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How School Leaders Can Directly Support School and Classroom Conditions to Improve Student Outcomes

Goldy Brown III

Introduction and Reviewed Literature

This study was conducted to present a method that could potentially be used to answer identified gaps in the research on a school leader's ability to impact student outcomes.

Quantitative research on School leadership has shown that leaders do in fact impact student learning (Fullan, 2020; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2008, 2020a, 2020b). A more recent review of literature conducted by Grissom et al. (2021) found that school leaders may have a larger impact on student outcomes than discussed in previous research. Their study found that principals' contributions to student achievement were nearly as significant as that of teachers. However, arguably, principals' effects are larger in scope because they are averaged across all students in a school, rather than in a single classroom.

Though there are quantifiably results that show that they can, there is still a gap that remains in the literature as to how school leaders do impact student outcomes (Leithwood et al. 2020; Sabastian & Allensworth, 2019). Other more recent quantitative studies have attempted to address how. Leithwood et al. (2020), identified four paths as to how leaders impact student achievement, known as the "four paths model." These paths include the leaders ability to 1) Set direction 2) Build relationships and develop people 3) Develop the organization to support desired results and, 4) Improve instructional programming. These descriptions are vague, and have not presented specific details as to how this is done in each area. This gap presents a need for rigorous qualitative methodology, which could potentially shed more specific insight into how a school leader can better impact student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Knapp, 2017).

School and classroom conditions have shown to be critical for student learning. There is a definite need to identify strategies a school leader can use to more readily improve school and classroom conditions to obtain desired student achievement results (Cruickshank, 2017). It is important that researchers and practitioners alike clearly identify leadership support that specifically raises the achievement of students. This gives practitioners the ability to prioritize resources and implement educational policies from evidence not just ideas. It is in this context that this qualitative study uses a student learning framework known as the Perspectives on Learning Environment (PLE), to answer the following research question: what support did a school leader provide to improve classroom and school conditions in a school that increased student outcomes under their leadership?

Methods

To answer my research question, I collected qualitative data by the following means: (a) three interviews with the principal; (b) interviews with teachers at each grade level in the schools; (c) interviews with one district office administrator; (d) document collection (i.e., site plans). Recorded findings were triangulated between all interview participants and documents. The results were presented using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, and consent was obtained by the school district, and all participants interviewed.

Study Site & Participants. This study was conducted on a principal in a Blue Ribbon Award receiving elementary school in the Midwest. The particular school principal was chosen because they significantly increased student achievement in their respected building over a seven-year period. I selected the school based on the principals' performance and the fact that the school accomplished and maintained high achievement profiles throughout the principals' tenure, which at the time of the study had been seven years. When evaluating successful schools

today, test scores and school labels are important factors. The school in my study exceeded state testing outcome targets and received state recognition for closing the achievement gap four years in a row. The school also received two blue-ribbon awards for student performance in the last five years.

When seeking a school principal for the case study, I employed two selection criteria. First, the principal had to have a record of improving student achievement in a public school. Second, I sought a principal who continued improving the achievement of students each year they were leaders in their building for at least five years.

The case study selections criteria allowed me to identify a principal and helped me identify the support they provided and thus answer my research question. The other participants are teachers from each grade level and two teachers in the building who are not classroom staff (specialist, resource, etc.). I interviewed the teachers and staff in the school to learn their perspectives on the principal's provided support. Another important part of this study is an interview with the supervisor of the elementary principal in the district regarding the support the principal provided. This input from a district administrator allowed me to determine what supports the principal provides that contributed to school success, and not misinterpret the principal support with district office initiatives. I also found it necessary after examining school data to interview the Director of the Boys and Girls Club who was a significant partner with the school.

Instrumentation. I conducted three interviews with the principal. The first individual interview focused on building a biographical base of the principal. I asked the principal about informal supports they provided to manage their buildings and deal with people on a daily basis. My second interview with the principal focused on identifying strategies they used to raise the

achievement of low-income students in their schools. The questions targeted strategies that are consistent with the learner-centered and knowledge-centered components of the PLE model. I derived these questions from the conceptual framework and the site plans collected. My third individual interview with the principal focused on identifying strategies they used to raise the achievement of low-income students in their schools. In particular, the questions target strategies that are consistent with the assessment-centered and community-centered components of the PLE framework. I interviewed one district office administrator who supervises the elementary principal in the district. This interview provided additional views of the principals' leadership styles from outside the context of the principals' buildings. I asked the administrator about the principals' abilities to be an instructional leader and move their building toward raising student achievement. I also asked the administrator why the principals were chosen for those buildings and what 50 challenges the principal had faced and had overcome in raising the achievement of students. This interview lasted 60 minutes. I met with six teachers to discuss the study and to explain the components of the PLE framework. The interviews focused on the support the principal provided through the four components of the PLE framework. I interviewed one teacher from each grade level who taught kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade, and fourth grade. In addition, I interviewed one resource teacher at each building. Finally, through the process of data collection I felt that it was important to add an informal conversation with the director of the after-school program to further clarify the principal's role in implementing the program. I encouraged all of the participants to follow up with me via e-mail after their interviews as a means of extending discussions. This occurred after they received and read a copy of the interview transcripts from each interview. This gave the teachers and administrators the opportunity to share further thoughts and ideas not presented during the interviews and to

clarify any information in the transcripts.

