, conducting a third observation on your best teacher was problematic and time consuming by the principals. Additionally, while principals in the study were quick to point out that AchieveNJ held teachers more accountable, they failed to acknowledge their own accountability. AchieveNJ did not just reform teacher

evaluations, but principal evaluations as well. Much of the compliance measures are completed, not out of accountability of teachers, but out of accountability for principals.

Implications and Research Issues

The findings suggest issues of policy and practice. The effects of AchieveNJ on middle school principals is rather nuanced, and ascertaining its utility is not easily done. In many ways, it does not appear to be a strong intervention and, on the surface, does not seem to be changing principal practice very much. However, the policy is increasing the amount of time principals spend doing observations and talking with teachers about instruction. It is also providing principals with opportunities to set goals and communicate their vision. These are positive changes nudged by the reform. Conversely, the principals in the study do not appear to be developing the skills and knowledge necessary to enact the policy effectively. Much of what they are doing is about compliance and accountability. These negative aspects tend to dominate and distort the conversation. For example, most principals made at least one negative comment about the PARCC assessment. If state policy continues to hover overhead, threatening removal or tenure revocation, it is unclear if principals will use the reform to improve their schools, or just to keep their heads above water. More research is needed on how school districts are providing principals with opportunities for professional development on enacting the policy for good. Alternative evaluation reform and more cost-effective policies should also be considered.

The principals in the study expressed negative opinions of the SGO and SGP system set forth by AchieveNJ. While there is already research that warns against using SGPs to measure teacher effectiveness (Baker, Oluwole, & Green, 2013), future studies should consider the efficacy of these tools on assessing and measuring student achievement. A particularly interesting future consideration would be an analysis of teacher SGP scores compared to their

classroom observations. Multiple principals in the effective schools admitted that they did not place a lot of emphasis on SGPs when they know some of their best teachers get low scores. As New Jersey's Department of Education has now changed the SGP weights for a second time, and states continue to abandon the PARCC assessment, it is unclear how much faith they have in their own system. It makes sense that there is not tremendous buy-in from principals.

From a practical perspective, both groups of principals claim to do many of the same things in their daily practice. They communicate their vision, set goals, observe staff, provided feedback, and work to develop people. More research is needed to determine how this plays out over time. What is happening to struggling teachers? What is happening to observation scores over time? All the principals in the study profess to giving feedback to their staff. What is still unclear is whether this feedback is useful. While principals discussed giving feedback to their staff, much of it was generalized and did not offer specific strategies to help teachers improve their craft. Future studies should include teacher focus groups. Their feedback could be valuable for fact checking principals, or just gaining a different perspective. Principals might think they are doing all the right things, but the staff might think otherwise. On the personnel side of things, the principals all mentioned that they welcomed the increased accountability for teachers with AchieveNJ. The literature places tremendous value on developing people, but does not recommend achieving this through accountability measures. Leithwood suggests that effective principals do this through providing teachers with individualized support and intellectual stimulation; giving them something they can absorb and readily use (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Still others have suggested accountability measures and extrinsic motivators can have an adverse effect on teacher performance (Firestone, 2014). This raises the question, are teachers

developing or just complying? Furthermore, it is important to note that this study did not consider principal evaluation. It would be interesting to see a similar study where central administrators discussed how they use principal evaluation to develop principals. A comparison of their opinions on the accountability of principals and the principals' opinions on the accountability of teachers could be telling.

Another area that deserves greater attention is the effect central administrative support plays on the success of schools. It is difficult to measure and is not always clearly visible. Built-in systems where supervisors complete observations alleviate some of the workload placed on principals, allowing them to do things they consider important to improving their schools. Another important area to consider is professional development opportunities provided by the school district. The principals in the effective schools had many built-in opportunities to provide professional development for their staff. This is another form of central administrative support that helps principals develop their staff.

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Appendices
Appendix A: Data Set

Relative Performance of New Jersey Middle Schools in the Areas
Of English/Language Arts and Matheatics and Overall

