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Perceptions of Elementary School Support  
Staff of Their Role in Supporting  
the School Mission Statement

by

Matthew Dean

August 5, 2020

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
School of Education

Perceptions of Elementary School Support  
Staff of Their Role in Supporting  
the School Mission Statement

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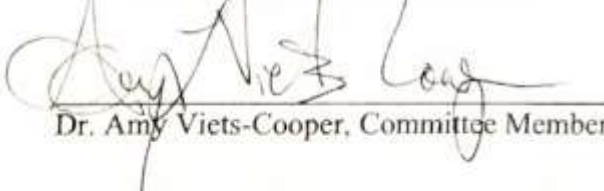
This Dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
Lindenwood University, School of Education

  
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Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Full Legal Name: Matthew Dean

Signature: Matthew Dean Date: 8/5/20

## Acknowledgments

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## **Abstract**

School district mission statements are intended to be unifying declarations that set a tone and direction for organizations and provide a unifying motivator for the individuals who serve those organizations (Rey, 2017). School district mission statements should be created and articulated in a manner that can be understood and followed by certified administrators and teachers, as well as classified personnel such as district support staff (Lynch, 2016). Without adequate articulation, school district mission statements can fall short of providing guidance and motivation to every employee in the district (Rey, 2017). This qualitative study was initiated to gain the perceptions of school support staff in the areas of custodial/maintenance, food service, and transportation as to how their roles and responsibilities support the mission statements of the school districts in which they serve. Data for this study were collected through support staff focus groups and elementary principal interviews. Results indicated that support staff members, although not always familiar with their districts' mission statements, do grasp the importance of their roles and how those roles intersect with the educational experience of students. Support staff employees desire more communication regarding their districts' missions, more training in student-related support, and more communication and respect from certified staff while serving in their roles. Because support staff members in the areas of custodial/maintenance, food service, and transportation are vital to the functioning of a school, it is imperative they are adequately supported in their roles (Balingit, 2018).

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

School district mission statements are typically regarded as centerpieces for strategy and policy implementation for the school communities they serve (Rey, 2017). When articulating a mission statement, school districts have much to consider. As Lynch (2016) explained:

In order for all stakeholders to have the opportunity to participate in the school's model, the objectives must be clearly expressed in writing. The language has to be clear and something that everyone can understand, from teachers and administrators to parents and support staff. Students should also be able to access mission statements so that they can become participants in their own education.

(para. 2)

Because mission statements are so encompassing and are developed to include many stakeholders, it is not surprising that mission statements fall short in many organizations due to some individuals feeling a lack of motivation relative to the stated mission (Rey, 2017).

This chapter includes an examination of the perception that school support staff are often left out of the process of creation and implementation of school mission statements. A background of the study and the theoretical framework based on systems theory are presented, with a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. The significance of the study is provided, and key terms are defined. Finally, delimitations, limitations, and assumptions are described.

## **Background of the Study**

Over the course of the last several years, many school districts across the country have adopted a professional learning community model to promote collaboration and achievement for their organizations (Van Clay, Soldwedel, & Many, 2011). Because an important component of the professional learning community model is the establishment of a mission statement, there has subsequently been an increase in the number of school districts collaboratively creating shared mission statements (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Allen and Kern (2018) stated, “A well-written statement can guide decision-making, resource allocations, policy decisions, and how the school operates” (para. 6). Allen and Kern (2018) also declared most mission statements are based upon the academic outcomes of a school district. Therefore, while teachers and administrators can easily connect their roles and responsibilities to a district mission statement, support staff members often feel inadequately trained to work with students, disconnected from certified staff members, and unappreciated in their contributing roles (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011).

Despite the importance of maintaining clear and consistent goals from the top down in an organization, there is an identifiable disconnect between the roles and responsibilities of school support staff and mission statements that typically revolve around learning and instruction (Harris & Merrihew, 2016). This type of organizational inconsistency, if not addressed, can lead to employee dissatisfaction and a lack of motivation (Rey, 2017). If support staff members can become part of the collective creation of the mission statement or if schools can better assimilate the roles and

responsibilities of support staff into the existing mission statement, efforts can be better aligned with the vision and values of the school district (Allen & Kern, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research was developed based upon a theoretical framework of the systems theory approach. Examination of perceptions of support staff and building principals, coupled with an analysis of existing literature, allowed for conclusions to be drawn regarding the connection of identified support staff to the overall mission of the school district (Becvar & Becvar, 2018). According to Becvar and Becvar (2018), a systems theory approach supports an analysis of each individual, or group, and their relationship to each other and the organization.

Ribeiro (2016) determined:

A system consists of interrelated parts that impact one another in a process that usually produces outputs. Relationships are the associations that occur between elements. This will resonate with education leaders who see beyond the “structure” and “roles” people serve in their districts and focus more intently on the value of the interconnected work their teachers and staff perform. (para. 3)

The six components of systems theory include a sub-system, synergy, open and closed systems, system boundary, flow, and feedback (Tanuja, 2020). By utilizing a systems theory approach and investigating each component with regard to school systems, an analysis can be conducted of how the mission statement motivates or guides school support staff (Kokemuller, 2019).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Since the rise of the professional learning community model in education, schools across the country have increasingly engaged in the creation or articulation of their district mission statements (Swun Math, 2017). The exercise of creating district mission statements typically involves school leaders and faculty members whose main charge is to articulate a clear focus on the practices of teaching and learning to guide a school district (Eaker et al., 2002). Left out of this process are support staff leaders and personnel from non-academic departments such as custodial and maintenance, food service, and transportation who serve a school district whose mission statement does not provide clear direction for their roles and responsibilities (Kokemuller, 2019).

There is little to no current research addressing the disconnect between school district mission statements and the roles and responsibilities of support staff. School district support staff are asked to serve in roles where interaction with students is frequent (National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2019). In fact, support staff members like bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodians play a key role in determining the trajectory of a student's school day (Balingit, 2018).

## **Purpose of the Study**

Leaders should always do everything in their power to promote a sense of identity and connection for the individuals who are part of their organization (Johnson, Irizarry, Nguyen, & Maloney, 2018). In a school setting, a mission statement helps to define the purpose of a school district and challenges everyone in that district to clarify their roles within the context of that mission statement (Eaker et al., 2002). One of the main goals of a mission statement is to motivate employees; however, if a mission statement is not

inclusive of all staff, this can be problematic (Kokemuller, 2019). The perceptions of school support staff members regarding their roles, and specifically their perceptions and understanding of their responsibilities within the context of a school district's mission statement, were investigated in this study.

**Research questions.** The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of elementary school support staff members regarding the primary roles and responsibilities of their positions (as custodians, cafeteria staff, or bus drivers) and how they support a district-wide mission statement?
2. What are the perceptions of elementary principals on job training and employee development for support staff members regarding the school mission statement?

### **Significance of the Study**

In school districts across the country, a system-wide mission statement serves as an important reminder of the overall expectation for the individuals who work within the school organization (Harris & Merrihew, 2016). Mission statements are most often created through a collaborative process involving faculty and staff who derive an academic outcome to serve as the guiding principle for a school district (Allen & Kern, 2018). Without being provided the appropriate background and training, school support staff who serve in areas such as custodial and maintenance, food service, or transportation can be left to determine how their roles contribute to a mission statement, which can lead to uncertainty and discontent (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). In addition, if not given the appropriate resources to navigate their roles to support

students, support staff members will struggle to fulfill their roles to the maximum benefit of the school districts in which they serve (Whittle, 2019).

Harris and Merrihew (2016) asserted it is vitally important that clear and consistent goals are in place from the top down in an organization. A “school’s mission and purpose cast a shadow far beyond architectural forms, artifacts and the written word” (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 29). According to Deal and Peterson (2016), schools that initiate efforts to improve share a strong sense of mission. This study was conducted to fill a current gap in research by examining how school district leaders inform support staff of their roles and responsibilities in supporting the district’s mission statement. Recommendations, based on the findings from this study, are provided for how school districts can do more to attribute student-related importance to the roles of support staff.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined:

**Support staff.** Support staff are defined as school employees who do not hold teaching credentials but assist in the operations of a school (Ravitch, 2007). These individuals include, but are not limited to, bus drivers, custodians, and cafeteria workers (Ravitch, 2007).

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

The following delimitations were identified:

**Time frame.** Focus group meetings and interviews were conducted at designated locations in area school districts during the fall of 2019.

**Location of the study.** The study took place in 11 schools in two southwest Missouri counties.



**Sample.** The sample for the study included support staff members (custodial and maintenance, food service, and transportation) and elementary school principals.

**Criteria.** There were no age or gender requirements for participants of this study. There was, however, the expectation participants had been employed by their school districts for at least one year. In addition, the support staff who participated in the focus group discussions only worked in the areas of custodial and maintenance, food service, and transportation.

The following limitations were identified in this study:

**Sample demographics.** Since specific district support staff were targeted for interviews, a purposive sample was utilized for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purposive sample was limited to participants in at least one or two small elementary schools (enrollment of 0 to 150 students), two medium elementary schools (enrollment of 150 to 300), and two large elementary schools (enrollment greater than 300).

**Instrument.** Research questions were utilized, along with the theoretical framework and the review of literature, to create interview questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Questions were designed to gather as much descriptive information as possible to triangulate the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The following assumptions were accepted:

1. The responses of the participants were offered honestly and willingly.
2. The sample was representative of the general population of support staff in the areas of custodial/maintenance, food service, and transportation employed by school districts in two counties in southwest Missouri (Missouri Department of Elementary and

Secondary Education [MODESE], 2018). In addition, elementary principals working in the buildings where selected support staff were employed were interviewed.

### **Summary**

It is incumbent on school district leaders to acknowledge the contributions and worth of every employee in their school districts and to promote a sense of connection and purpose relative to organizational goals (Johnson et al., 2018). School district mission statements are created to do just that—to outwardly express the school system's purpose and identity in a singular statement (Allen & Kern, 2018). However, if a district's mission statement is not crafted to be relevant to all staff members, it can fall short of serving one of its greatest purposes—the motivation of employees (Kokemuller, 2019).

The background of the study, theoretical framework, and statement of the problem were included in Chapter One. The purpose of the study and the research questions were presented. The significance of the study and the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions were detailed. Also provided in Chapter One was the definition of key terms.

Chapter Two includes the review of literature. The six components of systems theory are delineated. Current research regarding the roles and responsibilities of support staff, support staff training, and student-related support is reviewed. Finally, school leadership and their attitudes and beliefs related to school support staff and school district mission statements are detailed in Chapter Two.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

A thorough investigation of systems theory and how the theory guided this study are presented in Chapter Two. Additionally, the following topics are included in the literature review: an examination of the roles and responsibilities of support staff, and support staff training and student-related support. Finally, the role of school leadership, their attitudes, and their beliefs related to the support staff and district mission statements are provided.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Systems theory guided this investigation of the variables within school systems, which include the properties and qualities found in school systems, the relationships within the school systems, and the environment in which school systems exist (University of Twente, 2017). School systems are comprised of a number of certified and classified personnel working together within a larger school culture (Harris & Merrihew, 2016). While teachers, administrators, and other certified staff play obvious key roles in a school system, support staff employees play a vital role in the success of any given district (National Education Association, 2018). According to the National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2019):

School support staff play an important role in ensuring students are learning in a safe and supportive learning environment. They can foster positive, trusting relationships with students and improve school climate by encouraging parent and family involvement in education. Because students connect with school support staff on many occasions throughout the school day, support staff can model positive behavior and send positive messages to students. (para. 1)

The contributions of support staff members are interwoven with the roles and responsibilities of certificated faculty (i.e., teachers, counselors) to produce the important educational outcomes of a school system (Ribeiro, 2016).

The contributions and positive qualities of support staff members are easy to identify in any given school system (Balingit, 2018). School bus drivers play a crucial role in the school day of students, as they are often the first district employee to greet students in the morning and the last faces students see before arriving home at the end of the day (Hopkins, 2016). School cafeteria staff have been given the critical task of serving one to two meals to students each day, all while meeting important health, safety, and nutritional guidelines (Bumpres, 2017). School custodians are responsible for keeping school buildings in the best possible condition so students can learn in an environment that is both safe and sanitized (Williams, 2018).

The ultimate goal of any organization is for all members to work together toward a common goal (Harris & Merrihew, 2016). In a school system, this is often defined by a mission statement (Allen & Kern, 2018). Mission statements should be applicable to the daily activities within a school system and should be familiar and relevant to all of the stakeholders in the school culture (Lynch, 2016). Ribeiro (2016) proposed school leaders who are systems thinkers value the relationships that exist among the participants in a school, and the relationships contribute to a positive culture.

While organization and culture may vary from school district to school district, the majority of school systems are structured in a very similar manner (Heibutzki, 2019). Heibutzki (2019) described a typical school system:

A school district consists of administrators and educators responsible for ensuring students' academic success. To ensure effective decision-making local districts designate responsibilities to specific personnel. The superintendent manages the district's affairs in collaboration with elected school board members, department heads and building principals. Depending on his district's size, the superintendent handles most executive functions himself or delegates them to other middle-level managers. (para. 1)

While school systems operate under a chain-of-command system, it is important school leaders understand that within the school culture there are multiple layers of employees, and open lines of communication are necessary (Ribeiro, 2016).

In the context of modern education, it has become evident that educational organizations can benefit from adopting a systems theory approach to thinking and decision making (Ribeiro, 2016). Because schools are comprised of interrelated pieces, school leaders can utilize and appreciate a systems approach that focuses on the relationships and outputs that come from different departments (Ribeiro, 2016). Tanuja (2020) introduced six components of systems theory which must be developed in order for a system to be successful. These six components include sub-system, synergy, open and closed systems, system boundary, flow, and feedback (Tanuja, 2020).

In his research on the components of systems theories and management, Tanuja (2020) described each part of a bigger whole within an organization as a sub-system. Whether in businesses, schools, or other organizational structures, each department is a sub-system of the overall system (Lunenburg, 2010). Tanuja (2020) provided the example of national economies being sub-systems of the world economy. In this way,

the concept is transferable to organizations like schools, where each department (school board, teaching and learning, custodial and maintenance, food service) is a sub-system of the educational institution (Lunenburg, 2010).

Betts (1992) defined systems as a set of elements and functions that work together as a whole to achieve a common purpose. Phrased slightly differently, Betts (1992) described each component as a sub-component of the greater whole and provided the example of the body's circulatory system as a sub-system of the human system. To exist, Betts (1992) stated, "A system must be able to import energy across its boundary or have a capacity to create new sources of energy" (p. 3). When systems are able to easily and readily import and export energy, they are described as open systems (Lunenburg, 2010). On the contrary, when systems cannot import and export energy, they are deemed closed systems (Lunenburg, 2010). To apply both open and closed systems thinking to the educational arena does not work, as Betts (1992) asserted each educational system is comprised of unique variables, situations, and arrangements combined with a unique "constellation of relationships" (p. 3).

Tanuja (2020) asserted the "sum total of parts is less than that of the whole" and described how each department works independently to make up the total output of the school (p. 2). Tanuja (2020) also described synergy as the relationships among all parts of the organization derived from all sub-systems contributing to the total output achieved through coordination of sub-systems. Betts (1992) referred to synergy as a way to characterize systems as the whole being greater than the sum of its parts or elements. Ribeiro (2016) further declared the relationships of the parts working together creates additional value to the system as a whole.

Systems can be open or closed according to how they interact in any given environment (Lunenburg, 2010). Open systems include active interaction with the environment, receiving inputs, and providing outputs (Tanuja, 2020). Conversely, closed systems have very little or no interaction with the environment and operate more from internal perspectives (Lunenburg, 2010).

Betts (1992) asserted, “Social systems such as a school are generally regarded as open systems” (p. 3). Lunenburg (2010) more specifically stated:

According to open-systems views, schools constantly interact with their environments. In fact, they need to structure themselves to deal with forces in the world around them. In contrast, a closed-system theory views schools as sufficiently independent to solve most of their problems through their internal forces. (p. 1)

Looking at schools from the systems perspective, Betts (1992) described them as being moderately open. Betts (1992) went on to designate the two primary forms of energy transactions in schools as financial and intellectual in nature. Furthermore, Betts (1992) stated schools are not a natural setting; rather, they function under a series of conflicting legal and social mandates which represent a consensus of the participants.