Data Analysis and Conceptual Framework. To review and analyze the collected data, I used the Perspectives on Learning Environment framework, which is the unique feature to this study. The conceptual framework came from Chapter 6 of (Bransford et al., 2000) the book entitled *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*. The chapter discussed a Perspective on Learning Environment (PLE) framework, which identifies four general perspectives of a quality learning environment and emphasizes that they need to be conceptualized as a system of interconnected components that mutually support one another (p. 133). These perspectives on learning are (1) learner centered, (2) knowledge centered, (3) assessment centered, and (4) community centered.

Learner centered. For a learning environment to be learner centered, the educator must pay attention to the “knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that learners bring to the educational setting” (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 134) If knowledge is continually delivered without any thought to the learners, it is unlikely that any real learning will occur. According to the model, it is critical that educators keep their learners in mind when planning lessons. Teachers who are learner centered recognize the importance of building on the conceptual and cultural knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom. If teaching is conceived as constructing a bridge between the subject matter and the students, then learner centered teachers keep a constant eye on both ends of the bridge. The teachers attempt to get a sense of what students know and can do, as well as their interests and passions (Bransford et al., 2000, pp. 134-135).

Knowledge centered. According to the PLE model of a learning environment, knowledge-centered environments emphasize the importance of students understanding

knowledge as opposed to simply memorizing a set of facts (Bransford et al., 2000, pp. 136-139).

In a knowledge-centered environment, students can transfer knowledge to new learning situations. When teaching students, it is important to take into account the prior knowledge that students bring with them. This approach helps students formulate new knowledge and make sense of what they are learning.

Assessment centered. The third component of the PLE model is that the learning environment be assessment centered. There are two types of assessment: formative assessment, which is administered and used to improve teaching and learning, and summative assessment, which is used to measure what students have learned at the end of the designated learning period (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 140). Summative assessments are what most people think of when assessment is mentioned; they can assure accountability and may even help teachers modify their teaching strategies. However, one might argue that formative assessments are more beneficial. Formative assessments allow students to receive feedback in a more informative and timely manner. Furthermore, teachers are better able to adjust their instruction for students who have difficulty understanding the concepts. Assessing the achievement of learning goals is critical. Assessments should be “predictive of students’ performance in everyday settings once they leave the classroom” (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 141).

Community centered. The final component of the PLE theory is that the learning environment is community centered—that is, it focuses on the social nature of learning, including the norms and modes of operation of any community. Research shows that learning can be increased by social norms that value striving for understanding and making mistakes (Bransford et al., 2000, p. 144). In a constructivist classroom, for example, students are encouraged to share their ideas with one another to learn from different ways of thinking.

Students who feel safe to make a mistake (because the norm is learning from mistakes) are more likely to feel comfortable sharing. It is also important to bear in mind that teachers can formulate detrimental norms if they are not careful, such as low or different expectations for certain groups of children. Norms must be consistent.

The four components of an effective learning environment described in *How People Learn* provided a conceptual foundation for my study. In particular, I collected and analyzed data using the PLE components as the guiding framework. The elementary school principal from a high-performing school serves as case study. I asked the principal about the support they have provided in their respective schools to develop quality school and classroom conditions. Interview data collected from the principals as well as data from school documents such as meeting agendas, site plans, and newsletters are analyzed using qualitative methods in accordance with the PLE model. While the four tenets of the PLE model do not directly align to the characteristics of effective instructional and transformational leadership previously identified in the literature, they do reflect the categories in which a school leader helps provide support to make school and classroom conditions more conducive for student success. I use the tenets of PLE to analyze the data to provide a context for my research question. I briefly discuss the support the elementary principal provided that is related to the PLE model in the context of support that is provided to improve school and classroom conditions. I analyze all the data collected on the principal using the Perspectives on Learning Environment model shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Tenets of the Perspectives on Learning Environment (PLE) Model & Elementary Principal Support Identified from the Data

Tenets of PLE Model

Susan's Support

Learner Centered (LC)

Knowledge Centered (KC)

Assessment Centered (AC)

Community Centered (CC)

Other (O)

Results. Susan Johnson is the principal of Cooper Elementary School in a Midwestern School District. Susan's personality is energetic, upbeat, and outgoing. It also has a down-to-earth, practical side that shows through when she is speaking with her noticeable southern accent, which adds charm to her direct, straightforward persona. This combination of enthusiasm and frankness makes people feel comfortable talking to her and makes it easy to understand where she stands in regard to education: she has an unwavering belief that all children can learn. The executive director of student achievement of the School District says that it is Susan's personality and 20-plus years of experience in the classroom that have made her successful at Cooper Elementary School.