| GRADES | SCHOOL | ELA RELATIVE PERFORMANCE RATING 2013 | MATH RELATIVE PERFORMANCE RATING 2013 | 2013 COMBINED RELATIVE PERFORMANCE |
|--------|--------|--|---|--|
| 06-08 | A | 2.134199858 | 2.27931881 | 4.413518667 |
| 06-08 | B | 2.030058384 | 2.191479683 | 4.221538067 |
| 06-08 | H2 | 1.583947778 | 2.272150755 | 3.856098533 |
| 06-08 | D | 1.601409078 | 2.237708569 | 3.839117646 |
| 05-08 | E | 0.342439562 | 3.455665588 | 3.79810515 |
| 04-08 | F | 2.801245689 | 0.843827128 | 3.645072818 |
| 05-08 | G | 1.772563577 | 1.836137176 | 3.608700752 |
| 05-08 | H3 | 1.508631468 | 1.978559375 | 3.487190843 |
| 05-08 | I | 0.925858498 | 2.477769136 | 3.403627634 |
| 06-08 | J | 2.11743331 | 0.965445817 | 3.082879126 |
| 06-08 | K | 1.988674641 | 1.057991505 | 3.046666145 |
| 07-08 | L | 1.188732743 | 1.690068007 | 2.87880075 |
| 05-08 | M | 3.170454979 | -0.357491523 | 2.812963456 |
| 06-08 | N | 1.430096507 | 1.374906182 | 2.805002689 |
| 06-08 | O | 1.539960742 | 1.181177139 | 2.721137881 |
| 06-08 | P | 0.302822918 | 2.380795717 | 2.683618635 |
| 06-08 | H1 | 1.595498562 | 1.021379948 | 2.61687851 |
| 07-08 | R | 0.235039592 | 2.372164726 | 2.607204318 |
| 05-08 | S | 1.217199087 | 1.382540822 | 2.599739909 |
| 06-08 | T | 1.190019369 | 1.363862395 | 2.553881764 |
| 04-08 | U | 1.367855072 | 1.150136113 | 2.517991185 |
| 07-08 | V | 0.85678786 | 1.545421958 | 2.402209818 |
| 05-08 | W | 1.117377281 | 1.275870562 | 2.393247843 |
| 06-08 | X | 0.86482662 | 1.497444987 | 2.362271607 |

| | | | | |
|-------|----|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 06-08 | Y | 1.676173806 | 0.65346384 | 2.329637647 |
| 05-08 | Z | 0.604414344 | 1.672885537 | 2.277299881 |
| 06-08 | AA | 1.245825887 | 1.017164469 | 2.262990355 |
| 04-08 | BB | 1.815154791 | 0.433277786 | 2.248432577 |
| 06-08 | CC | 0.572134674 | 1.657538414 | 2.229673088 |
| 06-08 | DD | 0.72449863 | 1.501676202 | 2.226174831 |
| 06-08 | EE | 0.59477073 | 1.593459964 | 2.188230693 |
| 04-08 | FF | 1.773540974 | 0.392780274 | 2.166321248 |
| 06-08 | GG | 0.217924446 | 1.920934439 | 2.138858885 |
| 06-08 | HH | 1.851795673 | 0.262147754 | 2.113943428 |
| 05-08 | II | 1.345058322 | 0.756644666 | 2.101702988 |
| 07-08 | JJ | 0.202375278 | 1.8716712 | 2.074046478 |
| 06-08 | KK | 0.278857797 | 1.772521377 | 2.051379174 |
| 04-08 | LL | 0.293608665 | 1.721185684 | 2.01479435 |
| 05-08 | MM | 0.391280651 | 1.612799525 | 2.004080176 |
| 06-08 | NN | 0.855949342 | 1.146910071 | 2.002859414 |
| 06-08 | OO | 0.930759072 | 1.016174555 | 1.946933627 |
| 06-08 | PP | 0.78539741 | 1.130059123 | 1.915456533 |
| 04-08 | QQ | 1.376001477 | 0.512483895 | 1.888485372 |
| 06-08 | RR | 0.915290415 | 0.897083342 | 1.812373757 |
| 07-08 | SS | 1.555822372 | 0.200465575 | 1.756287947 |
| 07-08 | TT | 1.906079292 | -0.220476002 | 1.685603291 |
| 05-08 | UU | 1.014243722 | 0.669065714 | 1.683309436 |
| 06-08 | VV | 1.586041808 | 0.046135869 | 1.632177677 |
| 06-08 | WW | 1.696639419 | -0.141488776 | 1.555150643 |
| 06-08 | L1 | 0.139451176 | -0.145716771 | -0.006265596 |
| 06-08 | L3 | -1.292212963 | -1.153016448 | -2.445229411 |
| 06-08 | L2 | -2.063704252 | -0.83047241 | -2.894176662 |