For school improvement to occur, Betts (1992) stated educational systems and environments should be designed to be “more open, organic, pluralistic, and complex” (p. 4). Several implications are apparent when considering school systems. Rather than old design models for schools where information was taught from cover to cover in textbooks and within a four-wall classroom for six periods a day, research supports adapting schools with new designs, flexibility, and more open concepts (Betts, 1992). As a result

of Betts's (1992) research, several implications for education can be drawn. Betts (1992) explained novel elements should be considered when addressing educational components such as outcomes, self-assessment, interventions, reflective practices, and year-round school or structures in school calendars, to name a few.

Tanuja (2020) defined system boundaries as each system having a boundary that separates it from the environment. Some boundaries are more flexible and open in open systems, while others are more closed and rigid in closed systems (Lunenburg, 2010). Betts (1992) referred to the human body as an example for system boundary when describing how a healthy body system is maintained by regulating body temperature and balance around 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

Flow represents movement of inputs into the system from the environment, according to Tanuja (2020). Ribeiro (2016) stated, "Organizations are not static but in a constant state of flux" (p. 1). Ribeiro (2016) also pointed out, "With increasingly changing educational landscapes, our educational systems are in a constant state of transformation and unpredictable change" (p. 1). Lunenburg (2010) further asserted:

This transformation process includes the internal operation of the organization and its systems of operational management. Some components of the system of operational management include the technical competence of school administrators and other staff, their plans of operation, and their ability to cope with change. (para. 6)

With this in mind, what is accomplished by school leaders within the boundaries of the school organization will ultimately have an impact on the outputs of the district (Lunenburg, 2010).



Tanuja (2020) stated the mechanisms of feedback assist in the understanding of whether outputs ultimately result in a desirable outcome. Feedback provides a response to the environment and organizational output and is critical to the ultimate success of any school operation (Lunenburg, 2010). Furthermore, Lunenburg (2010) specified negative feedback can address shortcomings in not only the transformation process but also the inputs or both, which can play a significant role in a school moving forward.

### **The Roles and Responsibilities of Support Staff**

School support staff play a vital role in facilitating the day-to-day operations of the school districts in which they serve (Shaw, 1998). Whittle (2019) confirmed support staff as being the backbone of any school, but often they are largely ignored with what he referred to as a “coverage of work actions” (p. 1). By definition, Whittle (2019) asserted support staff work in supporting roles behind the scenes to ensure schools and colleges run smoothly and efficiently, and their work may go unnoticed. Because support staff frequently serve under-the-radar in supporting roles, their importance in the educational arena should not be overlooked (Shaw, 1998). According to Whittle (2019), “School support personnel are just as important as the teacher and make just as much of a difference” (p. 1). In light of this viewpoint, school support staff are not just performing menial tasks, they are building important relationships with the students they ultimately serve (Whittle, 2019).

Reinforced by Meals (2018), bus drivers play a critical role in serving as an extension of the school climate. According to Kokemuller (2019):

School bus drivers transport kids from elementary to high school grade levels to and from school. They also commonly take school sports teams and other groups

on trips. Along with their transportation duties, bus drivers commonly assume other roles in the school district. (para. 1)

Meador (2019) asserted the overall responsibility of the bus driver is to provide “safe transportation for students to and from school” (p. 7). Besides just being a safe mode of transportation to and from school, bus drivers may have many other positive interactions with children and give them a positive boost (Meals, 2018).

School bus drivers who transport students on their morning commute are tasked with the great responsibility of setting “an environment that is conducive to learning as soon as the student gets on the bus” (Schlosser, 2018, para. 4). Meals (2018) asserted that just like teachers greeting their students at the doorway has a positive effect on learners, a similar approach is applicable to bus drivers. Bus drivers are the first to greet students as they head to school, and morning interactions can actually set the tone for the day, both positively or negatively (Whittle, 2019).

Meals (2018) suggested, “Bus drivers can also play an important role in schoolwide efforts to prevent and respond to bullying, fights, and other harmful behaviors” (p. 2). Swanson (2012) stated, “Drivers and teachers who address their students by name each day are more likely to recognize unusual behavior” (p. 1). According to Meals (2018), “The importance of having committed bus drivers can be easily overlooked, but those drivers ensure students’ safe passage to and from school, prevent absences, and extend a positive school climate beyond the classroom” (p. 3). Meals (2018) advocated on behalf of the importance of school bus drivers and how much districts rely on them to support the overall larger mission of schools. With so much at

stake in schools, it is no surprise the recruitment and retention of qualified school bus drivers are challenges across the country (McMahon, 2018).

Likewise, school custodians are charged with continually reacting to and managing the daily needs of a school building while making sure facilities are “safe, clean, healthy, and running at their highest and best capacities” (Poskin, 2018b, para. 1). Beyond daily routines of cleaning and maintenance responsibilities, a school custodian will often be called upon to perform a variety of other tasks that can often be quite challenging (Williams, 2018). Custodians can be called on to disinfect an entire classroom experiencing widespread sickness and disease or performing extreme manual labor that requires heavy lifting and other strenuous activity (Markowitz & Senn, 2019).

Meador (2019) declared custodians have a huge responsibility that revolves around the daily cleaning of the buildings in which they are assigned; the tasks involved are numerous and varied in nature. However, these responsibilities are all critical to the overall functioning of the school environment (Meador, 2019). In addition, Markowitz and Senn (2019) detailed:

Custodians must deal with occupational health hazards such as heat and cold stress, mold, cleaning and disinfection chemicals, paints, solvents and other hazardous materials, and the lead paint and asbestos still present in many older school buildings. These exposures put them at risk for occupational diseases from dermatitis to asthma to cancer. (para. 5)

With this in mind, it is imperative that physical plant managers and school leaders develop detailed staffing and workload plans to drive school maintenance and custodial departments (Shaw, 1998).

Meador (2019) asserted custodians and school maintenance crews also play an important role in supporting the functioning of a school in general. Poskin (2018b) stated custodians have to manage many moving pieces to ensure their schools are “safe, clean, healthy, and running at their highest and best capacities” (p. 1). According to Markowitz and Senn (2019), “Custodial and maintenance employees are truly the guardians of safety and health for students, staff and the community” (p. 1). Whittle (2019) described how custodians and maintenance workers play an essential role by making essential repairs and improvements to bring about productive learning environments. Custodial specialists have many diverse duties and hazards to negotiate (Markowitz & Senn, 2019). Workloads continue to grow to include housekeeping, managing grounds, watering sports fields, maintaining artificial turf, managing warehouses, serving as mechanics, supporting technology initiatives, and utilizing equipment requiring new skills and increased duties and responsibilities (Markowitz & Senn, 2019).

Markowitz and Senn (2019) also mentioned many other responsibilities of custodians such as disinfecting for contagious disease prevention, preparing garden beds for botany courses, doing electrical repairs, working in confined spaces with boilers and in crawl spaces, and climbing on ladders, all while being exposed to equipment such as portable tools, snow blowers, leaf blowers, lawn mowers, and lawn edgers. Their physically demanding workloads include tasks such as lifting large trash receptacles, clearing snow on sidewalks, polishing floors, and rolling out and pushing back bleachers, just to name a few (Markowitz & Senn, 2019; Meador, 2019). These responsibilities all support a safe school environment (Whittle, 2019).

School cafeteria workers also have numerous job responsibilities (Bumpres, 2017). According to Bumpres (2017), cafeteria workers can be asked to do any or all of the following:

Perform any duties assigned by the cafeteria manager. Duties include arranging food and beverages on steam tables, a la carte trays or mobile carts to make items available for consumers. Cafeteria workers serve consumers by the menu or personal preference. They clean utensils and cooking and storage equipment. Cafeteria workers also clean and sanitize serving areas each day. They must follow food preparation instructions and serve all food and beverages according to cafeteria safety and sanitary policies. Cafeteria workers might also work as cashiers. Cafeteria staff members work as a team, and each cafeteria worker is responsible for a cooperative working environment. (para. 2)

Meador (2019) concurred, “A cook is responsible for the preparation and serving of food to the entire school. A cook is also responsible for the process of cleaning up the kitchen and the cafeteria” (p. 7). Beyond the typical day-to-day operations of kitchen staff, they assume other critical roles in ensuring children are fed and have the energy to perform well throughout the day. Similar to teachers, it is common for cafeteria support staff to spend their own money providing meals for children in need or supplying other essential hygiene items or clothes because of the relationships they have built (Whittle, 2019).

Other requirements for the role of a school cafeteria staff worker can include earning a high school diploma, becoming certified to handle food, and passing a criminal background check to be employed in the school setting (Bumpres, 2017). Furthermore, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2015) has established strict

guidelines for food and nutrition services that must be followed by support staff members working in a school cafeteria. These guidelines help to not only ensure health and nutrition guidelines are followed, but they also establish hiring and training standards that school districts are required to follow with regard to their personnel (USDA, 2015).

Despite the crucial role support staff play in the overall functioning of a school, oftentimes, they are left out of the planning process when it comes to developing school purposes and protocols (Lynch, 2016). This lack of communication with all stakeholders can be a detriment to any workplace where it goes unnoticed and is not corrected (DeStefane, 2019). Gallagher and Thordarson (2018) explained a focus on learning can lead to the exclusion of school personnel who are not as closely connected to the learning process, which can ultimately hinder the overall effectiveness of a school district. For example, not including a facilities department regarding a schoolwide move to flexible seating could have negative consequences when custodial crews receive requests to move furniture with no prior knowledge of the bigger initiative (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). This lack of including all stakeholders can lead to insufficient motivation for support staff to work hard to meet organizational goals (Rey, 2017).

### **Support Staff Training and Student-Related Support**

School support staff members play a key role in the educational experience of students (Balingit, 2018). The National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environments (2019) articulated:

Specialized instructional support staff and other personnel, including food service, building services, and other school support staff, also frequently mentor students in their buildings. In this role, they are able to build trusting relationships with

students and help to connect them with others in and outside the school. In addition, positive messaging goes beyond what is posted on bulletin boards in the hallways. Support staff and school personnel can all effectively create a caring learning community, inside and outside the school, through modeling positive behaviors. When staff members' actions are consistent in the school building, throughout the district, and in the community, they are acting as role models not only to students but to their families as well. (para. 3)

For those who work in and are familiar with schools, it is not surprising that the behind the scenes work done by support staff members is critical to the success of any school district (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018).

Because support staff has such an important role in the day-to-day operations of a school, professional development is needed to keep schools functioning and to make staff more efficient in supporting students (Harper, 2018). Professional development for support staff has typically focused on the technical aspects of the jobs they are asked to perform (Shaw, 1998). However, Harper (2018) explained that requirements differ with each individual job, and researchers have clearly identified the need for professional development opportunities for support staff is greater than it has ever been. Harper (2018) further described how such professional development “can enhance the value of school employees and improve the safety and well-being of students” (p. 1).

Harper (2018) noted how non-instructional staff are often “the eyes and ears of the school” and how they too should be trained on schoolwide behavior expectations so they know how to reinforce desired behavior as well as report infractions when necessary (p. 2). According to Harper (2018), support staff can be trained to support student-related

services in other ways as well. Beyond behavior management systems, they can be trained to recognize child abuse and harassment and how to support learners socially and emotionally (Swanson, 2012). On their school website, Duval Public Schools (2020) acknowledged:

High quality professional development for all non-instructional personnel (NIP) is provided to close the communication gap between NIP and certificated personnel by building meaningful relationships and support in our learning community.

This will help in increasing NIP knowledge, skills, aspirations, attitudes and behaviors necessary to effectively perform in their current position. (p. 2)

Furthermore, Harper (2018) declared schools will only be made better when purposeful professional development can be offered to all staff.

Considering the importance of support staff to the educational experience of students, it is imperative school district leaders provide appropriate professional development to non-instructional staff (Harper, 2018). This training can include topics such as behavior expectations for students, mandatory reporting guidelines, and appropriate staff interactions with students in the school setting (Harper, 2018). As supported by Gallagher and Thordarson (2018), it is essential for schools to provide team members “both opportunities and support” for the sustainability of their teams (p. 174).

As part of their jobs, school support staff are regularly placed in situations where student interactions are part of their daily routines (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). School bus drivers have the important responsibility of greeting students every morning and are also the last school staff members to see students home at the end of the school day (Hopkins, 2016). McMahon (2018) pointed out that these interactions can



also present challenges. For example, like a teacher in the classroom, bus drivers may be faced with the challenge of establishing rules and handing out disciplinary action (McMahon, 2018).

School cafeteria workers face some of the same challenges (Hopkins, 2016). The school cafeteria can be an environment that produces many of the most challenging student behaviors of the school day (Shore, 2019). However, there is a fine line between managing student behaviors in a cafeteria and allowing students the healthy social interaction that is also an important part of a student's day (Shore, 2019). With this in mind, it is obvious working in a school cafeteria requires much more than preparing and serving food (Bumpres, 2017).

Beyond the cafeteria, bus drivers are facing challenges nationwide, and because of this, schools are trying to navigate school bus driver shortages (McMahon, 2018). Due to low school bus driver pay, lack of benefits, not enough hours of work, lack of school management support with student disciplinary measures, the need for a Commercial Driver's License (CDL) which can take up to six months of training without pay, and the need to submit a background check and fingerprinting, many schools cannot secure enough qualified bus drivers (Prosight Specialty Insurance, 2020). To help with this shortage, according to McMahon (2018), bus drivers need continuing support.

Because of the important role of support staff in ensuring healthy schools for student learning, combined with the inevitable occupational hazards that go along with their jobs, Markowitz and Senn (2019) explained how schools can safeguard these individuals in several meaningful ways. Some examples include providing written job descriptions to encompass safety protocols and procedures and providing necessary tools

such as dollies, lifts, carts for heavy loads, and hand trucks. Items like walk-off mats to help with trapping dirt, toxic-free chemicals, adequate training to prevent back injuries and to learn proper lifting techniques, personal protective equipment, and other state and federal safety trainings can make the jobs of support staff more palatable (Markowitz & Senn, 2019). Poskin (2018b) cited the importance of school leaders working to support their custodial staffs:

If only human behavior was mechanical, allowing us to program staff to automatically accept and abide by all company policies without question or doubt. In reality, we work with a diverse group of people who have their own set of values, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes, which means that we will gain much more ground toward our goals of creating clean and healthy environments if our employees are working with us instead of against us. (para. 2)

Therefore, it is imperative that school leaders work to gain the support of their custodians through cohesive and organized building structures that provide a safe and productive work environment to ultimately benefit students (DeStefane, 2019).

### **School Leadership and Their Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Support Staff**

According to Harris and Merrihew (2016), successful school leaders recognize that maintaining a clear and consistent message from the top down in an organization is important, and “to achieve consistent success, all levels of the organization must be in sync” (p. 1). When school leaders provide direction and establish goals for staff members, it is vital all stakeholders are familiar with the expectations set forth (Lynch, 2016). Effective school leaders understand and promote the crucial roles members of

their support staff play in the day-to-day functioning of a school system (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011).

Effective school leaders understand that within an educational system, the roles and responsibilities of all members of the same system are interconnected and require shared goal setting and collaboration (Ribeiro, 2016). Effective leaders also solicit input and are quick to listen to the concerns and needs of all staff members, including members of the school's support staff (Lyons, 2018). Rosales (2017) specified:

The whole village concept for improving schools stresses the importance of all school employees working together to help students succeed—everyone from principals, custodians and bus drivers, to teachers, nurses, administrators, security and food service workers. The objective is to create a school culture that helps students reach their full potential academically, socially and emotionally. (para. 1)

Support staff members contribute greatly to a positive school climate, which has been proven to play a big role in furthering student achievement (Fine, 2019). Compatibly, Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) emphasized, “Cultural change must be a school-wide movement, not just an individual effort” (p. 127).

A key component in a successful organization is the celebration and recognition of staff members who do much more than their job descriptions require (Hill, 2017). The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2011) concluded:

Support staff frequently demonstrated that they had the best interests of the school and its community at heart, often going ‘above and beyond the call of duty’ in terms of extra hours worked, tackling additional tasks beyond the scope of their

immediate positions, and willingness to take part in the wider life of the school.