Susan was an excellent fit. She has a strong academic base and a very affable personality. Her unwavering belief and the experience that she brings to the school, being a kindergarten teacher and her work in curriculum, showed her staff that she knows what she is talking about, and they respect her position and what she brings as a leader.

Susan's office is small—"the smallest in the district," she said with a smile during the interview. It is not a place where she spends a lot of time. As one special education teacher mentioned, "Susan is always on the go, in classrooms, lunchroom, playground, and because of her curriculum expertise, she is often pulled to the district office to sit on committees."

In the early 2000's, Susan Thomas took a job with the current school district after her husband got transferred from Georgia for work. She began as an early childhood special education teacher, and then she was moved to a kindergarten position, where she taught for 10 years in an elementary school in Beaumont. During that time, she worked closely with the principal and decided to go back and get her principal license. She was given the chance to be an interim principal for a half-year position. "The executive director for student achievement wanted to see how I would handle myself as an elementary principal," Susan stated. In 2011 there were not any principal positions open in the district, so she moved to the district office as a curriculum coordinator. A year later Susan began as the principal at Cooper Elementary School during the 2012-2013 school year.

Findings. Cooper Elementary School has a growing student population that recently reached 400 students—up from 306 students during Susan's first year as principal at Cooper during the 2012-2013 school year. This increase in enrollment has been due to changing economic and other demographics in the neighborhood. More properties are becoming rental properties, and two or sometimes three families are living in homes where only one family resided 15 years ago. In 2000, 49% of the students at Cooper were categorized as low income. During the 2017-2018 school year, 86% of the students were identified as low income.

The year before Susan took the job at Gibson (the 2011-2012 school year), 35 students were suspended from school that totaled 103 missed school days. During the 2017-2018 school year only 7 students were suspended totaling 21 missed school days, and the number of students suspended each year has ranged from 7 to 16 during the seven years Susan has been the principal. It is important to note the some of the students included in these numbers were suspended more than once during year.

Under Susan Cooper Elementary School has a tradition of high student achievement. In sum, Cooper Elementary has experienced a significant increase in student enrollment and a shift in student demographics over the past decade, becoming increasingly socioeconomically diverse. Over this same time period, student achievement has progressed beyond state-required levels and has increased significantly under Susan's leadership.

Staff. When the data for this study were collected, Cooper Elementary employed 25 teachers and 31 staff members. Twenty-two of the teachers at Cooper were general education classroom teachers, three were special education teachers, and four were full-time specials teachers (e.g., art, music, physical education, and library). The remaining staff members were support staff, including three education assistants, one social worker, one school psychologist, and one literacy specialist.

Cooper has a veteran staff; most, including several members of the support staff, have worked there for many years. Susan inherited a veteran staff that had a reputation of being good but strong-willed. As the executive director of student achievement mentioned, it was Susan's experience that won her the respect of her staff. Over 75% of Cooper Elementary staff worked for more than one principal, and they respect Susan's willingness to provide support for what they needed in the classroom. Susan's persona conveys a willingness to listen but respectfully lets teachers know what she stands for and where she is going. All staff interviewed felt supported by their principal. A third-grade teacher mentioned:

Our principal has instituted a high level of accountability for student achievement on the individual classroom teacher and has provided the tools necessary to reach this goal. This has been successful in many of our classrooms and grade levels. Teachers have risen to

this level of expectation and have shown success through student achievement.... Susan continues to work to encourage all classrooms and staff to meet this level.

Susan's Provided Support. Susan's unwavering belief that all students can learn shows through in the collected data. Five categories came to the forefront in terms of Susan's contributions to student success at Cooper Elementary School:

1. Scheduling, budgeting, and communication systems that support instructional demands
2. Creating a positive school community using incentives, a Positive Behavior Intervention System, and a strong parent-teacher-organization
3. Facilitation of a targeted, comprehensive after-school program
4. Support of routine and productive Professional Learning Community Meetings
5. Demanding and supporting data-driven instruction and comprehensive interventions

Scheduling, Budgeting, and Communication systems that support instructional demands. The academic schedule at Cooper consists of common 90-minute literacy blocks and 60-minute math blocks at each grade level. There is an additional 30-minute intervention block for literacy, and teachers need to provide 30 more minutes of literacy and math instruction throughout the day. Each grade level has common prep time. Many of the teachers had positive views on this initiative. A fourth-grade teacher mentioned, "Susan's intervention block was a great idea for Tier 2 and 3 kids. It allows them to get classroom instruction and extra resource help that they need." Susan mentioned that it was in her fourth year that she really mastered the scheduling aspect of leading a building:

My fourth year I took more control of the schedule after 3 years of I trying to be evenly collaborative. However, with scheduling, when I did it with too much collaboration, I

found people have an agenda that is selfish and not student centered. If found that the way to do it fairly and maintain your building vision is to do it yourself. I asked people to send me their scheduling ideas before I worked on it, however, I became the sole decision maker, which was my contractual prerogative.

