

NOT UNHAPPY BUT UNSETTLED:

How New Leadership Engages With Existing Community in K-12-Unit Schools

by

Leslie Trail

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements of the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Middle Tennessee State University

August 2024

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Kevin Krahenbuhl, Chair

Dr. Lando Carter

Dr. Nancy Caukin

Dr. Angela Hooser

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began my journey towards the EdD degree, it was the spring of 2021 and schools were just beginning to return to some level of normalcy after the time of quarantine, closure, and Zoom school. Perhaps, it was the realization that the world had just finished one of the largest disruptions of my time that pushed me over the edge to move forward to an EdD, but regardless, it was that spring when I first began to inquire about this program. The first conversation that I had was with my soul-sister, Dr. Nancy Caukin. I asked her if it would be worth it. I asked her if she thought I could do it. I asked her if I had lost my mind. She unequivocally encouraged me to proceed, so after this conversation some reality hit, and I realized it was time to talk to my family because just maybe this was in my future.

When I mentioned the idea to Jeremy, my husband, he encouraged me forward without any hesitation. We talked about time constraints and class meetings and family requirements. Still, he didn't hesitate and came beside me to push me forward. It was his support that led me to take my next steps into this degree. For that, I have no words of gratitude and know that this degree would not have been possible without that support.

I have been blessed to have family who stand by my side with every crazy idea that I have and encourage me forward. From a young age, my mom and dad showed me the value of education. I grew up loving books because my grandfather loved books and my mother was a librarian. This love of books has trickled into my work as an educator, and it is probably the reason that I have not met a book that I didn't need to read. There are no words of thanks to my family for their love, their encouragement, and their support

as I have moved through this program. Even before this, for supporting me in every degree and educational pursuit that I have chased. I know that I am who I am because of how I was raised by my parents and grandparents. When I married, I was blessed again to have a mother and father in-law who also encouraged and supported me through each step of my journey.

To my children, for the games and the events that I missed, thank you for your understanding. I hope that when you look at this document you see not my dream but a glimpse into any dream that you may have for your future self. You are never too old to pursue it and if you have dreamed it, it will always be worth it. So much of who I am is because I have you. Thank you for being part of this work with me.

To Dr. Nancy Caukin, thank you. Thank you for the hours that you have listened and called to check in on me through the coursework and the dissertation. Thank you for being my friend and advisor and thank you for your support.

To my friends who have listened to iterations of this dissertation as it has unfolded and who have never complained that I was once again talking about “this book that I have read,” thank you for standing by my side each step of the way. I have called on you to help me clarify my interview questions and to listen to me vent. You were there each step of the way, and I appreciate your support.

Finally, to my committee chair, Dr. Kevin Krahenbuhl, thank you for your support, encouragement, and constant willingness to listen and send feedback. Each professor who has been part of this dissertation on my committee (Dr. Lando Carter, Dr.

Angela Hooser) and who has taught my classes has been a gift and I am grateful for your time and commitment to my education.

ABSTRACT

K-12-unit school structures are unique in grade band structure and in community involvement. Often found in rural settings, K-12-unit schools are steeped in tradition and community. They are typically smaller schools with under 1500 students enrolled. K-unit-schools exhibit characteristics of an open system wherein they are impacted by both those individuals directly involved in the school such as teachers, students and administrators and those community members and parents who surround the school. As an open system, this dissertation seeks to understand how one K-12-unit school adjusted through the change of administration when an administrator from an outside, large metropolitan area moved into the area as Principal. This qualitative analysis looks at one K-12-unit school that has recently undergone administration change. As part of the study, the new administrator, assistant principal, six teachers and staff, and a community focus group were interviewed and social media, school improvement plans, and state teacher surveys were analyzed to answer the following research questions: Question 1 - How does a new administrator assimilate within the existing school culture initially accepted by teachers and community members in a K-12-unit school?; Question 2 - How does the culture and/or community also have to adjust during the assimilation of a new leader?

This dissertation examines how the administrator assimilated in the school and community and how the school and community adjusted for the new administrator. This dissertation seeks to understand elements of school culture, leadership, and change and how these things work together in the K-12-unit school environment.