(p. 7)

Effective administrators, therefore, place a high value on the contributions and strengths of support staff members in the same way they recognize and build capacity in certified staff (Lyons, 2018).

Lyons (2018) asserted that to be most effective as administrators, school leaders need to work to build capacity and diversity among their teams as they work to engage them. Gallagher and Thordarson (2018) pointed out the importance of spotlighting the unique strengths and contributions each staff member makes to the team. Effective school leaders have the ability to recognize the strengths each individual staff member has to offer and can work to build leadership ability based on those strengths (Lyons, 2018). Gallagher and Thordarson (2018) further stated that as stronger teams are formed, better communication evolves, and leaders are more in tune with what levels of support are needed.

Similarly, DeStefane (2019) announced staff engagement is critical to the success of any organization. Moreover, DeStefane (2019) stated that inspiration from leadership should extend beyond a few encouraging emails from executive leaders throughout the year, then, organizations can “facilitate team-wide engagement by developing a communication-centric organizational structure that defines the organization’s core beliefs, values, and objectives and aligns them with both its long-term objectives and day-to-day goals” (p. 2). In essence, this approach would bring about shared feelings of ownership, buy-in, and responsibility of organizational mission and efforts (Trammell, 2018).

Brooks (2017) asserted, “Employee engagement is important for organizations because workers who are more devoted to their jobs are also more productive” (p. 2). In light of his findings, highly engaged employees (support staff included) are typically more dedicated to the team with whom they work and are less likely to change companies (Brooks, 2017). If employees are given new challenges and regular performance feedback, they become more engaged, find more meaning and motivation in their work, and understand how their contributions align with the mission and goals of the organization (Trammell, 2018). Additionally, DeStefane (2019) also declared:

Organizations cannot function without trust. If team members feel restricted, micromanaged, or held back from completing the tasks assigned to them, they will inevitably disengage and deliver sub-par work. Accountability, authority and responsibility need to be balanced within organization leaders; otherwise, they will not be able to meet expectations. (p. 4)

The element of trust is paramount to a reliable school culture (Comaford, 2018). In the opinion of DeStefane (2019), all levels of an organization should integrate respect and dignity into every aspect of culture.

In support of these ideas and specifically addressing trust factors within a school, Fullan and Kirtman (2019) asserted, “Trust is built on a clear sense of predictable behavior” (p. 24). It was further explained that if the stage of developing trust in a school is skipped, staff predictions will tend to be inaccurate and negative because of the lack of clear understanding and expectations, ultimately leading to more mistrust (Fullan & Kirtman, 2019). The notion of trust, therefore, is paramount as it is the building block of

shared commitment and people learning to count on and rely on one another to complete their work and reach organizational goals (Dib, 2019).

Nevertheless, Brooks (2017) advised ways in which organizations might achieve higher levels of employee engagement. Brooks' (2017) findings provided several tips including discussing the future with employees and opportunities for advancement, being supportive of innovation while encouraging staff to take on projects they find personally rewarding, providing consistent communication, showing interest in employees by getting to know them on a personal level, and keeping the team fully staffed to avoid overextension or demanding workloads. Dib (2019) further asserted that motivation in the workplace can be negatively affected by overreaching or unrealistic goals.

### **School District Mission Statement**

The rise of the professional learning community model in public education paved the way for a dramatic increase in the creation of school district mission statements over the last two decades (Eaker et al., 2002). According to Lynch (2016):

Direction setting in the school environment is an essential aspect of instructional leadership. Framing and communicating the school's goals through a mission statement is the perfect way to communicate the direction and focus of the school environment. Clear, measurable and time based goals are at the heart of the school experience. When these goals are communicated and achieve buy in from stakeholders within the school environment, then the school's mission becomes attainable. (para. 8)

Therefore, carefully and collaboratively created district mission statements are very important, as they publicly describe a school district's purpose and core beliefs (Allen & Kern, 2018).

When a school district begins the task of creating a purposeful and meaningful mission statement, a variety of variables must be considered (Jagodowski, 2018). School district mission statements should be as brief as possible while still encapsulating what a district stands for and staying relevant over a long course of time (Jagodowski, 2018). The objective of the mission statement should be clearly understood, and the mission statement should be displayed prominently in all corners of a school district (Lynch, 2016). Finally, it is imperative the decision making of district leadership always ties back to the overarching purpose of the mission statement (Lynch, 2016). As supported by Heick (2019):

A mission statement should act like a mirror, clarifying for everyone where the school is, and where it's going. And for that to happen, it has to be dynamic and organic. Changing endlessly—responding to changing tones, values, and social needs. (p. 2)

Heick (2019) pronounced school mission statements should not only reflect a brand, a philosophy about learning, and an overall approach to educating children but should also sell the school to the community.

Lynch (2016) further clarified the characteristics of a good school mission statement as academically focused, having explicitly expressed objectives, being clearly displayed for stakeholders to see and be reminded, and being present in classrooms and actively modeled. Allen and Kern (2018) suggested a school mission statement should be

the focal point of staff energy and direction to align staff actions to educational outcomes. Lynch (2016) further stated district leaders should use the school's mission statement as a starting point for an educational experience with collective support.

From a business perspective, Poskin (2018a) stated, "Running a mission-driven company is a cornerstone of a good business practice" (p. 1). Extending this idea, Poskin (2018a) described how leadership teams work diligently over many hours or months to create the perfect guiding principles for how to run daily operations of their organizations. Allen and Kern (2018) asserted:

Schools need to balance parent interests, the local community, political pressures, information and misinformation available online, and constant pressures of time and resources. Vision and mission statements can help keep the school on track with its greater purpose by helping school leaders navigate competing interests. (para. 5)

Allen and Kern (2018) also concurred that, "A well-written statement can guide decision-making, resource allocations, policy decisions, and how the school operates" (para. 6). Poskin (2018a) pointed out that effective and easily understood mission statements help employees maintain a clear focus on working toward organizational goals.

Rey (2017) declared the motivation of employees is one of the biggest reasons organizations take the time to create guiding mission statements. Poskin (2018a) further stated, "A good mission empowers leaders by encouraging them to keep moving to their desired outcome without having to check in at every fork in the decision-making road" (p. 2). To create employee buy-in, organizations need to go beyond the mission-based goals established, cultivate employee buy-in, and increase employee productivity with the



power of engagement through prosocial motivation (Rey, 2017). Most importantly, Poskin (2018a) pointed out that any revisions to the mission statement should include input from all stakeholders.

Many problems can come from a poorly crafted or poorly implemented mission statement (Rey, 2017). Allen and Kern (2018) maintained:

Despite the benefits, vision and mission statements are subject to a number of criticisms. They can be full of shallow marketing language that sounds good but has little impact on how a school operates. Staff members might not be aware of, or care about, what the statement says. This means the explicit values are disconnected from what actually happens in the school. (para. 13)

In addition, hastily created school district mission statements can quickly become irrelevant, losing their usefulness as a driving force for district actions (Allen & Kern, 2018).

### **Staff Motivation**

Motivated employees are absolutely necessary for a productive and successful organization (Dib, 2019). Trammell (2018) declared:

Over the past few decades, the nuances of workplace motivation have been studied from every perspective imaginable: psychology, neuroscience, biology, organizational theory and more. Many of the findings have been counterintuitive, such as the fact that monetary compensation is one of the weakest motivators out there. (para. 2)

Costill (2020) further explained, “Unlike your parents or grandparents, you’re not motivated by a raise or promotion” (para. 1). Employees today are motivated by intrinsic

factors that include being appreciated for workplace efforts, having an opportunity to do important work, and maintaining a healthy balance between the expectations of work and a healthy home life (Costill, 2020).

There are a number of reasons employees lose their motivation and contentment in the jobs in which they are employed. One reason employees lose a connection to their jobs is that the work is something in which they do not place value or is no longer important to their interests (Clark & Saxberg, 2019). For many workers, the idea of doing something with a greater purpose, where the results produce an identifiable and tangible difference, is important (Trammell, 2018). Trammell (2018) further stated:

One of the quickest way to lose high-performing employees is to make them feel that their job is pointless. This happens when their job is full of useless procedures and does not make a meaningful difference to the business or when their manager fails to communicate the purpose and impact of their work. (para. 11)

All too often, the value of work is lost to employees because it reflects the interests or goals of upper management, and the merit of the work is not adequately communicated to the workers who are asked to do the job or task (Clark & Saxberg, 2019).

Another reason employees lose their motivation to do their jobs is that they do not believe enough in their abilities or feel ill-equipped to carry out the requirements of their roles and responsibilities (Clark & Saxberg, 2019). Workers inherently desire to grow and develop professionally, and it is incumbent on employers to make sure employees have the tools to be successful in their roles (Dib, 2019). If employers do not make the investment of building worker capacity, they will ultimately lose employees to a

workplace that can provide that type of support (Dib, 2019). This phenomenon of self-growth is particularly prevalent in younger generations of workers who are seeking personal growth and would prefer to see their supervisors in a coaching capacity rather than playing the role of the traditional workplace boss (Comaford, 2018). Regardless of age or vocation, however, workers can and should continuously seek self-growth through on-the-job training and professional development in order to maximize their productivity and work satisfaction (Dib, 2019).

Another contributing factor to employees losing motivation in the workplace is they develop negative perceptions or become frustrated or angry and find fault with certain aspects of their roles (Clark & Saxberg, 2019). A workplace environment built on the foundations of trust and positive interactions will ultimately be more successful and a place where workers want to belong (Comaford, 2018). In a workplace characterized by negativity and distrust, it is important leaders pursue practices of active listening and conflict resolution (Clark & Saxberg, 2019). To get to that point, however, there must be in place a strong employer-to-employee relationship to allow for healthy discourse (Trammell, 2018). Costill (2020) stated employees are more motivated when management is able to keep them abreast of various issues and changes that might be taking place.

An employee's inability to identify what is going wrong and a lack of supervisory feedback and appreciation can be contributors to failing employee motivation (Clark & Saxberg, 2019). Comaford (2018) suggested it is important that feedback is not based on some sort of standardized score, but instead offers real motivation that touches on the intrinsic benefit of both the employee and the organization. In addition, it is important

for supervisors to show appreciation for the good work their employees do on a regular basis (Costill, 2020). Another way to make clear the expectation of the work and to coordinate feedback along the way stems from supervisors making work more manageable by setting incremental and measurable goals accompanied by timely feedback and reflection (Moens, 2019). It is important for both employers and employees to celebrate accomplishments and milestones, as celebration provides for increased motivation moving forward (Moens, 2019).

Ultimately, the issue of employee motivation will always come back to the overall quality of the relationship between the employee and the employer and the employer's ability to provide excitement for and place value on the work asked of those under his or her supervision (Moens, 2019). Monetary compensation or the fear of losing a job are no longer effective motivators in today's ever-changing workplace landscape (Phirippidis, 2018). Instead, successful employers should determine ways to get their employees to understand how their work contributes to the greater mission of the organization in which they serve (Trammell, 2018).

### **Summary**

The review of literature included research on specific topics related to school support staff, their roles and responsibilities, perceptions of leadership, school district mission statements, and staff motivation. Chapter Two included a description of systems theory and an examination of the roles and responsibilities of support staff. The review of literature also included support staff training and student-related support, school leadership and their attitudes and beliefs related to school support staff, and school district mission statements. All topics were approached within the context of a systems

theory framework and with the understanding that schools operate as open systems with many interrelated parts.

In Chapter Three, the methodology for this study is provided. This is accomplished through an account of the statement of the problem and purpose, restating of the research questions, and a description of the research design. In addition, special consideration is given to the population and sample of the study, as well as the instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis techniques utilized for the research. Finally, ethical considerations are detailed.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used to analyze the perceptions of school support staff members and elementary principals with regard to how school districts include support staff members in the fulfillment of a district mission statement. Chapter Three includes the problem and purpose statement and the research questions that guided this study. In addition, the qualitative focus of the research design is described, as well as the rationale for why this type of approach was utilized. Descriptions of the population and sample, the instrumentation, and how the data were collected are presented. Finally, data analysis and ethical considerations are described.

#### **Problem and Purpose Overview**

The rise of the professional learning community as a common model for school districts in the early 2000s resulted in more and more districts establishing mission statements to guide their organizational goals (Van Clay et al., 2011). As described by Eaker et al. (2002), a typical process includes school administrators and certificated faculty working in collaborative teams to articulate a district's mission, vision, values, and goals. School personnel from non-academic, support staff departments such as custodial and maintenance, food service, and transportation are often left out of the process of designing a mission statement to serve as a guiding force for all employees in a school district (Eaker et al., 2002).

It is important that clear and consistent goals exist in any organization (Harris & Merrihew, 2016). Information and data gathered from this study can assist school districts in understanding how support staff members perceive their roles and responsibilities in the context of an overall district mission statement. Schools with a

shared sense of mission across the organization are more likely to see purposeful improvement efforts (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

**Research questions.** The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of elementary school support staff members regarding the primary roles and responsibilities of their positions (as custodians, cafeteria staff, or bus drivers) and how they support a district-wide mission statement?
2. What are the perceptions of elementary principals on job training and employee development for support staff members regarding the school mission statement?

### **Research Design**

This study was designed to draw conclusions following focus group meetings with support staff and elementary principals as to how support staff members are informed and supported in their roles as they relate to a school district's mission statement. In addition, the perceptions of two different groups of individuals through the lens of the singular district mission statement were analyzed. Open-ended interview questions lent to the flexibility of the design of the research with the ultimate goal of providing a narrative to support the stated research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). With this being considered, a qualitative methodology was an appropriate approach to initiating research and data collection for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Findings, therefore, were based on the data gathered through focus group meetings with selected support staff and elementary principals, along with a review of literature on supporting topics.

## **Population and Sample**

A purposive sample was utilized for this study. Data were collected from focus groups comprised of six to eight support staff participants. These focus groups were identified for focus group discussions in five of the 11 eligible districts.

The population for this study included 206 possible participants. Of this group, 31 were custodians, 38 worked in food service, 121 were bus drivers, and 16 were building principals. The sample was recruited from support staff and building principals from 11 schools across two counties in southwest Missouri (MODESE, 2018). Support staff participants were selected from custodial/maintenance, food service, and transportation departments. The criteria for the purposive sample was to interview participants in at least one or two small elementary schools (enrollment of 0 to 150 students), two medium elementary schools (enrollment of 150 to 300), and two large elementary schools (enrollment greater than 300).

## **Instrumentation**

For this study, two instruments in the form of a series of questions were created to collect data. The first set of questions was designed to conduct focus group interviews with selected support staff in the chosen schools (see Appendix A). The second set of questions was created to interview the elementary school principals who work in the same buildings as the selected support staff (see Appendix B). Support staff focus group questions were designed to gain an understanding of how selected support staff employees see their roles and responsibilities contributing to the district mission statement and how much training and support they received toward that end. Principal interview questions were designed to gain insight into how district mission statements



were created and to what extent support staff are trained and supported in their roles as they pertain to the district mission statement.

**Validity.** According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), validity is synonymous with credibility and is dependent upon whether the perceptions of a study's participants match up with the researcher's findings. Member checking was used to assist in establishing validity. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), member checking is utilized to "determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (p. 208). Any inaccuracies reported by participants were corrected in the official transcripts.

**Reliability.** Burkholder, Cox, Crawford, and Hitchcock (2020) recommended when an author engages in detailed data collection, it is important to check for reliability in instrumentation. For a qualitative study, it is imperative researchers make sure to verify their approaches are consistent (Burkholder et al., 2020). For the qualitative researcher, this includes specific documentation that could be easily interpreted by another researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) identified the importance of having other individuals cross-check coding practices utilized during the study. For this study, support staff focus group questions and principal interview questions were field-tested to ensure reliability of the instrumentation. Furthermore, reliability was maintained by checking transcripts for accuracy and documenting procedures utilized during research.