To implement initiatives in Susan's building, there was a huge need for her to take over scheduling of the instructional day for teachers. Each year she took more and more control of the schedule to get it where she wanted. The quality implementation of literacy, math, and intervention programs without a schedule that supports these initiatives would be impossible. A fifth-grade teacher noted, "we were a bit troubled by her control of the schedule at first. Due to the fact we like to have more of a say as a staff. Once it was done and we saw we were supported to get done what we were asked to do we felt more at ease."

Susan has established a building budget that is targeted to building goals. On page one of Cooper Elementary School's School Improvement Plan, Strategy 1 states: "We will create sustainable financing and establish financial priorities in order to ensure quality instructional programs to support adequate, up-to-date facilities." Susan and Cooper Elementary make spending building money wisely a top priority. The most notable of these initiatives is using a R.E.A.C.H grant, which they received during Susan's third year. This is a R.E.A.C.H [Responsive Education for All Children] grant to pay for substitute teachers so that full-time classroom teachers can meet for two hours per month and look at student data. Susan stated, "the teachers really got into this and appreciated the time they were given to meet with each other and look at student data. In addition, I scheduled monthly two-hour grade-level meetings, to examine data and I used the R.E.A.C.H grant to pay for building subs." A third-grade teacher agreed, "the release times allow us to focus on each student as an individual and plan appropriate

instructional opportunities based on their strengths and needs, the fact that we could do this monthly led to some significant growth.”

In addition, Susan realized through PBIS, that most of the disciplinary concerns took place before school and at lunchtime. Teachers rotated supervision responsibilities daily, during these times. Susan, and the team realized that this caused a lot of inconsistency. Susan stated, “The majority of the discipline or incidents that lead to a student or students having a bad morning or afternoon took place before and afterschool.” She looked for funding through the schools 21st Century Learning Community Afterschool Program Grant, and \$30,000 building budget to increase their partnership with the local Boys and Girls Club. They sent over a team in the morning before school and during lunchtime to supervise and plan activities for students to participate in. Susan stated, “We already had a good relationship with them because they ran our afterschool program for the previous 3 years, they were familiar with are PBIS language and common expectations. In addition, they had relationships with many of our students.” The teachers appreciated this as well. A first-grade teacher said, “Knowing we have a 40 minute lunch every day without the supervision demand is a relief, it is the longest scheduled break that we have, not having it lost to supervision responsibilities has been great.” Susan stated, “This was a win/win, teachers needed a break during the day, we increased a community partnership, and suspension rates went down...behaved students in class with a happy qualified teacher, equals strong learning opportunities.”

Communication was another component that Susan streamlined at Cooper Elementary School. A third-grade teacher noted, “Prior to Susan we would get bombarded with emails from each other, central office, and leadership. Susan, streamlined that for us, it saves a ton of time

that we can focus our energy on more important things such as students and responding to parents.”

Susan did two things to make things better regarding communication. First, she created a weekly staff newsletter that staff members received every Thursday morning. Any school wide announcements had to be emailed to her by Tuesday to be in the newsletter that week. In addition, no school wide announcements could be sent out through email, that were not put in the email unless it was an emergency. In that case the announcement still came through her with a 911 in the subject line. The second thing was that she got the district office to send emails with updates for staff to her. Though there are still all district wide emails that were received by staff, these district updates were also put into the weekly newsletter. “This accomplished many things” Susan stated. She added

First staff knew the weekly newsletter was worth it’s weight in gold. They were accountable to read it each week, second they knew that if other emails did not have a 911 or all district tone to it they did not have to panic about reading it. This was a small thing but they really appreciated the time it saved and the mental relief they gained from having the pressure of answering emails.

In addition, announcements over the intercom were also streamlined. None were allowed during the day between 8:10 and 2:55 unless there was a lock down or evacuation emergency. Morning announcements took place at 8:03 sharp and end of the day announcement began at 2:55 pm. “I did this to protect instructional time.” Susan continued, “This was another small signal but it let the staff know what the most important aspect of the school day was.” Teachers appreciated this as well, a fifth grade teacher reported “nothing worse then being in the middle of

a great math lesson and you hear a voice over the loud speaker interrupting getting students off task etc., so many times I thought to myself when that happened, this could've waited.”