Appendix B: School/District Data

| Principal | District Size | School Size | Student Demographics | Principal Tenure in school | Assistant Principal |
|-----------|---------------|-------------|---|----------------------------|---------------------|
| H1 | 9,700+ | 1000-1100 | 62.5% Asian 25.4% White 7.8% Black 3.7% Hispanic | 3-4 yrs | Yes (2) |
| H2 | 14,000+ | 800-900 | 72.3% Asian 14.1% White 10.2% Black 3.0% Hispanic | 3-4 yrs | Yes (1) |
| H3 | 600-700 | 250-300 | 86.5% White 8.7% Hispanic 2.4% Asian 1.7% Black | 3-4 yrs | Yes (1) |
| L1 | 13,000+ | 650-700 | 48% Asian 30% White 13.3% Hispanic 7.8% Black | 3-4 yrs | Yes (1) |
| L2 | 13,000+ | 400-450 | 36.3% White 33.6% Hispanic 16.4% Black 11.3% Asian 2.1% Mixed | 1-2 yrs | Yes (1) |
| L3 | 13,000+ | 600-650 | 35.3% White 23.6% Hispanic 21.5% Black 19.3% Asian | 3-4 yrs | Yes (1) |

Appendix C: Principal Interview Protocol

Principal Investigator: James Parry

Setting Directions

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your school?
2. How has teacher evaluation affected your school's ability to improve student achievement?
3. What is your vision? Where would you like to see your school in 5 to 7 years?
4. How has AchieveNJ changed this?
5. How do you communicate this?
6. How do you use classroom observations to ensure school goals are embedded in the classroom?
7. What kinds of goals did you set for yourself (and your school) prior to AchieveNJ?
8. What kinds of goals did your teachers set for themselves prior to AchieveNJ?
9. How does AchieveNJ help or hinder your efforts to assess those goals?
10. How does AchieveNJ help or hinder your efforts to achieve those goals?

Developing People

11. Which evaluation/observation system do you use?
12. How many staff members do you have?
13. What percentage of those observations are you responsible for completing?
14. Who else does observations? How does the central administration assist in this? (other observers, scheduling, etc.)
15. Do you conduct pre and post observations? Which? Both?
16. How do you use pre-observation conferences?
17. How do you use post-observation conferences?

18. How do you give feedback to your teachers?

19. Tell me about a non-tenured teacher you gave feedback to in the last few weeks. Walk me through the process. Probe: How did the teacher respond? What questions were asked?

Repeat for:

a. A tenured teacher?

b. A strong teacher?

c. A weak teacher?

d. A teacher in your subject area of expertise?

20. Did you use conferences prior to AchieveNJ? How have they changed?

21. How do you use teacher evaluation to guide professional development for teachers?

22. Many districts are applying for waivers that will reduce the number of classroom observations for tenured teachers, but increase the length of each observation. What are your thoughts on this?

23. How many classroom observations did you do before AchieveNJ?

24. How do you use SGO's to help develop your teachers? What do you do with them when you get the results for each teacher?

25. How do you feel about the idea of trust between principal and teacher being an important lever to their professional development?

26. Have you found AchieveNJ (pre and post observation conferences) useful for developing trust with your staff? Probe: How has it gotten in the way of developing trust?

Redesigning the Organization

27. Principals often change the design of their schools by reallocating assignments or through staffing decisions. Have you made any changes to teaching assignments because of teacher

evaluations?

28. How has SGO, SGP, or observation data affected the way you staff your school?

29. Is there any other way that teacher evaluation has helped or hindered your ability to develop people?

Improving the Instructional Program

30. One of the principal's most important jobs is improving the instructional program of the school. How has AchieveNJ helped or hindered the way this gets done?

31. How does teacher evaluation connect to curriculum? Probe: Is one more important than the other?

32. Prior to SGOs, how did you monitor student growth?

33. How do you use SGP data to improve instruction? How was this done prior to SGPs?

Creating an Orderly and Supportive Learning Environment

An important responsibility that sometimes gets overlooked during the endless pursuit of instructional leadership, is the principal's ability to create a school that is conducive to learning.

34. How do you do this in your school?

35. How has AchieveNJ helped or hindered your ability to do this? Probe: What has the implementation/requirements of AchieveNJ prohibited you from doing as principal?

36. Are there any other ways that teacher evaluation has helped or hindered your ability to improve the instructional program?

Demographics

37. How long have you been principal?

38. How many years have you been in this school?

39. How many years have you been in this district?

40. How many years of experience do you have in teaching?
41. How many years of administrative experience do you have?
42. What is your highest degree earned?
43. Any last thoughts?

Appendix D: Code List

1. Accountability
2. Beans, Balls, and Buses (non-instructional responsibilities)
3. Change AFTER AchieveNJ
4. Compliance
5. Curriculum
6. Data Use
7. Developing People
8. Focus on Instruction
9. Negative Behaviors Before AchieveNJ
10. Positive Behaviors Before AchieveNJ
11. SGO/SGP
12. Setting Directions
13. Time Crunch
14. Trust