## **Data Collection**

A permission letter was created and approved for use in this study (see Appendix C). After approval of the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (see Appendix D), letters of permission were mailed to each district superintendent of the schools selected to participate in the research project (MODESE, 2018). After gaining permission, elementary principals from these schools were contacted by phone to seek assistance in scheduling support staff focus group meetings and individual principal interviews.

At least one member from each of the areas of custodial and maintenance, transportation, and food service who served in the districts for at least one year was recruited for each focus group in the districts selected. In addition, the principal in the elementary building where the identified support staff worked was recruited for a one-on-one interview. Focus group participants received a letter of participation (see Appendix E), a copy of the research information sheet (see Appendix F), and a copy of the focus group discussion questions.

Focus group discussions were conducted on-site in the districts where the support staff participants were employed. All focus group discussions took place in person, and the meetings were audio-recorded for accuracy. Principal interview participants also received a copy of the research information sheet and the principal interview questions. All interviews took place in the school building where each principal was employed with the exception of one interview that was conducted by phone. All principal interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy.

Once all focus group meetings and principal interviews were completed, the audiotapes were transcribed. Transcripts of interviews were sent to focus group

participants to ensure reliability of responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). At that time, participants were able to approve, revise, or withdraw their responses. After reliability was confirmed, the data were coded, and emerging themes were identified.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze the perceptions of support staff members (custodial, transportation, and food service) and elementary principals, a systems theory approach was utilized. According to Becvar and Becvar (2018), a systems theory approach can be utilized to support an analysis of each individual, or group, and their relationship to each other and the organization. By employing a systems theory approach, the perceptions of individuals who perform different roles within each school district were collected and evaluated regarding how the mission statement motivated or guided the school support staff members (Kokemuller, 2019).

Following focus group discussions with support staff and individual interviews with building principals, responses were transcribed and coded (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Burkholder et al. (2020) described open coding as “the process of identifying, labeling, examining, and comparing your codes and categorizing them into larger, conceptual categories encompassing a variety of similarly themed codes” (p. 236). Data were examined using open coding and then analyzed to identify consistencies or discrepancies to reference the research questions in a process known as axial coding (Burkholder et al., 2020). Inferences and information gained from this research were triangulated with information gained through the review of existing literature to draw conclusions for the purpose of this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Ethical Considerations**

Considerations were made for study participants during every stage of the study. Appropriate permission was gained before beginning focus group meetings and administrator interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research questions were carefully crafted to elicit open-ended input from the participants. Questions were not designed to be suggestive or leading to study participants. Data collected were kept confidential and secured in a locked office cabinet. In addition, any personal information that could be identifying to participants was not used. Three years from the completion of this study, all digital and paper documents will be destroyed.

**Summary**

Within Chapter Three, the methodology for qualitative research was described. The problem and purpose of the study were addressed, and the research questions were articulated. The research design was described, and the population and sample were identified. The instrumentation and the validity and reliability measures that were taken were detailed. The data collection procedures were stated, data analysis practices were described, and finally, ethical considerations were highlighted.

Chapter Four includes the presentation of the data collected. The responses to the support staff focus group discussions are detailed. Finally, a synthesis of the principal interview data is provided.

## Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to gain the perceptions of school support staff members regarding the roles and responsibilities of their jobs in the context of their school district mission statement. School support staff members in the areas of custodial/maintenance, food service, and transportation serve in roles that require interaction with students on a frequent basis (National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2019). These members of a district's non-certified staff play a pivotal role in the school day for students (Balingit, 2018); however, there can often be a disconnect in the guiding principles of a district mission statement, which is often created by certificated staff members and limited to a focus on learning and instruction (Eaker et al., 2002).

To gain a greater understanding of the perceptions of school support staff and their roles and responsibilities in the context of district mission statements, five separate focus groups were conducted. These focus groups were comprised of school support staff members in the areas of custodial/maintenance, food service, and transportation. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with the five elementary principals who provided leadership in the buildings where the selected focus group participants served. Focus group questions and principal interview questions were designed to help answer the two overarching research questions for the purpose of this study:

1. What are the perceptions of elementary school support staff members regarding the primary role and responsibility of their position (as a custodian, cafeteria staff, or bus driver) and how they support a district-wide mission statement?

2. What are the perceptions of elementary principals on job training and employee development for support staff members regarding the school mission statement?

### **Focus Group Discussions**

Support staff focus groups were conducted in five participating schools in two counties in southwest Missouri. To preserve anonymity, each participating support staff member was assigned an alphanumeric designation with the letter identifying the school district and the number specifying the individual support staff member. Five support staff members across all participating schools identified as members of both the transportation department and the custodial/maintenance department for their districts. One school support staff member was employed in both the food service and transportation departments for his district. Individual perceptions were shared based on the role most relevant to their response. For the sake of determining the population, the researcher assigned each of these participants to the department they primarily served.

**Focus group question one.** What is your official title in the school district?

This question was created to identify the individual support staff departments represented by participating members. Focus group participants were only recruited in the areas of custodial and maintenance, food service, and transportation. The following table depicts the schools utilized for this study and the number of participating support staff members from each department.

Table 1

*Focus Group Participants*

Participating Schools	Custodial and Maintenance	Food Service	Transportation
School A	3	2	2
School B	1	3	1
School C	2	2	1
School D	1	3	2
School E	1	3	1

**Focus group question two.** What do you see as the primary roles and responsibilities of your job?

Custodial and maintenance staff members from all five schools answered in similar ways. Participant A2 responded, “We clean the school, we sanitize surfaces,” and C4 also added, “We provide a safe, secure, and healthy environment, a clean environment to keep the place clean and sanitary.” Participant D1 referred to his role in the context of the size of the district in which he was employed. Participant D1 stated, “In a small school district, it runs the gamut of, it might be unstopping a toilet one day to repairing a computer the next day, so it’s never the same; two days are never the same.” Support staff member B1 was the only respondent from a custodial or maintenance department who mentioned students in his response. He stated, “I am responsible for making sure the building stays ready for the kids cleaning-wise.” He further pointed out, “I make sure there are paper products and there are no spills that they can slip and fall on.”

Food service members provided varied responses. Several mentioned students in their responses. For instance, participant A4 pointed out:

We make sure that the students have a balanced breakfast and a balanced lunch that they eat. Can't really take a test, study, do what you got to do if all you think about is being hungry. And we clean up the kitchen and take care of cleaning up.

Participant D3 continued, "[We] usually watch kids come through the line, make sure they're happy, give them a smile, and if they need something, they can come and ask us without being afraid." Other cafeteria staff responses reflected the strict nutritional and service guidelines indicative of their department. Support staff member E3 responded that she "makes all of the menus and does all of the nutrition evaluation of that." She further added, "I deal with the state and everything that goes with that." Participant C2 also responded that her job involves "making sure that kids are fed and following guidelines from the state on what to offer and serve."

Participant C2 stated the district participated in the FFVP (Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program) program, which is a state-funded program that exposes students to various fruits and vegetables as snacks in the classroom. Other food service respondents saw their role as more straightforward. Support staff member B3 reported her job was to "make sure that we have the food for the meal of the day and to make sure food is prepped the way it is supposed to be." Participant C3 stated she provides "nutritious meals and then keeps the kitchen clean." Meanwhile, participant B5 stated, "My responsibility is showing up every day and cooking nutritious and healthy food for the kiddos."

Transportation department members responded with common themes of student safety and the importance of interacting with students. Support staff member B2 stated he saw the following as his primary job responsibility:



Greeting the students every morning on the bus with a happy attitude. When I hear one negative “I don’t want to be at school,” I try to reinforce a positive. I tell them that they need to be in the program because without education, there’s nothing for them in the world.

Support staff member A7 stated his primary role involved “getting students from home to school and school to home safely, with no injuries and no accidents.” A similar sentiment was shared by participant E5, who stated, “I transport the students here safely, and I get them back home safely.” She concluded, “Safety is my number one concern.” Participant C1 offered, “We try to make sure that all kids can get to the school safely and on time.” Participant D6 emphasized that in addition to his job, he had to be available for summer trainings.

**Focus group question three.** What is your school district’s mission statement?

School A had one support staff member who was able to recite the district mission statement. One staff member from School B offered a shortened summary of what she believed to be the district mission statement, ending her attempt with, “along those lines.” One support staff member from School C came with a copy of his district’s mission statement and was able to read it to the other participants of the focus group. No support staff member from School D was able to recite the district mission statement, and none of the participating support staff members from School D seemed to have an idea of or ability to summarize their mission statement. A school bus driver from School E was able to state her district’s mission statement. The researcher did provide participating focus group members from all five schools a copy of their district’s mission statement at the conclusion of question number three.

**Focus group question four.** Describe how the district’s mission statement was introduced during the recruitment and hiring process. Please describe how the mission statement was presented during any on-the-job training you received.

The majority of respondents in this study suggested the school district’s mission statement was not a part of the hiring process or on-the-job training they received. There were a few outliers, however, who offered something different. Support staff member C1 stated:

The job was kind of presented to me, and so as far as the mission statement being included in that, it was more like here’s what we’d like for you to do, if you have the ability to do it. And so outside of just general conversations or looking at it on the wall there was not a lot of talk about it.

Participant A1 pointed out that although it was not a part of his recruitment or hiring process, the mission statement was included in his on-the-job training. Other responses included examples wherein even though not presented in the recruitment, hiring, or training processes, exposure to the district’s mission statement was provided through postings on the walls of the school or was mentioned during all-staff meetings at the beginning of the year. Focus group participant E1 was able to recognize that although the district mission statement was not presented to her formally, she recognized everything contained in her district’s mission statement as things she strives to do every day.

Participant E4 agreed, “Everything we do, everything here, we just haven’t really ever talked about it. I guess we just stepped into it and just did it.” Although not introduced formally through the process of on-the-job training, support staff member D1 recognized an important role in the context of his district’s mission statement:

I think that through the training we go through at the beginning of each school year, we become aware that—and especially as a bus driver—you may have a window into their world that no one else has because you get to see them get on and get off. It is your responsibility that if you recognize this, that something's not right, as a mandated reporter, you need to go and tell someone that there is something there that someone needs to check about.

Support staff member E1 echoed this sentiment by sharing, “[Although] we have not trained with this specific statement, there's things we do in there on a daily basis.”

**Focus group question five.** In what ways, if any, did you receive training or instruction related to how you could specifically support the school mission statement in regard to the following: students, student behaviors, and student learning? Please describe.

When responding to question five, a number of the participating support staff focus group members cited examples of being trained to deal with situations involving students. Support staff member E4 pointed out, “I've had training on the bus,” and further explained, “We've had training during the summer and at different times.” He further clarified the content of the training when he stated, “We've had people come in and talk to us on how to deal with behavior problems.” Another participant from that same district, E1, who worked in the kitchen but had previously been employed in another district, had something similar to add. She stated, “Whenever I came here, we'd have to watch videos and different nutrition stuff, how to feed the kids and how to interact with them.” Support staff member A6 stated that although the videos they are asked to watch do not necessarily pertain to the district's mission statement, they do deal

with “students and student behaviors and stuff like that.” He further explained, “Those videos do help us understand.”

Support staff member A7 cited a specific example of the elementary principal visiting the transportation department to go over the discipline system they were using in the schools and the terminology associated with that system. She stated, “In the eight years that I’ve been here, that has been the most specific training I’ve received as far as helping with student behavior.” Other staff members from that same school echoed A7’s assertion that this was valuable training. Participant A1 enthusiastically shared, “I would agree with that even to the point that we were engaged to help with this process of the learning for the kids.” He further clarified, “It seemed to be more of a reinforcement of what they were being taught here so that we were made aware, and we could utilize that as a part of our directing and helping the kids.” Participant A7 responded, “It’s like giving us extra tools in our toolbox to work with the kids, and if we know what they’re teaching here in the school, then it helps us to reinforce that on the school bus also.”

Other respondents pointed out that although they had not received much formal training on how to best deal with student issues, they did recognize the significance of those interactions. Support staff member D2 stated:

There’s a big difference in the way you can handle students now from what it was 15-20 years ago. And when I started, I did not realize that things had changed so much over the years, and it was the Holy Word starting out, and you just don’t realize some of the things that you did or had done to you as far as discipline goes; those rules don’t apply anymore. A person can innocently get themselves in

a lot of trouble, not meaning to, and I think the education you get on that is very helpful.

Another bus driver from that same district, D1, pointed to specific situations that present real challenges to drivers. He stated that although bus drivers are often “down on the list of employees who they [administration] sometimes feel that need information shared with,” that lack of information sometimes puts those individuals in “the dark.” He specifically alluded to custody situations as being particularly challenging. According to D1, “We’ve got a vehicle sitting there that’s going to pick up the student, and we don’t know if that is OK. The student is saying ‘that’s my dad,’ but we’re not sure.”

Support staff member A4 also recognized the significance of staff member-to-student interactions, but she framed it differently. She cited an example of how students in her school help to clean the cafeteria and the tables. She stated, “We might only be the kitchen staff or the custodial staff, but they help, and they learn, and we are a part of that.” She then tied her answer back to the district mission statement by pointing out, “It’s not even just in a classroom or mathematics or science, it doesn’t matter if you’re the custodian or the dishwasher, we all work together to accomplish a mission.”

Support staff member D2 continued with an additional response by also pointing out that it would be helpful as a bus driver to understand the medications his students were taking, citing that they may react differently to being disciplined than other students. He also stated it would help to have a greater understanding of some of his students’ emotional capacity to better assist them on the bus. Participant D2 followed up by stating his frustration regarding the communication of challenging student behaviors to bus drivers. He pointed out that these “explosive anger issues” were not

communicated to him until it was made obvious “when they threw something across the bus to break a window or something.” Participant D2 went on to state, “I know that there was a reluctance to give out some of that information, but sometimes for the safety of everyone involved, that communication needs probably to be better.”

Some participating staff members also emphasized they do receive different types of training related to their departments; however, the training does not relate to either the district mission statement or students. Support staff member A4 explained that in the kitchen they did receive training as a group in the area of nutrition and what kids need from food, but she further elaborated, “I don’t know that it’s specifically to their learning, just maybe their needs, to help with that.” Support staff member C1 felt compelled to directly address the content of the question by speaking to the portion about the mission statement. He specifically stated:

I don’t know if there has been any specific training based off of saying, “Here’s the mission statement, and this is what your description is in relation to this.” I think it’s more indirect more than anything. I think I could go through and say this part of my job indirectly affects this part of the mission statement or this is how it fills in. And not only that, I think we are examples of part of that within the system itself. Just looking at the mission statement as a whole, as far as that really being taught or trained--not directly.

His coworker, C6, followed up by stating, “I was taught a lot of stuff, but I think most of all, which is in our mission statement, is to respect one another.” He further explained to “respect coworkers, teachers, and the kids. Kids need to be shown respect and that way they can know how to give respect back.”

Another respondent in a different school, C3, provided a similar response:

When they did implement the mission statement, I do remember talking about it quite a bit at that time. And I think I got a lot of it by just being positive with the kids and helping them out. Being in the kitchen, there's not a whole lot you can do, but you know, when they go through maybe helping them be polite, reminding them of their attitudes, things like that.

And finally, C2, pointed out they “do a lot of stuff that supports the mission statement, but we haven't really based anything off of it as far as training goes.”

**Focus group question six.** If you received no training, what type of training would you find beneficial?

A number of support staff respondents referred to the district mission statement when addressing this question. Participant C2, for example, stated, “Maybe at the beginning of the year they might cover this, but I just don't recall them covering this, mentioning the mission statement.” He concluded, “Maybe that's something we should be more aware of.” Participant C4 echoed those sentiments by suggesting “more emphasis at the beginning of the year.” He then tied his response to the district mission statement by concluding the training should be reflective of how one's job or role ties to the mission statement. He recognized the difference in his role as it related to the district mission statement by pointing out, “I feel like how I would say that I support it is totally different than if you asked the teacher.”

Participant E3 agreed with this rationale. She stated, “I think it would be beneficial to any employee of the district if they were trained in each one of these departments that show up in our mission statement.” Support staff member C1 agreed:

I mean, just even maybe a little bit more talk in the initial stages of training. I don't think it's productive to pull aside and say, "Let's not focus on this area just so you understand the mission statement." But, maybe, in the training process, pointing out the mission statement—and I don't think that you can do it by definition—but rather I think you can say this is who we are, this is what we are looking at, and this is how we feel we benefit the school as a whole, the district as a whole.