Creating a positive school community: PTO, PBIS, and Incentives. Cooper Elementary School has always had a good parent organization. As Susan stated,

Cooper's parent organization has always had the reputation of being one of the best in the district.... There are many traditions established at the school, and their support is strong. This strong parent group sets a positive tone for the entire building and makes school community a top priority.

In talking to Susan and her teachers, three things stand out that make Cooper Elementary School a positive school community: its parent-teacher organization, its incentive system, and its Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) system. This component of a positive school community is huge at Cooper Elementary School and is embedded in two of its seven school improvement strategies. These two strategies state that Cooper Elementary School will:

1. Develop and implement strategies that will engage families as partners with educators and community resources to improve the education and lives of children.
2. Partner with families to integrate, model and reinforce positive character traits.

Parent-teacher organization (PTO). Cooper Elementary School's parent-teacher organization is actively involved in the school. Parents are encouraged to participate in a number of ways. Parents, teachers, and students sign a parent/teacher compact each year regarding their responsibilities to educating the students of Cooper Elementary School. This compact sets a strong tone for the school year and gets parents, students, and teachers off on a positive note in regard to understanding what is expected behaviorally and academically at the school.

Parents are also encouraged to attend monthly parent workshops and meetings that are held at Cooper to provide learning opportunities that will allow them to assist their children at home with school work and build a stronger parent partnership for behavior and expectations. These meetings and workshops are a follow-up to the compact that parents, students, and teachers sign at the beginning of the school year. These workshops teach parents how to help their children with homework or check to see if they are doing it thoroughly. Also discussed are community resources, such as the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, and the public library, which offer tutoring sessions for students whose parents work and have little time to help them with their homework. Other sessions address topics such as building parent-child relationships, how to communicate with children, and how to deal with poor behavior.

In addition to these workshops, Cooper Elementary School hosts a PTO meeting once a month. My review of PTO agendas from Cooper revealed that the PTO business meetings are well attended. The organization has a president, vice president, treasurer, parliamentarian, and secretary. In addition, the principal and at least one teacher are in attendance at every meeting. At these meetings, monthly events are planned for parents to attend. These events include a carnival, a holiday shop, Donuts with Dad, a market day, and a parade, just to name a few. A PTO treasurer report is given during each meeting; Cooper's PTO averages an account balance of \$17,000 to \$25,000. Fund-raisers throughout the year keep money coming in as well. A veteran third-grade teacher stated, "The parent involvement at Cooper has been outstanding for years.... Many activities happen because of our parents and their willingness to get involved." Susan agreed:

I walked into a great situation with the PTO piece. Not all parent organizations are this strong, especially in schools that are predominately low income.... The parents do a great

job organizing events and raising money. I couldn't ask for a better situation considering our demographic.

Many parent activities at Cooper Elementary School take place on a regular basis. Most of these activities were going on when Susan took the job, so starting these would not be considered a support provided by this principal. However, as a special education teacher at Cooper mentioned, "Susan came in and respected parent involvement traditions in place. She did not change the culture of these positions she added a focus to them to incorporate them into Cooper's framework." Susan came to Cooper and provided continued support for the parent organization. This proved to her staff and to parents that she respected the positive traditions of the building and where they have been. Many parents have more than one student who participated in these activities, such as the parade and carnival, over many years. A fourth-grade teacher stated, "Susan has a lot of respect and a good rapport with the parents as a whole. She is supportive of them and they in return respect her."

PBIS and Incentives. Cooper elementary school has incentives for positive behavior. The school implemented a Positive Behavior Intervention Supports system, which is based on principles of applied behavior analysis and the prevention approach and values of positive behavior support. PBIS is a framework or approach for assisting school personnel in adopting and organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions into an integrated continuum that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students. It is a prevention-oriented way for school personnel to (a) organize evidence-based practices, (b) improve their implementation of those practices, and (c) maximize academic and social behavior outcomes for students. PBIS supports the success of all students.

At Cooper, this program starts with the contract signed at the beginning of the school year by parents, students, and teachers. After aligning the goals at the start of the school year, a behavior matrix is established that shows expectations for student behavior in every location of the school: classrooms, the hallway, bathrooms, the lunchroom, and the playground. These expectations are explained to all throughout the school year. A kindergarten teacher mentioned, “Susan really got on board with the school district’s PBIS initiative. We worked hard at it, and it is an important part of our school program.” Another part of PBIS is the notion of teachers modeling this behavior. A third-grade teacher stated, “Susan leads by example and makes sure that teachers in the building are setting good examples for their students...she sets an excellent example for us.” A fourth-grade teacher added, “She has gotten involved in PBIS. We really devoted a lot of time to this program, and there have been some good changes to the climate of Cooper Elementary most notably better before, after, lunchtime supervision because of Susan’s work in implementing this.”