The vast majority of participants in the focus groups responded to question number six from the perspective that they felt more training in how to interact with students and deal with certain situations involving students would be highly beneficial. Participant E1 summed up this notion by asking for "training, maybe on interacting with kids more—I don't know how to explain that, but just how to interact with them, how to talk to them, maybe give you a little bit more so you're not just thrown into it." She concluded her response by further suggesting support be given so "you kind of know how to talk to them, how to relate to them, what's appropriate to say, that might help a bit." Support staff member E5 followed that response with a request for training in "how to handle an angry child, one that you just can't figure out what is causing the anger."

Two respondents mentioned prior experience dealing with students and behaviors to put their answers in context. Support staff member A4 referenced her personal experiences raising foster children and children of her own. She stated this experience had helped her gain the understanding that "with behaviors and learning, I kind of know, but if I came into it and I didn't know that kind of stuff, I would say how to deal with children would be more beneficial to their learning." She added, "You don't know what



a kid's gone through at home," and that through her experience as a foster parent, she realized many kids come with different levels of support at a younger age. She pointed out, "It was hard to communicate because I didn't know how to explain a word to make them understand how they're feeling or how they felt." Her desire to have more training was then rooted in the idea that it would not just be beneficial for the staff members, but having adults who know how to better communicate would benefit children. She concluded, "I think that would be more beneficial for all of us."

The second respondent to cite past experiences was A7. She followed up participant A4's assertions with her own, similar perspective:

If I hadn't had previous training in another school district, I would find that my job would be a lot harder, dealing with students from kindergarten through grade 12, all in a confined area, how to talk to them, how to deal with—like she was saying—their situations at home. They bring it onto the bus, and you learn to spot those things, which helps me to be able to deal with a situation on the bus with the words I would use for their age group. That is a huge thing. With what we do, because we have such a large difference from the little kids to the older kids, you have to be able to speak to each one of them differently depending on their age. If I was asking for more instruction time through the school year, it would be to be updated on how to speak to them and what words to use for the different age groups.

Support staff member A4 expanded on participant A7's response when she pointed out the value of being able to recognize the student who is having a hard time because often

one student's struggles can affect other students, and "the next thing you know the whole cafeteria is out of control."

Participant B1 expressed a similar desire for support staff members to receive some "form of training on how to handle certain situations." She specifically stated it would be helpful in those extreme situations to know, "if you see this, make them stop." Similar to support staff member A4, she expressed a similar concern about how student situations can escalate if there is no intervention. She stated, "Sometimes teachers do not catch it, and some of it can get ugly quick."

Support staff member A4 alluded to the critical role the individuals working in her department play as mandatory reporters for the state. She stated, "If you had a kid that you thought was being abused, exactly what do you do with that?" She went on to explain that more training in this area would be helpful. She then expanded by suggesting, "Or maybe there's a kid that doesn't get food at home, maybe they don't have the money, and we need to introduce them to the backpack program." From there, she summarized her perspective by concluding, "We need to be able to know how to spot those kids, to maximize what we can do for a child. Even if you're just a custodian, kitchen help—we all serve the district as a mandated reporter."

Support staff member A1 echoed those concerns. He pointed out that in a smaller school district, his bus routes include students from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade. He emphasized, "We have the full gamut." He then expressed, "I would also like to see maybe some training on what our limitations are and how far we can talk to a child that might be struggling. I don't know the legality of it."

Two participating support staff members specifically spoke regarding their concerns about dealing with students who have special needs. Participant B2 expressly stated:

As a driver, those special needs students—I have had so many times that, personally, I don't know how to handle the situation. I can't handle it like I would for an average student. And there again, I'm lost. I don't know what to do. So sometimes I will go to the special needs teacher at that grade level and ask them. I'll point out that so and so has had this issue, could you please explain it to him? Because I don't know how to explain it to them in their level of understanding.

Support staff member B3 followed up participant B2's comments with her own related to dealing with students in the cafeteria. According to participant B3, "We in the cafeteria kind of understand the special needs children." She went on to say their strategy in dealing with these students is to not "poke the bear." She further explained, "Some people don't understand that" and try very hard to intervene and interact with these students when a better course of action would be to "just leave him alone and give him some space." She concluded, "I feel like there are a few in our area that could use some training on that."

Several respondents from School B spoke specifically about the challenges of dealing with student behaviors. Support staff member B3 suggested, "Being in the cafeteria, we have the children at the rowdier time." She then explained, "Student behavior could be mellowed some because they don't tend to want to be respectful or listen to the women that are there in the kitchen or cafeteria." She also stated dealing

with discipline in the cafeteria is made tougher because some cafeteria staff understands how to discipline or intervene with children better than others, so some sort of training or support in this area would be beneficial to members of her cafeteria staff.

Inside the school building, support staff member B1, a custodian, noticed in her experience that by observing students with their teachers in the hallways, “Where the teacher is standing is how their line is behaving.” Support staff member B2 furthered the importance of proximity control by stating he believed school bus drivers could benefit from school districts providing bus aids to assist drivers in dealing with student discipline issues. He understood this type of staffing would present a financial challenge to the school district; however, not having an aid also presents a safety challenge to bus drivers. Support staff member B2 further explained, “Every time I have to look up in the mirror or turn around and ask Johnny to stop, I’ve taken my eyes off the road for a split second, and then there’s times that I don’t feel safe in that area.” He concluded that regardless of any additional support from the district, he will continue to believe, “it is my responsibility as a driver to try to discipline that child and report it to the principal at that grade level.”

Support staff member D4 spoke about a need for training not necessarily involving students or the district mission statement. She stated, “I do not know what to do in an intruder training.” She pointed out that the kitchen staff is expected to participate in these procedures, and it “might be helpful for us to know what to do.” Participant D1 also referenced a need for training in dealing with an intruder situation. He stated that in his district, there is an annual “mandatory eight hours of training, and although it covers some good information, it usually just involves driving.” He then

expressed frustration with his school district by stating, “I mean they don’t tell us anything.” From there, he cited the specific example of two high school age boys getting in a dangerous fight on the bus. He explained, “There is no information on what you should do other than to get on the radio and try to find the principal.” He further explained his frustration by stating, “That’s one of those things that when it’s happening in real time out there, and you’ve not had any training in what to do with that type of thing on the bus, you’re just not sure how to react.” He concluded his assertion by pointing out that in the absence of training or understanding how to deal with those challenging instances of student emergencies, “the driver winds up getting in trouble because he tried to pull one kid off another and he winds up in trouble.”

Support staff member E4 spoke to the issue of confidentiality and how that presents a challenge to support staff members who work around students. He stated the frustration that occurs “when you have a kid move here from another district, and they have issues, behavior issues, and the administration doesn’t want to share that with you,” citing confidentiality. He asserted the support staff members in these instances need to know when there is a problem with a new student. He described having “been told at one time to just watch my back,” which to him was “not a good answer.”

**Focus group question seven.** How do the primary roles and responsibilities of your job support the district’s mission statement?

Several respondents addressed question number seven with reference to the human element of their jobs. Support staff member B2 expressed:

I might be the only person that may say “Good morning” to that student or “Have a good day.” It’s very important to give them that positive, “Hey, today’s going

to be a good day.” So it’s like I tell some of my friends, “You know, today’s a brand new day. This is a day that you’ve never seen. You’re going to learn something. You’re going to see something different that you’ve never seen. Take it and run with it as best you can.”

Participant B5 echoed those sentiments by explaining, “I’ve even seen that in the lunch room. They’ll come through crying, and I just hug them and tell them it’ll be okay. I’ve done that several times.”

Support staff member C6 added, “Attitude is very important every day while you are working around the kids.” She went on to encourage her peers to “be positive and have a good attitude.” Participant A1 also mentioned the attitudes of support staff members in her response to question seven. She stated the bus driver is the “first face and first voice that they see, and my attitude starts their day off in the very beginning, and we’re the last one they see when they get off.” She then tied that to student learning by stating, “My attitude has a lot of influence on how their focus on learning is going to be for the day.” Support staff member C6 also referenced his attitude when he stated, “I think attitude is very important every day while you’re working around the kids.” He further stated the importance of “showing a good attitude and just being a good listener.”

Participating support staff member C1 emphasized the importance of a bus driver related to the trajectory of a student’s day. He specifically stated, “From the position of bus driver, we create the atmosphere for the day with that student.” He went on to explain how important it is to show genuine respect for students. He described the end result as being a “reciprocal—most of the time—interaction.” Support staff member C2

reiterated participant C1's assertions that the bus driver plays an important role in a student's day while also including humor:

When I drive the bus a lot of times, I want to tell the kids good morning, but I don't think most kids are morning people. Occasionally they'll say it back, but anyhow, just like C1 touched on, I just try to make a positive impact on a lot of people. If you start their day off negatively, then they're probably going to have a bad day. Like I used to tell people, "Don't hit the boss with something when they walk in the door. Let them drink some coffee first."

Support staff member D1 also spoke to the relationship between the bus driver and the student, and specifically, the relationship the bus driver is sometimes able to build over time. He stated, "I've always felt like there's kids that when they get on your bus of a morning, you very well may be the first person who has greeted them with any form of a friendly response." He pointed out, "Their situation at home may be such that they just want to get out of there." Then, he concluded, "And when they walk up the steps of the bus and you greet them with a friendly response and a face, I think it can make a huge difference in how that day gets started."

Support staff member E3 offered her perspective through a story she shared about a girl who attended her school but ultimately was forced to move away. She explained there was a "little girl in foster care" who would come to her every day for a hug and a kiss on the top of her head. She described how, after the foster child moved away, another girl who was friends with the foster child approached her and shared that she missed their mutual friend. When E3 agreed, the other little girl asked her if she would hug her and tell her she loved her like she did for the other little girl. Participant E3

answered, “I sure will” and then offered, “I didn’t even realize that she was watching me.” She noted that even in a supporting role, “You touch somebody every day.”

Support staff member A7 described the preventative role support staff members can play with the students they interact with on a daily basis. She pointed out that bus drivers and other support staff members could be more diligent in reporting to the school when they “spot a problem or a child that looks like they’re having a problem.” She adeptly explained that if she notices a student on the bus who is struggling and does not do what she should to report it, “They take it into the classroom, which detours their learning for that day or the next day.”

From her role as a support staff member, A7 was able to recognize, “If something’s happened at home, there is no way that student can come into the school building and sit in a classroom and concentrate on what the teacher is saying, which hinders their ability to learn that day.” Support staff member D3 described serving in a similar role in her position in the cafeteria. She described how often students would come through the lunch line and appear to be “scared to death.” She explained she always tries to “give them a smile and ask them if I can help them in any way.” She stated that this could be put in action in a small way. For instance, “If they say they don’t want corn or peas, I usually don’t put it on their plate and that makes them a little bit happy.” She emphasized, “I always try to make them happy when they come through and ask them how their day is and stuff because that’s just me.”

Respondent A4 mentioned the importance of adult role modeling from her position as a cafeteria staff member. She stated, “I know I serve breakfast to the kids in the morning, and, like I said, I think it’s important.” She explained, “I know as an adult



when I'm hungry, it's hard to focus." She tied that to a routine day and described, "When they walk into the building, I'm on the breakfast cart right here and so I'm one of the first faces they see when they come in." Support staff member A4 mentioned she always tries to greet each student with a "Good morning" or "How are you this morning?" When one student responded to her with "I feel confident today," she responded, "That's awesome—you should feel confident." Participant A4's conclusion was that because members of her team interact with students all day long, "It's important what we say and how we carry ourselves."

Support staff member C1, responding based on the maintenance aspect of his position, claimed the atmosphere created from his position can quickly flow "outward and downward" when things are not working the right way. He further stated, "It never affects just one area at one time," but rather the whole, as it will eventually go to "the teacher, to administration, and then down to the student." He concluded by stating the importance of giving "the best attitude that I know how to give," as it can "affect the whole either positively or it will be negative."

Some participants specifically mentioned components of the district mission statement in their responses. Support staff member D4 explained:

I think that the productive workers would apply to us. I mean, they see us every day. We show up to work, and we do our job. They get a meal every morning and every afternoon, and we're always happy to be there, talk to them, greet them with a smile, or ask them how their day is. The responsible citizens, I think, plays a part in our roles as well. I think that us showing them how we're being

responsible, in turn, lets them know that they need to be responsible for their own actions as well.

Respondent D6 also cited a component of his district's mission statement by stating that as a "bus driver, it's mostly the responsible citizens that come into play there." He further claimed that other components of his district's mission statement were more "building-related." He did state, however, that a student's time on the bus did relate to the school day, because "if the kid respects you, you're going to get a lot more out of them." He concluded by asserting, "The responsible citizenship is what we can probably pass to them in a limited manner."

Participant E5 cited the need for her role to be a consistent force in the lives of her students. She explained:

As a bus driver, I get them here, and I take them home. So, I get to see them coming out of that home environment if there is one. I get to know that at the age of nine, they're doing their own laundry, they're getting themselves up, and they are sometimes the adult in the house. But what we do learn on the bus or what I try to encourage is that we respect one another. We keep our hands off each other. We respect, and that's one thing we can teach them, even on a bus loaded with kids and with my back to them. I do encourage—no, I demand—good behavior. I do. I have this one kid, and he goes, "Am I still your favorite?" And I say, "You sure are, sweetheart." And he loves that. I've got to do that with them. And, every morning when I get on the bus, I say "Good morning" and when they get off the bus they hear "Have a good day," or "Have a good Friday." When they go home, "I'll see you in the morning," or "Have a good evening, I'll

see you in the morning.” I encourage that. I put that in their mindset. I’ll see them in the morning. I am going to be there.

She also recognized the strength and endurance it takes to be a consistent presence in her students’ lives when she concluded, “But I’ve only been driving for about three years, so I am not tired yet.”

Support staff member A2 was able to make a clear connection between the responsibilities of his job and the portion of his district’s mission statement that referenced a focus on learning. He stated, “We keep the illness rates down by disinfecting and all that stuff and actually keep the areas clean.” Support staff member C3 also made a connection to learning by relating the roles and responsibilities of her job. She shared, “When children are fed nutritious meals, it helps them to learn, and they have better opportunities to get that quality education.”

Participant C4 also made a connection to the classroom when he stated the roles and responsibilities of his job, which included “keeping a safe, secure, clean environment” are a plus for students and “help the teachers perform their duties easier.” He concluded by stating it is important to “compliment kids and stuff when they help you” and to “show respect.” Support staff member C3 also made a similar assertion when she noted, “When children are fed nutritious meals, it helps them to learn and they have better opportunities to get that quality education.” Support staff member B5 also claimed, “As a cook, we give them the nutrition that their brains need to grow and strengthen their muscles and stuff to be able to do the activities and studies throughout the day.”

Three respondents from School B were very brief and to the point in responding to question seven. Support staff member B3 stated, “Sometimes breakfast and lunch are the only hot meals they get, you know, so that’s what we provide.” Participant B1, a custodian, responded, “Honestly, we just try to keep it clean so they [students] can be here, keep everything running so that they [students] can actually be here.” Support staff member B4 responded, “I think it’s good for us to help them to follow the rules in the cafeteria and to get them their food as fast as we can so they have plenty of time to eat.”

**Focus group question eight.** What steps could be taken to help you understand how your position helps the district to achieve its stated mission?

The responses to question number eight shared by focus group participants were varied. Some respondents chose to answer the question exactly as it was stated. For example, support staff member C2 offered, “I guess I would just follow back on some training tied into our mission statement and some examples of our job duties.”

Participant C4 suggested more training at the beginning of the year focused on how different job titles relate to the mission statement. He suggested different roles “take it [mission statement] different, and it means something different, and they wouldn’t say the same things.” Participant D2 pointed to the difficulty in tying his role to the district mission statement by pointing out that support staff positions “have such limited contact with students as compared to teachers and other staff, it’s a little harder I think to get us more on an even keel.”