In addition to the PBIS framework, Susan believes in rewarding students who meet these behavior expectations. “It is important to recognize positive behavior,” Susan stated, “This is more important in my opinion than recognizing negative behavior.... It sends a message to the students that doing the right thing gets more attention than doing the wrong thing.” Cooper Elementary School developed an incentive called the TWAC program, which stands for Together We Achieve at Cooper. Students periodically receive a green tag that says “Together We Achieve at Cooper” on it. They wear the tags to an assembly where they are recognized in front of everyone and rewarded. Another incentive at Cooper is Comet Bucks, which students receive for positive behavior and which they can use to buy items from the school store. Students

who demonstrate positive behavior in the lunchroom get to eat lunch at a gold table every Friday. The classrooms that keep their bathroom the cleanest receive a golden plunger.

A kindergarten teacher at Gibson Elementary School said it best: “we have all kinds of incentive programs here that all of the kids respond well to; Susan does an excellent job orchestrating these incentives.” As mentioned, Cooper had a strong PTO and many school wide programs before Susan arrived. These programs are not results of Susan’s support, but she maintained the programs that were positive and systematically implemented them into a comprehensive school wide process. This is notable in the most recent School Improvement Plan, which was written during Susan’s tenure and lists these programs. Susan did, however, begin a few of the initiatives, such as PBIS. This program was started district wide, and Susan did a great job, according to her staff and decreased discipline referrals and suspensions, of putting this program in place at Cooper. The best measure for this study in regard to a positive school community is suspension data. As mentioned, the year before Gene began as principal, Cooper had 37 out-of-school suspensions. In the seven years Susan has been at Cooper, the school has had between five suspensions in the lowest year to 16 suspensions in the highest year. According to Susan, “a comprehensive school wide PBIS program to include incentives and building trust with parents attributed to this decline in discipline.”

Targeted after-school program. During Susan’s second year as the principal at Cooper Elementary, a district mandate was given to every principal to establish an afterschool program in their buildings. “This caused many principals a little anxiety,” Susan mentioned. “No extra money was given to fund this initiative, we had to use our Title 1 money.” At Cooper, Susan chose to reallocate her Title I money and reach out to the local Boys and Girls Club. This organization is on the same side of town as Cooper Elementary School and could provide on-

sight structured after-school programming that consisted of a snack, a homework club, and a recreational activity.

The director of the program stated, “Susan definitely had a vision of what she wanted us to do, so it made it easy for us to all be on the same page.” When the program first started, however, there were a lot of negatives. A fourth-grade teacher stated, “The Boys and Girls Club program didn’t have much structure at first, kids weren’t completing assignments, and the discipline was extremely poor; kids were running through the building.” However, each year the program improved because of Susan’s hands on leadership. Susan stated:

I told the Boys and Girls Club director that we had to come up with a better plan after the first year, otherwise I would have to go with another program...We talked about what the students needed academically, socially, and recreationally in addition to the school day.

The Boys and Girls Club Director and Susan decided to target 50 students who could benefit most from the program based on academic needs, home situations, and behavior in school. Currently, the program has six components and a well-laid out schedule. The program runs Monday through Friday from 3:00 to 5:15 p.m. It is structured as follows:

3:00-3:20	Snack and community-building activity
3:20-4:00	Academic activity and Power Hour homework time
4:00-4:45	Social Emotional Learning Programming (2 nd Step)
4:45-5:05	Structured recreation time
5:05-5:15	Dismissal

During the community-building activity, students and staff sit in a circle and share thoughts and ideas about various community topics. At each daily session, participants state their

name, age, and a response to the topic for the day—for example, “if I were president of the United States, the first bill I would sign into law would be...” The director of the program stated:

This was done in order for members to be comfortable sharing among peers as well as learning to accept and understand differences, being respectful as others speak as well as other social competencies members need at this juncture in their lives. Sharing, participation, and expression are encouraged at this time.

The academic activity had a physical component, as members moved around, and some recreational activities are incorporated. The director of the program said that “this part of the program is based on the research that says youth should be physically active for at least 60 minutes daily.” A routine of daily mental and physical warm-ups were also created. Intended outcomes in these activities and lessons are discussed so students can relate the skills learned to things they can do every day.

The Power Hour time is designated to assist students with their homework, tutoring, and study needs. The directors commented, “all members will be required to do homework, study, read and continue to use the specific techniques for learning math and reading.”

During the social emotional learning programming, students learn more skills that assist them in making positive and healthy choices. Other programs and activities teach students specific skills and contain lessons with an emphasis on self-expression and sharing. One of these programs is the Second Step Program, in which students prepare skits and performances dealing with program lessons and topics. Several curricula throughout the school year are used to deepen the impact on participants.

During recreational time, students are active in a physical activity, such as stretches and simple exercises. All participants are encouraged to adopt a healthy lifestyle through the lessons that are taught.