Support staff member D6 suggested that just being informed about the district mission statement could be effective training. He stated, “For some people in this room, this may be the first time they’ve seen this.” He pointed out that seeing the mission

statement on the website or posted in the halls is not the same as having some type of specific training to where it becomes “kind of ingrained in you.”

Support staff member E5 was the only other respondent who attempted to answer the question as it was asked. However, he started his response with “to go along with our mission, not specifically.” He went on to add, “I think overall, general preparedness and what we’re supposed to do on a bus and things like that help to contribute to the mission statement.” Several participants did respond with what they believed could be done to help them in their roles to benefit the students.

For example, support staff member D1 suggested, “Everyone that works here should be trained, encouraged, and that they all have a part.” He asserted, “Everyone here who comes in contact with kids, whether they realize it or not, have a part in these students’ lives.” Support staff member D1 further stated, “Sometimes it’s just as simple as consistency.” He explained how having a support staff member as a consistent presence in the lives of some students is important because so many go home to lives of turmoil. Participant D1 further suggested, “You’re the person they see and whether it’s in the lunch line, on the school bus, in the hall—just seeing that face makes them feel that they are a part of this and that they belong.”

Other respondents referred to specific training to assist them in the responsibilities of their jobs, with several tying that back to helping students. For example, support staff member A4 mentioned that being informed “about what limitations we have, what’s expected of us, what kind of things to look for or things that we need to report—I think those kinds of things would really help all of us a lot.” She concluded by referring to

students when she brought up the point that even when she and others realize a student is having a hard time, there is an uncertainty in what they can or should say.

Participant A4 summarized, “So I do wish that we did have training that would help us a little more in that area.” Support staff member A2 responded in a similar manner when she called for “more training in general,” because although she understands what to do in a number of situations, “what do we do in this situation when there’s a lot of questions not being answered.” Support staff member A7 suggested:

I still feel that we’re not getting the training, and I’m talking about other fellow employees, on how to actually talk to a child when they’re having a problem using the proper words, more positive words, and how to talk in a calm voice and not in that irritated voice when you’re trying to correct them. It makes a huge difference in a child, the way you talk to them in the voice you use. I just don’t think that everybody in the school district is getting the training they need in that area.

Support staff member A4 agreed with A7’s response and then brought up the need for open discussions between support staff and certificated employees, like teachers and administrators. She stated the value in this type of collaboration by pointing out, “If you were going to take your custodians and your kitchen help together and say, okay, just because we serve food and they clean the school, we also take care of other things,” that it would be helpful to the school community as a whole. Participant A4 further shared, “Somebody in the office may not understand what kind of kids we ran into or saw what happened that day.”

Participant A4 also brought up video trainings for support staff as an expectation for support staff at School A. Support staff member A7 stated she did not “care for the video training” and that she would find it more beneficial to be trained by an actual person. She stated, “I learn better [when] somebody stands up and actually speaks, where there’s a chance for open discussion versus just sitting in front of a TV and watching a video.” Participant A4 agreed and suggested the videos can be problematic, “because when you have a question, who do you ask, and if you run into a question, what do you do?”

Support staff member A6 also argued trainings should be made “more personable.” He argued that because society has become more depersonalized, as “everything’s either through a text message or an email and stuff like that,” he advocated the trainings should be more “one-on-one with the person to make it more personal.” He further stated, “Through a text, you can read it the wrong way and take it the wrong way or vice versa with an email.” He claimed, “[If] you’re there in front of the person, then nine times out of 10, you don’t take it the wrong way.” Participant A4 followed support staff member A7’s claims by suggesting staff members deal “with the kids face-to-face,” as that type of communication is “very personal.” She stated, “So to help us deal with that person, if we had personal contact as well, it would help us to understand even more than watching a video.”

Support staff member A4 mentioned the video trainings required annually, but declared, “Video training we get is on nutrition and blah, blah, blah, but not really about how to deal with the child or how to deal with a situation.” Support staff member A6 also brought up the annual video trainings but cited limitations to taking advantage of

these videos as a nighttime custodian. He pointed out, “Being a nighttime custodian, our time that we have is very limited, and with all of the work to do it’s hard to actually get time to do those refresher videos and stuff like that.” He also cited the challenge of having four nighttime custodians and one computer. He proposed it would be more helpful if he were offered “videos to help remind us of what we’re supposed to be doing or if we see a problem, who do we go to report the problem to and along those lines.”

Respondents from three different schools took question number eight as an opportunity to express various frustrations with certain aspects of their school districts and their jobs. Support staff member B3 declared her opinion that her department, food service, was not “respected” by others and they were “just the maids for teachers, faculty.” She went on to express frustration about how much her department has to get done in a certain amount of time, yet teachers come in in stating, “I need this.” She stated, “They don’t respect our time.”

Participant B2 immediately responded to participant B3’s assertion by stating, “It’s all about them.” Support staff member B3 agreed and repeated, “It’s all about them.” She then went on and shared, “We’re all here for these kids to provide them with security, food, education, to feel secure, and for them to say you do this for me, it’s frustrating.” Support staff member B1 specified, “Some of the others might actually need to understand how our position actually helps them.” He continued, “It’s like we’re not considered.” Participant B4 then stated, “It’s because we don’t have a title.” Support staff member B2 then inserted, “We’re not certified.” Participant B1 then followed, “We’re the forgotten unless something goes wrong.” Support staff member B4 continued this line of discussion by interjecting, “Don’t have the cinnamon rolls, and we’re in



trouble, or if the chicken is a little late.” Participant B1 responded by restating that her department is not considered unless something goes wrong, which led her to maintain that, “Hey, you know, we’re here all the time.”

Support staff member B2 also expressed a desire to be more appreciated, but not before putting his job into context. He stated, “It’s a big role, and if it weren’t for the cooks, custodians, and definitely the drivers, there would be no district at all.” He described being underappreciated and shared, “Sometimes it’s just like you’re a rug.” He did conclude his statement, however, by pointing out, “I love my job, and I love the kids that are here every day.” He also stated he loves “the people I work with,” but there are “times in this area that more than a pat on the back would be nice.”

Support staff member E3 also expressed frustration over being underappreciated, but she spoke more about respect needing to come from district administration. She stated, “Sometimes, the administration should show a little more appreciation and respect for the departments that each of us are in.” Participant E3 then asserted, “If it wasn’t for the departments that are represented here today, schools would not roll.” She further stated:

And there’s a lot to be said for the things that are done behind the scenes. Just like we have a child that’ll come in here, and he’s not eaten since probably he left here the evening before. Well, that takes a certain type of person to be able to communicate with him because you know he’s hungry and you don’t know what kind of life he’s had that night. So you have to have a lot of patience. You have to have a lot of willpower. You have to have a lot of love, and you have to care.

Other respondents took the opportunity to praise their school districts in the context of question number eight. Support staff member E1 stated, “I will have to say at this district I feel a lot more appreciated than at other schools.” He further shared, “We’re more important than what the custodian, what the food service, what bus drivers, what they do,” and concluded, “I feel a lot more appreciated, that we’re all kind of on the same level.” He went on to point out that the teachers and administrators in his district frequently offer words of thanks and appreciation. He finished with describing how teachers say, “Thank you for doing this, or thank you for doing the extra and making different things for us.”

Support staff member E4 agreed with E1 and further stated, “I’ve been here doing this part of the job for 16 years, and they’re all really good.” He mentioned the teachers and administrators he currently works with are “friendly and easy to get along with” and placed that statement in context by adding, “I’ve driven a bus for 31 years, so I’ve dealt with several of them.”

Support staff member D6 declared from his perspective, “Our support staff is not necessarily looked down on,” and they “are just as important as everybody else.” He described how kids would not make it through their day without a meal from the kitchen staff. He reiterated the same point regarding bus drivers getting students to school and then followed up with a specific scenario about the maintenance staff’s ability to repair the heat or air conditioning in the classroom because without that, it could “be a miserable day.”

Participant E5 alluded to the intrinsic importance of her job when she stated, “It’s not about the money, because I am a bus driver.” She continued, “It is about what I can

contribute and help.” From there, she related her job to that of a teacher by describing an “aha moment” she had with a student, which helped her to understand why “teachers are teachers and why we do what we do.”

### **Elementary Principal Interviews**

**Principal interview question one.** What is your district’s mission statement?

As shown in Table 2, all five participating principals were able to recite their districts’ mission statements requested in question number one.

Table 2

#### *Participating Principals Able to Recite District Mission Statements*

Participating Principal	Yes/No
Principal A	Yes
Principal B	Yes
Principal C	Yes
Principal D	Yes
Principal E	Yes

Principal A stated her district mission statement: “We are a district with an unrelenting focus on learning as successes are our only option.” Principal B shared her district mission statement: “To equip our students for the next stage of life.” The principal at School C offered her district’s mission statement even though it was longer and more involved than others. She stated, “The students of [School C] will acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes through a progressive quality education to be self-respecting, self-sufficient, contributing citizens of the rapidly changing world in which they live.”

The principal from School D stated her district mission statement started as “Preparing students for the future.” She further stated, “We believe in knowledge and character, and those two added together equal productive workers, responsible citizens, and lifelong learners.” The principal from School E affirmed her district’s mission statement: “Stand confidently, participate fully, learn continually, and contribute meaningfully to the global community.”

**Principal interview question two.** Are you aware of the process that was undertaken to create your district’s mission statement, and if so, please describe.

Principal A responded she was not employed for her district when their mission statement was created. She did state, however, that she was led to believe it was created by the district’s board of education and then disseminated to district administration and others. She explained that when the district mission statement was created, the district was “in a place where it was not performing very well academically, and so the board put their hands in it a little more and said this has got to improve and this is how we’re going to do it.” She also explained the mission statement was revised after initially being created because the original language was not stated in a positive enough way.

Principal B was employed in her school district when the district mission statement was created. She explained that eight to nine years earlier, the administrative team sat down, and “all came up with it.” She explained, “We decided we wanted it to be kind of concise and short, but meaningful.” She concluded, “So we just all came up with that in agreement.”

Principal C shared the district mission statement was already in place at the time she was employed with her school district, and she was not aware of the process that took

place to create it. Principal D shared similarly, “I am not aware of that, and it is just super sad.” Finally, Principal E responded, “It was actually created in 2014, prior to when I arrived in the district, and it has not been revised since.”

**Principal interview question three.** Based on your perceptions, how does the role of your custodians contribute to the fulfillment of your district mission statement?

Principal A chose to answer question number three by referencing her individual building’s mission statement. She described her building’s mission statement as revolving around the notion of being “lifetime learners and leaders.” She connected that concept with her district’s mission statement by stating:

So this is what the district wants us to do. We do a lot of things in the elementary with trying to grow the whole child. So we have like a club time once a week and our custodians are involved in that. They’re a part of that. They have the kids that serve them in cleaning up after lunch and different things like that to get them to see that what they learn in class can help them have something outside of school when they grow into adults. And, so I think they have to buy into that. I don’t know that they necessarily always look at that district mission statement and think, “I’m going to create learners,” but through the way that we scaffold it down, they do things that align to helping kids see their future which aligns with learning.

Principal B stated she understood the question but went on to explain, “I really have no idea.” She then provided an example of a specific custodian in her building. She described how that particular custodian is always available to help students clean

something and is even willing to help them “in their understanding of what they should be doing.”

Principal C stated the custodians in her building “help to create a clean and safe environment for the students to learn, and they are active in the school.” She further clarified the custodians in her building are considered part of the team. From that, she was able to make the connection that because her district’s mission statement states students should be “self-respecting” and “self-sufficient,” the custodians who work in her building reinforce those qualities on a daily basis “just in the tasks that they complete and the manner in which they do so.”

Principal D answered by stating she did not “think that it goes with it, like I don’t know that they’re in it.” She then repeated the question and followed up with an attempt to point out that she could make a connection to her building’s custodians promoting character, as they should be treated with respect in their role. She concluded, “I mean that’s one of the things that they do.”

The Principal from School E began her response to question three by stating, “Our philosophy here at school is that it takes everybody on staff, whether you’re in a classroom or in the cafeteria or wherever to teach our kiddos what they need to be productive members of society.” She then confirmed that her custodians make connections with students. She stated, “They are helping to contribute to each student, whether they want to go into vo-tech or things like that.”

**Principal interview question four.** Based on your perceptions, how does the role of your cafeteria staff contribute to the fulfillment of your district’s mission statement?

Principal A stated that although her cafeteria workers may not be aware of the district mission statement, they understand “kids can’t learn without having a full tummy.” She also asserted she makes a concerted effort to let her cafeteria staff know they are valued. She concluded, “[The cafeteria workers] believe they’re valuable in that sense, but not necessarily because of the district mission statement.”

Principal B was able to cite a specific initiative her building had recently taken on involving her cafeteria staff. She explained how her school began serving breakfast in the classrooms, which placed her cafeteria workers in the hallways at the beginning of the school day. Principal B also suggested that due to this breakfast-in-the-classroom program, her school had experienced a decrease in discipline issues and had increased instructional time in the morning. She referenced her cafeteria staff as part of the success of this initiative by stating, “They’re willing to come down here and kind of oversee that and clean up and do all kinds of stuff.”

In addressing question four, Principal C shared that her cafeteria staff “are also very engaged with the students and connect with them on a daily basis.” She described how the students “see them working hard to prepare nutritious meals, allowing the students to have that nourishment so that they can be good students.” She also shared, “My cafeteria staff probably knows every child by name and addresses them by such most days.” Principal D pointed directly to the character piece of her district’s mission statement by explaining that her cafeteria staff is an example of respect and integrity.

In responding to question number four, Principal E immediately stated, “Our cafeteria staff is exceptional.” She went on to explain:

Their whole philosophy is that every day when they come in, it is to make sure that they provide kiddos with something to eat, put something on their tummy so that they can go to the classroom and learn. And, there are times when we have kids who come in who are just having an absolute meltdown, and they'll fix the most special breakfast. I've had them fix scrambled eggs before and sauce and sausage—anything that's going to turn their day around, because that's what they're about.

She concluded by further stating her cafeteria staff helps “our kiddos feel like they're confident and their bellies are full, and they're warm and fed and able to walk into a classroom.”

**Principal interview question five.** Based on your perceptions, how does the role of your bus drivers contribute to the fulfillment of your district's mission statement?

Principal A suggested her bus drivers probably do not feel connected to the district's mission statement, and if they were asked how their roles contribute to the mission statement, “They would say it doesn't.” She explained, “A lot of our discipline happens on the buses, and I know our bus drivers a lot of times feel frustration with that.” She also stated that the disconnect is not helped by the fact the drivers “don't get to see them do the learning... They just get to bring them and take them home.” Principal A concluded by stating she makes sure to constantly remind her bus drivers how important they are and thank them for the job they do because she is not sure “they know their contributions align with the mission statement.”

The principals at School B and School D provided brief responses to question number five. Principal B stated her bus drivers contribute to the district's mission



statement by “getting our students here safe and sound.” Principal D explained her bus drivers support the district’s mission by “treating students with respect, being happy to see them each morning, knowing that they’re the first point of contact for our families and our kids.”

Principal C again pointed out that her bus drivers are a “part of the team.” She further explained:

They help get our students to and from school safely. They connect with the kids. They conduct their buses in a safe way so that they are safe—that the bus trips are safe. They greet our students. They are oftentimes the first face that our students see daily as well as the last one. So that’s a necessary way of helping the kids—to feel like they are all part of this community that we have developed.

Principal E stated that with her bus drivers, addressing question five was “a little bit trickier.” She then explained she did not feel bus drivers were included in training as much as other departments, other than mandated reporter training everyone participates in at the beginning of each school year. It is, however, something she stated she would like to improve upon at the beginning of the following school year. She concluded, “As far as looking at a mission statement or anything like that, really it doesn’t seem to apply sadly as much.”

**Principal interview question six.** In what way is training or professional development provided for your support staff that is geared toward understanding the district mission statement?

In responding to question number six, Principal A clarified the training custodians and cafeteria staff receives in her building is more “in the realm of what they do, not in

the realm of the district mission statement.” She then went on to explain that the bus drivers from her building “get training on safety and all of that from the transportation director.” She also stated that during the current school year’s back-to-school meetings, “I did some training with our bus drivers on our building mission statement to try and help them hear the same verbiage we are telling the kids to help curb some discipline.” She stated she received positive feedback from bus drivers for this particular training, and explained, “A lot of them thanked me for taking time to come and include them.” She also stated that during this training, she “recognized the efforts they are making with kids every day, and I wanted to help them in their jobs.” Although this training was not particularly intended to help support staff meet the expectations of their mission statement, this type of training would “fall over into that.”

The principals from School B and School D again provided brief responses to question number six. Principal B simply stated, “I don’t think that really applies.” Principal D shared, “Besides the required training, I don’t know that we do a good job of that, sadly.” Principal C commented, “We probably don’t have as much professional development for the support staff other than bus drivers and their annual training that they must do to maintain certification.” She then concluded, “As far as any training or professional development for custodians or cafeteria staff, I’m honestly not aware of a whole lot that is geared toward understanding the mission statement.”

In answering question number six, Principal E spoke to what she would like to see going forward. She explained there is a push in her district to revise the current mission statement. She also stated, “With that, I want to be able to have that professional development for all of my different departments and not have them feel segmented.”

**Principal interview question seven.** In your opinion, what are the steps that could be taken to help the support staff members of your school better understand their roles and responsibilities in the context of your district’s mission statement.

Principal A responded to question number seven by stating, “I think having a training for them separately, where they are just even told what it [mission statement] is and explaining how that would all fit together and showing them some appreciation—it might certainly help.” She then questioned if it would simply be better if the “mission statement was fresh and new and written with buy-in from everybody.” She concluded:

Ultimately it’s not that we don’t follow it. Even as an administrative team, we talk about “this is our goal,” and we often look back on that. But, very few people sitting at the table even had a part in writing that mission statement. And, it is not easy to live someone else’s mission sometimes. So, in giving them a part and understanding what it means and having a voice in that would probably make it more impactful.

Principal B brought up making all district meetings more effective by talking about the mission statement and “maybe explaining it and giving examples of how they could contribute, might be one way that we could do it.” Principal D explained there is a need for “more explicit training” and to let support staff members know “how vital they are” to the fulfillment of the district mission statement. Principal D pointed out that her district does have annual meetings where the superintendent talks about the importance of all staff, but it probably falls short of helping support staff tie their roles back to the district mission. She also questioned how many current staff members were around when the

district's mission statement was created, and that it is something "we probably need to revisit."

Principal C also mentioned her district had "been kicking around the idea of updating the mission statement." She claimed that in revising the mission statement, her district "would definitely want to include everybody, not just the teachers and administration in the development of that." She further suggested support staff members "see the school district through a different lens, and having their input in the development of a mission statement would be great." She concluded by talking about the importance of district administrators communicating appreciation to support staff members for the job they do, and they could possibly tie in "pieces of the mission statement and their fulfillment of it to help them see how they are an integral part of this community."

Principal E began her response to question number seven by pointing out that when she was hired years ago, "there was definitely a separation between staff and teachers." She went on to explain that when she started in her role, she began making changes like including support staff in teacher appreciation week. Her goal, she pointed out, was to create "a cultural change for our building to say that we're all responsible for the children that come to us every day." She also described some steps she has taken including making support staff a part of focus group meetings and including them in all district meetings where in the past they may have just worked in the building. At the minimum, she stated, "They need to be able to have the opportunity."

Principal A and Principal D provided closing comments associated with question number seven. Principal A pointed out that a higher employee turnover rate in the support staff ranks in her district creates a challenge. She explained, "People don't often

stay happy in their role and stay a long time.” She concluded by stating this dynamic is something her district constantly has to consider, and it is something they plan to address, because “not always are they long-termers.”

Principal D concluded by making the admission that her district struggles to maintain a clear focus on their mission statement. She explained, “As a district, we all love kids, and we communicate that well, and we want them to succeed.” However, she admitted, “Maybe the path to getting there, we don’t communicate very clearly.”

### **Summary**

Chapter Four included the collective responses from focus group discussions and one-on-one elementary principal interviews. This research was designed to examine school support staff and elementary principals and their perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of school support staff in the context of school district mission statements. Data gathered through the information presented in Chapter Four assisted in the articulation of findings and conclusions contained in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five includes a complete analysis of the perceptions of school support staff and elementary principals gathered in focus group discussions and principal interviews. That information was used to detail the findings, conclusions, implications for study, and recommendations for future research. Chapter Five concludes with a summary of the study.

## **Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions**

A key to any successful organization is that everyone involved in that organization has access to clearly stated and shared objectives (Lynch, 2016). In a school setting, the district mission statement is generally viewed as the starting point and guide for articulating policy and expectations (Rey, 2017). Because of this, a school district's mission statement should be written in clear language and applicable to everyone from support staff to district administration (Lynch, 2016). However, due to the scope of an organizational mission statement, key personnel can sometimes feel left out and unmotivated due to an inability to see the connection between the stated mission and the roles and responsibilities of the jobs they hold (Rey, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to gain the perceptions of specified school support staff as to how the roles and responsibilities of their positions help to fulfill their school district mission statements. In addition, the perceptions of building-level administrators as to how support staff members in their schools contributed to their district mission statements were also analyzed. Finally, an examination of how support staff are assisted within the context of a district mission statement was also utilized to support this qualitative study. Chapter Five includes the findings of this study based on data gathered through support staff focus group discussions and principal interviews. Chapter Five also includes the conclusions, the implications for practice, and recommendations for future studies.

## **Findings**

This qualitative study was guided by two overarching research questions. The research questions were designed to examine the perceptions of school district support staff as to how the roles and responsibilities of their jobs supported the school district's mission statement. In addition, the views of elementary principals were examined to determine their perceptions of how school support staff in their buildings support the district mission statement.

Focus groups were conducted in five schools across two counties in southwest Missouri. Focus groups were made up of school support staff in the areas of transportation, food service, and custodial and maintenance. One-on-one principal interviews were held in five elementary schools, where the selected support staff members were employed. Following the focus group discussions and one-on-one principal interviews, participant responses were transcribed and then reviewed to gain an understanding of the perceptions of support staff roles and responsibilities in the context of the district mission statement. The data gathered were then used to address the two research questions of this study.

**Research question one.** What are the perceptions of elementary school support staff members regarding the primary roles and responsibilities of their position (as a custodian, cafeteria staff, or bus driver) and how they support a district-wide mission statement?

When asked to describe the primary roles and responsibilities of their jobs, support staff members from all five participating schools responded in similar ways. A number of responses spoke to the technicalities of their respective positions. For

example, support staff member A2 shared, “We clean the school.” Participant C4, a food service employee, described, “We make sure that the students have a balanced breakfast and a balanced lunch that they can eat.”

Several focus group members cited safety. For example, participant A4, a custodian, stated, “We provide a safe, secure, and healthy environment.” Support staff member A7 viewed his primary role as “getting students from home to school and school to home safely, with no injuries and no accidents.” Students were mentioned on numerous occasions, particularly by cafeteria workers and bus drivers, whose positions involve interaction with students on a more frequent basis.

When asked to recite their district mission statements, very few were able to do so without prompting. Because focus group questions were presented to participating support staff members ahead of time, a few who looked over the mission statement beforehand were able to share it, and for those who were not, a copy of the district mission statement was provided. When asked how that district mission statement was introduced during the hiring process, the majority of respondents noted the district mission statement was not part of any recruitment, hiring, or on-the-job training they received in the initial stages of work for their respective school districts.

Focus group question five involved asking participating support staff members about any training or instruction they received to better equip them in dealing with issues surrounding students and supporting the district mission statement. Responses from bus drivers included training on how to address problem behaviors on the school bus. Respondents from food service largely stated the training they received was typically geared toward nutrition and the technical aspects of their roles. However, a number of



respondents across all three support staff areas cited understanding the importance of their interactions with students despite receiving little to no training in dealing with them.

That notion of support staff members potentially benefitting from student centered training was reinforced by participating focus group members when they addressed the focus group question about what training they would find beneficial. Many saw a need for training at the beginning of each school year. Participant C4 suggested he recognized how his role might support the district mission statement, “totally different than if you asked a teacher.” The majority of participating support staff members stated they felt like more training on how to interact with students and deal with students in different situations would be beneficial.

When asked specifically how the primary roles and responsibilities of their jobs supported their district’s mission statement, a number of respondents were able to cite their impact on students within the context of their jobs. For example, bus drivers pointed out the importance of how they are the first and last contact with a student on any given school day. Custodians were able to connect the importance of a safe, clean environment to attendance and learning.

Cafeteria workers addressed the importance of positive interactions with students in the course of doing their jobs and the importance that nutritious meals play in a student’s day. Support staff member A2, a cook, made a clear connection to his job and the portion of his district’s mission statement that addressed learning when he stated, “When children are fed nutritious meals, it helps them to learn, and they have better opportunities to get that quality education.”

Finally, when asked about the steps that could be taken to help focus group participants better understand how their positions help school districts to achieve their mission statements, responses were varied. Some respondents simply wanted the district's mission statement to be introduced and discussed more throughout the year. Other participating support staff members did not see the need to have more understanding of their roles relative to the mission statement. Instead, they preferred to see more preparedness in dealing with students, better communication from district leadership, and more appreciation for the importance of their roles in the operating of their school districts.

**Research question two.** What are the perceptions of elementary principals on job training and employee development for support staff members regarding the school mission statement?

To lay the groundwork for the principal interview questions, each participating principal was asked if he or she could recite the district's mission statement. Each elementary school principal from the five participating districts was able to state his or her school district's mission statement. The follow-up question asked elementary principals if they were aware of the process undertaken to create their district's mission statement. Of the five responses to this question, only two principals were aware of how their district's mission statement was created, with one explaining theirs was created by the district's board of education and the other reporting theirs was created by district administration.

When asked how custodians contribute to the fulfillment of the district mission statement, the idea that custodians can model certain elements of the district's mission

statement, from citizenship to character, came up in multiple responses. While two respondents were not able to make a connection to the role of the custodian in the district's mission statement, the other three principals were able to make that connection, and all five principals took an opportunity to speak to the value of the role the custodians play in their buildings.

Principals were then asked to describe the role their cafeteria staff played in the fulfillment of their district's mission statement. A number of principals were quick to point out the impact of the cafeteria support staff on students through providing meals and interacting with them in the cafeteria setting. Principal B described a program that had recently been implemented by her district where students were being served breakfast in their classrooms on a daily basis. This district had already seen an increase in instructional time and a decrease in discipline issues, and she was quick to highlight the cafeteria staff's role in this initiative and their presence in the hallways before school.

When asked about bus drivers and their role in fulfilling the district's mission statement, principal responses were varied. Principal A stated bus drivers experience more of a disconnect, exacerbated by the fact they "don't get to see them do the learning, they just get to bring them and take them home." Principal E offered a similar response and stated more needs to be done to train bus drivers in a manner similar to other departments. The three other principals attempted to connect the role of their bus drivers to the district mission statement based on getting students to and from school and the relationships they build with those students on their buses.

Next, the elementary principals were asked to describe any training or professional development offered to their building's support staff geared toward their

understanding of the district mission statement. Two of the five responded that their support staff received training, but it was not geared toward the district mission statement. Two other principals specifically stated that it either did not apply or their district did not do a good job with that. The final respondent spoke more to what she would like to see going forward when she stated, “I want to be able to have that professional development for all of my different departments and not have them feel segmented.”

For the final question, principals were asked to state their opinions on what steps could be taken to help support staff members better understand their roles and responsibilities in the context of their district’s mission statement. Two of the principals specifically cited a need for their district’s mission statement to be rewritten and become more inclusive of everyone working in their school districts. Principal C offered the point that support staff members “see the school district through a different lens,” and any input they would be able to provide would be valuable. Other responses included the simple introduction and reinforcement of the district’s mission statement during opening meetings and at other times throughout the year. Another respondent pointed out the importance of giving support staff more of an opportunity to be included in various meetings or focus groups.

In offering final comments, two principals cited the challenge of the high turnover rate in the employment of support staff in their districts. Another principal wanted to admit that her district, as a whole, struggled to maintain a clear focus on their stated mission. She shared that her district has the right intentions and ultimately achieves their goals, but communication could be better along the way.

## Conclusions

The following section includes conclusions based on an analysis of the responses gained from support staff focus group discussions and elementary principal interviews, along with information presented in the review of literature from Chapter Two. This triangulation of data was intended to answer the two overarching research questions.

**Support staff members in the areas of transportation, custodial and maintenance, and food service understand the main responsibilities of their roles and how those roles intersect with students.** Participating support staff members were able to define the major responsibilities of their roles, and a majority were quick to mention students when detailing their job descriptions. While it can be easily stated that transporting students safely to school and then home each day is a primary responsibility of a bus driver (Kokemuller, 2019), the bus drivers who participated in this study also explained the importance of their interactions in setting a trajectory for a student's school day. Just as a student being greeted at the door by a teacher can give that student a positive start to the day, bus drivers can also set an important tone for the day with how they interact with the students on their buses (Meals, 2018).

Cafeteria staff workers participating in this research were also able to detail their job responsibilities in the context of the importance of their roles to students. According to Meador (2019), the primary roles of a school cafeteria worker are to prepare and serve food in schools while maintaining a clean, safe kitchen environment. The cafeteria support staff participating in this study's focus groups also wanted to point out the significance of their interactions with students and the important role that providing nutritious meals plays in a student's ability to learn and thrive during a school day.

School custodians and maintenance workers are responsible for many responsibilities critical to the overall operation of a school—from cleaning and emptying trash to taking care of the grounds and moving furniture (Meador, 2019). The custodians and maintenance workers who participated in this study identified their jobs in terms of those traditionally defined responsibilities, with only one participating custodian mentioning students. His response referred to the fact that the school must be kept clean for students. These responses indicated custodians and maintenance workers feel more separation from students than do bus drivers and cafeteria staff.

**Support staff workers are not aware of their district’s mission statement, and it is not typically a part of any on-the-job training initiated by school districts.**

Despite the importance of a mission statement for school leaders to communicate direction and focus for all staff members in a district (Lynch, 2016), the support staff members participating in this research were not able to articulate their districts’ mission statements without assistance. Furthermore, the majority of respondents could not describe the district’s mission statement referenced in any on-the-job training they received. When their district mission statement was shared with them, however, many respondents were able to connect their roles back to the mission statement. In addition, several respondents were able to identify where their district’s mission was posted, which reiterated the importance of a district’s mission statement being clearly understood and posted for all to see (Jagodowski, 2018).

**School support staff have a desire to feel more of a connection to their district’s mission statement and to receive more training in student-related support.**

As mentioned, once support staff members were made aware of their district’s mission

statement, many were able to associate their roles and responsibilities to that guiding mission. Their responses alluded to the desire to feel more connection to a mission statement that was created with the intent to represent a unifying direction for everyone working under its umbrella (Lynch, 2016). Participating support staff members understood their roles within the context of their district mission statements and wanted others to understand the importance of their roles. Participants cited a need to have their district's mission statement shared more in whole staff forums, like beginning-of-the-year meetings, and to have more frequent training that ties their roles and responsibilities to their district's mission. The end result of this practice would help school support staff members feel valued and execute their roles in a manner that reflects the guiding principles of their school districts (Poskin, 2018a).

Support staff focus group discussions indicated not enough training and student-related support is provided by school districts. While adequate training is provided for the technical aspects of their roles, extra support for dealing with students is rare despite support staff members playing a vital role in the school experience of students (Balingit, 2018). Dealing with difficult student behaviors, how to appropriately communicate with students, and dealing with students with special needs were all mentioned by participating support staff members as big challenges in their roles. In addition, support staff members cited better communication regarding student medications, custody issues, and past behaviors as being important.

**Lack of communication and respect for the importance of their roles are significant issues for support staff.** When analyzing the responses of participants in the focus group discussions, some common themes were evident, including communication

from teachers and administrators and a general belief they often feel underappreciated in their roles. These frustrations come from the understanding that support staff in schools across the country are vital to the success of the districts in which they serve (Whittle, 2019). Participating support staff members cited certified staff members not understanding the jobs they do, only being noticed when they are needed, and their time not being respected. They specifically mentioned school district administration as a source of lack of communication and respect.