A routine is set to make dismissal time easy and safe for students in the after-school program and their parents. All students are picked up in the same location at the same time every day. Programming ends at 5:05, and dismissal is promptly at 5:15 p.m. The director stated, “this was an issue during the first year, so we made it a point to have a structured time slot for every activity, including dismissal, so parents and students knew that it was important to be on time.”

Susan’s leadership with the after-school program at Cooper Elementary, working with the Boys and Girls Club, is why the program was a success. As Susan mentioned, “Many teachers were irritated by the program the first year; it was unstructured, and they were unimpressed with the impact it had on students’ academics and behavior.” As Susan took a more active approach to working with the Boys and Girls Club director and providing structure, the program became more successful. This is apparent in teachers’ positive comments about the program and other principals wanting to model the structure. The club director stated, “We have two other elementary buildings over the last five year that reached out to us to set up programming in their buildings.... They have specifically referenced Susan’s program as a framework.” Another teacher mentioned,

This past year of the program was well done. Kids were completing their homework, and the programs were great for students with behavior issues. It was also great that students who needed afterschool programming structure the most were targeted.

Professional learning communities. While PBIS drives Cooper's school culture, professional learning community procedures drive the way teachers interact regarding student achievement. These communities consist of:

1. Supportive leadership and structural conditions
2. Collective challenging, questioning, and reflecting on team-designed lessons
3. Instructional practices/experiences and team decisions on essential learning outcomes and intervention/enrichment activities based on results of common formative student assessments.

Much like the after-school program, PLCs are a district initiative; however, it took leadership from principals in the district to make them work. As the former executive director of student achievement stated:

We gave a directive and provided training; however, when we went out to the buildings to see who was doing what, only a few principals were able to put it into practice and move their buildings towards effective collaboration through PLCs. It requires the ability to schedule, organize data in an informative useful way, and lead discussions regarding the data. Susan was ahead of the game in doing this.

A fourth-grade teacher agreed, "One way Susan has helped me become a more effective teacher is by organizing PLC meetings to track student progress using data walls/boards and forms that are kept in a binder." In trying to make Cooper a professional learning community, Susan stated:

We have done professional learning communities for a few years now, and they do give us a systemic way to look at students' data...It is very beneficial to get everyone on the

same page looking and talking data, sharing strategies and ideas, and seeing where we need to target money for our professional development opportunities.

The process started with setting up common language. “We needed to decide what data was going to be looked at in order to drive the discussion at our meetings,” Susan stated. A form was developed collaboratively to keep track of each student at Cooper Elementary School; it contains all of the student’s formative and summative assessments, report card data, and special needs and services (English language learner, special education, speech and language, and so on). In addition, every meeting has a documented form and objective. Each grade level has a facilitator, and for each subject a goal for the year is set (for example, “80% of our students will be proficient or above in math this school year”). After the goal is set, pieces of evidence are identified that will be examined to determine whether the goals have been attained. A third-grade teacher stated, “we use MAP testing, running records, and other common assessments put on our data wall in order to see progress students are making.” From there, students may be identified as “on watch” based upon their performance on given assessments. Students on watch are discussed in each grade level, and the question of how student needs are being addressed in the universal curriculum is discussed. Students are identified who need extra help outside of the universal instruction. These students are given a selected option or an intervention outside of the universal instruction they receive. The interventions for literacy consist of small group instruction with a literacy specialist or reading intervention teacher; for math, an intervention program is administered via a computer purchased by the district.

Professional learning communities have been around for close to 2 decades, so the PLC itself is not a support that the principal at Cooper has provided that has led to an increase in student achievement. However, the principal coming up with a process for establishing meeting

times and organizing the common language necessary to have effective professional learning communities is the relevant practice. Using the PLC model to track student progress, developing and using common forms so everyone is on the same page, and being able to manage and update an assessment wall are important practices that Susan implemented as well. Susan according to staff made PLCs at Cooper Elementary School work effectively.

Data-driven instruction and comprehensive interventions. A first-grade teacher, when asked what the principal has done to raise student achievement at Cooper, stated, “scheduling time for student interventions and having a system to identify what students need those interventions the most and getting them into those interventions was a key for Susan’s success in raising student achievement.” Susan agreed:

We started out with common language and an assessment wall that was developed for the purposes of our professional learning community meetings. This was a huge wall in our staff lounge that had every student listed. It showed where they were at for reading and how far they advanced after every assessment.

Once this process of monitoring and identifying students was put in place, the question remained as to what was needed to move students forward. “This was the key to it all,” Susan stated; “being able to identify who needs extra help means nothing if you aren’t able to give it systematically.” Of the six teachers interviewed in this building, five mentioned that this was one of the top five actions Susan implemented that led to the increase of student achievement. “It’s one thing to know it’s important in theory, but being able to have a schedule that supports it, monitor it, and make available the necessary personnel to pull it off was something big that Susan brought,” a third-grade teacher mentioned. A first-grade teacher agreed:

We always had ways to get students help, but Susan has put together a schedule and after-school programming that has been able to get more students the help they need, it's always been a problem schedule-wise to do this with so many of our students needing extra help and being limited personnel-wise. Susan did a great job with this.