Support staff members also spoke to the challenges they experienced in their roles due to a perceived lack of communication. For example, participating bus drivers mentioned being unaware of custody issues that play out at bus stops. They also mentioned students who get on their buses in the afternoons after having dealt with something significant at school and they were not made aware. Swanson (2012) asserted it is important for bus drivers to know as much as possible about the students they are transporting so they are better prepared to respond to student needs.

Support staff workers also mentioned the frustration of not knowing what a student has been diagnosed with or what medications they might be taking. Without that knowledge, support staff workers, particularly in the cafeteria and on the bus, are left to try to deal with student situations without the best knowledge or tools. Students with special accommodations due to developmental disabilities and students who are taking medications for various reasons can also present challenges to support staff when they have not received background communication (Rosales, 2017).

**Elementary principals can connect the roles and responsibilities of their support staff to their district mission statements, but training and support for**



**support staff in the areas of district mission and student support are lacking.** All of the elementary principals participating in this study could accurately state their district's mission statement. Likewise, they could also cite examples of how the roles and responsibilities of their support staff help to fulfill their school district's mission statement. The only exception to this was Principal B who could not state how her custodians specifically support the district's mission statement. Lyons (2018) stated an effective leader "values all staff members and recognizes the strengths they bring to the table" (p. 3). He further stated an effective leader "works to build leadership capacity across the staff" (Lyons, 2018, p. 3).

Despite being aware of the contributions of their support staff, participating elementary principals also stated more training and support is needed for the support staff members working in their buildings. Effective principals realize there has to be capacity built and diversity promoted in the teams they are asked to lead (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). DeStefane (2019) stated:

Respect and dignity must be integrated into every aspect of a company's culture and day-to-day work. Having a compassionate working atmosphere encourages team members to face challenges as a united front. Each person knows that they have value to each other and the company, so they both support each other through failure and celebrate together after successes. This shared sense of respect contributes to—or even creates—a culture of organization-engagement and dedication. (p. 4)

Principal E reinforced this with her assertion that she wanted more unified training for her employees so they do not feel "segmented." The principals participating in these

interviews stated training for support staff in their schools was largely geared toward the technical aspects of their jobs.

**Elementary principals believe more training and possibly the retooling of their existing district mission statements are needed to be more inclusive.** The elementary principals participating in this study felt the districts in which they work should be more explicit in how the district mission statements are communicated and supported for all staff. This issue of staff engagement was supported by DeStefane (2019) who suggested that it takes more than token and infrequent communication from leadership to promote engagement. Instead, building consensus for supporting a mission evolves over time by establishing an organizational structure with the qualities of being communication centered and driven by agreed upon values and goals (DeStefane, 2019). Participating elementary principals repeated the training support staff receive currently is not enough. Support staff members are more likely to engage with the presence of more meaningful motivation in their work and the understanding they are part of something bigger (Brooks, 2017).

Some participating principals mentioned their district's intention to retool current mission statements. They cited reasons from a lack of buy-in because the current mission statement was not written by anyone currently working under it, to a desire to craft a mission statement inclusive of more stakeholders. Jagodowski (2018) argued mission statements should clearly state what a district stands for as succinctly as possible and should be relevant to future generations. Lynch (2016) also stated when the goals of a school district are clearly communicated and all stakeholders are included, the school district's mission becomes much more attainable.

## **Implications for Practice**

The perceptions of school support staff in the areas of transportation, food service, and custodial and maintenance and the elementary principals overseeing the buildings in which they were employed suggested the need for more training for support staff members to feel included in the school district's mission statement. As each department in a school district works toward a desired end, there must be coordination of these departments to achieve desired success (Tanuja, 2020). This was evident throughout focus group discussions with selected support staff members and one-on-one interviews with elementary principals as both parties indicated areas of improvement. The following paragraphs describe implications for practice based on the findings of this study.

**School leaders should be intentional in helping support staff members in non-academic areas better understand how their roles and responsibilities support their district's stated mission.** Because a mission statement should be an encapsulation of what a school district stands for and reflective of its values, it is important everyone under the umbrella of that mission statement understands their greater purpose (Allen & Kern, 2018). In discussions with participating support staff members, it was evident although they understood the everyday expectations of their jobs relative to the technical aspects of their roles, they were largely unaware of their district's mission statement and how they were meant to support it. Because support staff members play such a critical role in the day-to-day functioning of a school district, their "buy-in" to the greater purpose and motivation to perform their jobs is critical.

The last two decades have resulted in a large number of school district mission statements created in response to the rise of the professional learning community model (Eaker et al., 2002). These mission statements have largely been crafted around student-centered academic outcomes (Eaker et al., 2002). It is of paramount importance that school leaders are intentional in not only keeping both certified and classified staff members in tune with the district's mission, but the mission should be repeated and reinforced throughout the school year. Lynch (2016) stated that not only is it important that a district mission statement be understood, it should be prominently displayed across the district.

In addition to on-the-job training that deals with the technical aspects of a support staff worker's job responsibilities, more effort should be made to help those individuals understand the significance of their roles in the context of the district's mission statement. While that mission may be more focused on instruction or learning, support staff members should be constantly reminded of how their roles ultimately support teachers, students, and the learning in the classroom which is typically at the heart of every mission statement.

**More student-related supports should be provided for support staff members whose roles and responsibilities often intersect with students and their school experience.** Based on the results of the support staff focus group discussions and the one-on-one principal interviews, school leaders can see the need for more student-related supports for their support staff. While working in the areas of food service, custodial, and transportation, support staff members often build trusting relationships with students, serve as much-needed mentors, and frequently communicate expectations, praise, and

sometimes correction to the students they serve (National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2019). Based on the results of the local support staff focus groups, support staff all routinely deal with instances of student behaviors and situations where decisions have to be made regarding how to communicate or react to a student need. For schools to operate more efficiently and truly achieve their stated missions, appropriate professional development must be provided to support staff to help them support the students they inevitably serve (Harper, 2018).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This qualitative study was initiated to gain the perceptions of select school support staff with regard to how their roles and responsibilities support their school district's mission statement. In addition, the perceptions of the elementary school principals who lead the buildings where these support staff served were also gathered to analyze the beliefs of school leaders regarding the roles and responsibilities of school support staff. The first recommendation for future research would be a qualitative examination of the process initiated by school districts to create district mission statements. Careful consideration should be given to deducing whether the standard created during the rise of the professional learning community model is applicable to all stakeholders in a school district and, therefore, the best model to use when undertaking this important process. This process should involve not only school district leaders, but also non-certified staff and community members.

Another recommendation for future research would involve a qualitative analysis of the need for student-related professional development for non-academic support staff personnel. As evidenced by the responses provided through focus groups as part of this

study, beyond the typical interactions that are a part of their roles, support staff members are routinely placed in situations where they may be forced to address students in crisis, significant student behaviors, students with special needs, and situations that require decisions that carry legal implications. It is no longer enough to simply train school support staff members in the technical components of their jobs and hope they are able to navigate dealing with students on their own accord. This study would involve both school leaders and support staff members.

Finally, a qualitative study based on a systems approach to understanding the relationship between school support staff members and their certified counterparts could be productive. Through the results of support staff focus groups, there emerged a common theme of support staff members feeling unappreciated and undervalued in their roles. Furthermore, they often cited a lack of communication from teachers and school leaders, which oftentimes left them at a disadvantage in fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of their jobs. This study would require input from teachers, support staff personnel, and administrators.

### **Summary**

Though school support staff play a vital role in the day-to-day operations of a school district, their contributions are often taken for granted (Shaw, 1998). This qualitative study was initiated to gain the perceptions of school support staff regarding their roles and responsibilities in the context of their school district mission statements. For this study, focus group discussions were initiated with 28 support staff members from the areas of transportation, food service, and custodial and maintenance working in five schools located in two counties in southwest Missouri. In addition, five elementary

school principals were interviewed one-on-one. These focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews were designed to address two overarching research questions through the perceptions of school support staff and their roles in fulfilling their school districts' mission statements.

Chapter One began with a background of the study and was followed by a theoretical framework, that highlighted a systems theory approach, and the statement of the problem. Following these sections was the purpose of the study, including the research questions, and the significance of the study. Also included in Chapter One were definitions of key terms and delimitations, limitations, and assumptions.

Chapter Two, or the review of literature, began with a section highlighting the theoretical framework chosen for this study, a systems theory approach. Following the theoretical framework was a review of the main subject headings examined in Chapter Two. These main topics included the roles and responsibilities of support staff, support staff training and student-related support, school leadership and their attitudes and beliefs regarding support staff, school district mission statements, and employee motivation.

Chapter Three was an explanation of the methodology utilized for this study, which included details on the compilation of data. Included in Chapter Three were the problem and purpose overview, including the research questions utilized for the study, and the research design. Following the population and sample section, the instrumentation was detailed, including the validity and reliability of the instrumentation. From there, details of data collection and data analysis were described before Chapter Three concluded with the ethical considerations of this study.

Chapter Four included information gained from support staff focus group discussions and one-on-one principal interviews. Participating support staff results were based on the eight questions asked during focus group discussions, and the elementary principals who participated in this study offered valuable information from their seven interview questions. The data gathered through focus group discussions and principal interviews were utilized to address the two research questions that were the driving force of this study.

Chapter Five began with the findings of the research, which centered around addressing the two overarching research questions. Next, the conclusions were described, drawing from information presented in Chapter Four and triangulated with the review of literature offered in Chapter Two. Also contained in Chapter Five were implications for practice. The first suggestion for future practice was that school leaders should be intentional in helping support staff members in non-academic areas better understand how their roles and responsibilities support their district's stated mission. Secondly, more student-related supports should be provided to support staff members whose roles and responsibilities often intersect with students and their school experience. Finally, recommendations for future research were offered. These suggestions included examining the creation of school district mission statements and offering student-related support to non-certified members of the school support staff.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Support Staff Interview Questions**

1. What is your official title in the school district?
2. What do you see as the primary roles and responsibilities of your job?
3. What is your school district's mission statement? (If unknown, it will be provided.)
4. Describe how the district's mission statement was introduced during the recruitment and hiring process. Please describe how the mission statement was presented during any on-the-job training you received.
5. In what ways, if any, did you receive training or instruction related to how you could specifically support the school mission statement in regard to the following: students, student behaviors, and student learning? Please describe.
6. If you received no training, what type of training would you find beneficial?
7. How do your primary role and responsibilities support the district mission statement?
8. What steps could be taken to help you understand how your position helps the district to achieve its stated mission?

## **Appendix B**

### **Elementary Principal Interview Questions**

1. What is your district's mission statement? (If unknown, it will be provided.)
2. Are you aware of the process that was undertaken to create your district's mission statement? If so, please describe.
3. Based on your perceptions, how does the role of your custodian/custodians contribute to the fulfillment of your district's mission statement?
4. Based on your perceptions, how does the role of your cafeteria staff contribute to the fulfillment of your district's mission statement?
5. Based on your perceptions, how does the role of your bus drivers contribute to the fulfillment of your district's mission statement?
6. In what way is training or professional development provided for your support staff that is geared toward understanding the mission statement?
7. In your opinion, what are the steps that could be taken to help the support staff members of your school better understand their roles and responsibilities in the context of your district's mission statement?

## Appendix C

### Permission Letter

(Date)

RE: Permission to Conduct Research in (Stone or Taney County School District)

To: Superintendent of Schools

I am writing to request permission to conduct research in the (Stone or Taney County School District). I am currently pursuing my doctorate through Lindenwood University and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled *The Perceptions of Elementary School Support Staff of Their Role in Supporting the School Mission Statement*.

I am asking permission to conduct focus group interviews with the elementary support staff in your school district. The group will include individuals from custodial/maintenance, food service, and transportation departments. These support staff members will be selected by an elementary principal in your school district. Also, I would like to interview the elementary principal to learn about his/her perceptions of the staff's role in supporting the mission of the school district. Formal consent forms and a copy of the interview questions will be available to all participants before the scheduled interviews.

If you agree, please sign below, scan this page, and email back to me, Matt Dean, at [REDACTED].

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Matt Dean,

Doctoral Student at Lindenwood University

**Approved by:**

---

Print name and title here

---

Signature

---

Date

## Appendix D

### Approval Letter of Lindenwood Institutional Review Board

Nov 11, 2019 5:22 PM CST

RE:

IRB-20-78: Initial - The Perceptions of Elementary School Support Staff of Their Role in Supporting the School Mission Statement

Dear Matt Dean,

The study, The Perceptions of Elementary School Support Staff of Their Role in Supporting the School Mission Statement, has been Approved as Exempt - Limited IRB.

Category: Category 2. (iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

The submission was approved on November 11, 2019.

Here are the findings: **Regulatory Determinations**

- This study has been determined to be minimal risk because the research is not obtaining data considered sensitive information or performing interventions posing harm greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests.
- The IRB has performed a Limited IRB review as part of this Exempt determination. The PI is collecting and retaining email addresses to facilitate scheduling of the focus groups and retaining these identifiers as part of the data set. The IRB has found that this identifiable data will not place subjects at any additional risk or harm as the research is not collecting information provided by subjects which could jeopardize their standing at these institutions. In addition, these data are not be collected for purposes of analysis or reporting and will be adequately protected by the data management plan described by the PI.

Sincerely,

Lindenwood University (lindenwood) Institutional Review Board

Fri 6/12/2020 3:27 PM

RE:

IRB-20-78: Modification - The Perceptions of Elementary School Support Staff of Their Role in Supporting the School Mission Statement

Dear Matt Dean,

The study, The Perceptions of Elementary School Support Staff of Their Role in Supporting the School Mission Statement, has been Approved as Exempt.

Category: Category 1. Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

The submission was approved on June 12, 2020.

Here are the findings: **Regulatory Determinations**

- This modification documents a change to the site selection and approval. This modification does not affect the previously approved risk determination.

Sincerely,

Lindenwood University (lindenwood) Institutional Review Board

**Appendix E**  
**Letter of Participation**  
**Focus Group**

Date: February 23, 2020

Dear (Participating School) School Staff Member,

My name is Matt Dean. I am a doctoral student at Lindenwood University, and I am conducting a research study titled *The Perceptions of Elementary Support Staff of Their Role in Supporting the School Mission Statement*.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. I have attached the Research Information Sheet and a copy of the focus group discussion questions. If you choose to participate, please respond affirmatively to this email message, and I will be in contact with you to schedule a day and time that are convenient.

Please contact me at [msd209@lindenwood.edu](mailto:msd209@lindenwood.edu) with any questions you might have.

Thank you,

Matt Dean  
Lindenwood University  
Doctoral Student

## Appendix F

### Research Information Sheet

You are being asked to participate in a research study. We are conducting this study to examine the perceptions of elementary school support staff of their role in supporting the school mission statement. During this study, you will be asked to participate in a focus group interview of support staff members from your district. It will take approximately 30 minutes to complete the interview.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or to withdraw at any time.

There are no risks from participating in this project. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. We are collecting data that could identify you, such as job title and years of service; however, every effort will be made to keep your information secure and confidential. Only members of the research team will be able to see your data. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. We do not intend to include information that could identify you in any publication or presentation. Any information we collect will be stored by the researcher in a secure location. The only people who will be able to see your data include members of the research team, qualified staff of Lindenwood University, and representatives of state or federal agencies.

Who can I contact with questions?

If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please use the following contact information:

Mr. Matt Dean: [REDACTED]

Dr. Shelly Fransen: [REDACTED]

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns about the project and wish to talk to someone outside the research team, you can contact Michael Leary (Director - Institutional Review Board) at 636-949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu.



### **Vita**

Matthew S. Dean obtained undergraduate degrees from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1995) and the University of Central Arkansas (1998). He also earned a Master's in Educational Administration from William Woods University (2004) and a Specialist in Educational Administration through Lindenwood University (2013). Matthew began his education career in Ozark, Missouri, in 1998 working as a high school history teacher. From there, he served one year as the middle school principal for the Kirbyville (MO) School District before moving to the Branson School District in 2006. While working in Branson, Matthew served four years in the role of assistant high school principal before moving to the role of intermediate principal, a position he has held for the last 10 years.