Over the last four years, Susan scheduled an intervention block at each grade level outside of the normal literacy and math blocks. During these times, students meet with the literacy specialist, an English as a second language (ESL) support teacher, or another interventionist in order to meet IEP minutes and provide Tier 2 interventions to students below grade level. A fourth-grade teacher elaborated:

This gave each teacher the opportunity to see every student in guided reading and math groups; we saw the low students every day during the math and reading block, and then they would go get a double dose of small group instruction with an interventionist. Students with IEPs would have their IEP minutes met during this time; students who needed ESL support got it. While they were doing that, we were able to see some of the higher-level kids.

Providing Tier 2 interventions during after-school programming has also made a difference. Susan reserves 50 spots in the after-school program for students to do Tier 2 interventions on the computer or in a small reading group. This provides additional programming for students needing extra assistance in math in reading. The director of the after-school program stated:

Our first two years at Cooper we just conducted a homework club; the last four years Susan wanted us to target the academic piece a little more so we developed a plan to find

out which students needed extra help and we got it for them. In addition, a few Cooper teachers agreed to stay afterschool for an hour and do an extra reading group.

Susan added:

I just wanted to make sure all of our resources were being targeted to the students who needed them most. ESL, SPED, and after-school programming all needed to be working cooperatively towards raising student achievement. Once we did that, our results continued to increase, and I believe a great school was able to become greater.

Data-driven instruction and these interventions that led to the increase in student achievement came about by one question that Susan would pose after every PLC meeting. She stated, “I would ask them how will your observations, the data that you looked at, change or drive your instruction?” She added:

This question was critical to ask over and over to my staff, and I expected a response. So many times we bombard people with trainings and data, but we never find out if it is useful for them. If they could answer this question effectively, I knew good information was discussed. If they couldn’t answer effectively, I knew I needed to facilitate these meetings differently. They probably thought this question was for them, but their answers were just as important for me also.

What supports did Susan provide to improve school and classroom conditions?

This case study of Susan Thomas, principal of Cooper Elementary School, provides an overview of Susan’s professional background and the school context at the time of my study. The study looked to answer the following research question: how can school leaders improve classroom and school conditions to increase student outcomes? Susan’s supports improved school and classroom conditions, including effective scheduling, budgeting, and communication

systems that support instruction; creating a positive school community with incentives through PBIS and partnering with the PTO; establishing and maintaining a targeted, comprehensive after-school program; creating meaningful professional learning communities; and making sure staff are using data-driven instruction methods and a comprehensive intervention system.

Table 2

Perspectives on Learning Environment and Principal-Provided Support

PLE Components	Susan's Support
Knowledge-Centered	Led data-driven instruction efforts
Learner-Centered	Led data-driven instruction efforts Established a targeted after-school program
Assessment-Centered	Established professional learning communities Implemented a quality reading and math intervention system
Community-Centered	Provided effective scheduling Provided effective use of the budget Developed effective communication systems Implemented a quality positive behavior support system Developed an effective incentive program <u>Maintained an effective parent involvement</u>

Though many schools that have not produced positive academic gains have some version of these programs, this case study identified that Susan's comprehensive understanding of all managerial tools at her disposal (budget, communication, PBIS, etc.) allowed her to efficiently

implement these programs in a way that improved and supported school and classroom conditions, designating teacher-student interactions as the school's most important element.

Susan's data-driven instruction efforts at Cooper Elementary played the most significant part in increasing student outcomes. Implementing a schedule that allowed for protected instructional time, routine observation of student data, and time to reflect on that data in order to develop the best instructional strategies was key. Objectives for meetings were also developed for weekly and monthly data meetings. The case study revealed that Susan's program included scheduling time for interventions and data observation as a way of fostering school and classroom conditions conducive to maximizing student learning by building as much as possible upon students' prior knowledge in literacy and math.

Recommendations. Though the case study found no mention of the school leader building teacher capacity, the staff had a reputation as highly capable but strong willed. The reported supports were credited by them in making academic gains. However, these gains may not have been made if the same measures were taken by a less capable teacher body. However, the framework is not limited in this area, as if building teacher capacity was in fact a provided support, the framework could be used to identify it as such.

Though the PLE research framework allowed the researcher to investigate the impact a school leader can have on school and classroom conditions, the study's findings are limited because it was a single case study. This study reports what worked in one elementary school. Though the framework produced findings and proved to be a useful tool, more case studies of schools with different demographics that have produced positive results will be needed to make findings more widespread. With more ranging case studies, this framework potentially can

produce more studies on school leadership supports necessary to scale positive student results. These findings could influence instruction in principal training programs.

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