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LIST OF TERMS/ABBREVIATIONS

Culture – the norms, expectations, and shaping of the individuals who work together in a place

K-12 Unit School – School that houses on one campus all grades kindergarten through 12th grade.

Grade bands – grades that are often grouped together, example: k-5 are elementary grade bands, 6-8 are middle school grade bands, 9-12 are high school grade bands.

Open Systems – organizational systems that are impacted by the individuals who make up the organization and are subject to change.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Whether one is looking at the culture of a business, a religious facility, or a school, culture is part of any organization. The question becomes what elements produce that culture: is it leadership or the surrounding environment that creates culture? Furthermore, when delving into schools and school culture, this topic becomes even more narrowed. To what end does leadership influence the culture of a school? Is culture indicative of the school's principal or are there greater factors impacting culture? Gruenart and Whittaker (2015) aptly ask if culture is “something we can predict and control, or does it control us?” (location 89). While Coyle (2018) points out that even in the beginning, members of an organization are “figuring out where they fit into the larger picture: who is in charge?” (p. xvi). More narrowly is the focus of the K-12-unit school, a school wherein students from kindergarten through 12th grade are all in one building, and the culture that is created in that environment. K-12-unit schools are often close-knit community schools wherein change may seem disruptive though it is also inevitable. Much has been written about the definition of culture, how it is created, and the impact of leadership on school culture. For this study, culture was defined through the school's mission and vision and the working dynamics of the leadership, faculty, and community surrounding it. Furthermore, in this study, culture was defined as the norms, expectations, and shaping of the individuals who work together in a place (Muhammad and Hollie, 2012; Guenert and Whitaker, 2015). Additional research shows information on the impact of leadership, community, and tradition on rural/small schools.

In the United States, K-12-unit schools currently comprise 1900 schools in this framework. Schools classified as K-12-unit schools service students from all grade bands and are sometimes the only school in their district which make them unique to study (Bickel et al, 2001). With that in mind, the culture of the K-12-unit school is unlikely to shift much unless some change takes place around the school. K-12-unit schools are often characterized by their rural setting, community connection, small size, strong parent relations, and student-teacher and student-student relationships across grade bands (Carlson, 2000; Howley et al, 2000; Howley and Harmon 1996; Funnemark-Clapper, 2018). In unfolding and understanding the K-12-unit school and its culture, it may become evident that the culture remained unchanged until an outside force initiated change into that culture. For this research, that outside force was the introduction of a new leader. Because the leader came from outside the network of the school, that leader was part of a change that impacted the school. Therefore, this study focused on a school where change recently occurred to better understand how that change in the K-12-unit school environment affected the school's overall culture. Understanding the organizational structure of the K-12-unit school is key to understanding how culture and change are intertwined in this school structure.

Context

For the purposes of this research, Henderson Unit School, a K-12-unit school in the Southern United States served as the research site. This school was one of several K-12-unit schools in the area, but it had recently undergone two administration changes: a new principal came to the school from a large neighboring district where he was the administrator of an urban school. The new assistant principal was a former teacher and former assistant principal at this K-12-unit school and part of the Henderson community who was returning to the school. This

location was a good setting for this study because it brought both a leader from outside the district to the school and a new leader from within the school's community. The school fits the description of the K-12-unit school provided by Howley and Harmon (1996) wherein a K-12-unit school is small and situated as a central part of the community that surrounds it. Because the school matched this description of a K-12-unit school, it provided a place to see how the leaders assimilated into the school culture with the focus on the leader who came from a different district. With under 500 students, this small K-12-unit school had seen a small increase of its enrollment in the last two years. The majority (88%) of the students at this K-12-unit school were white, 6% of the students were black, and 6% of the students were Hispanic. The school had a moderate rate of economically disadvantaged students with 19% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. 15% of the students who attend the school were identified as eligible for special education services.

Statement of the Problem

Because K-12-unit schools are often close-knit community schools wherein change may seem disruptive though is also inevitable, when leadership enters the K-12-unit school from outside of the community, it may be more difficult for that leadership to assimilate into the school and for the school to adjust to the change. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how a new administrator assimilates within the school structure and how the school community and culture assimilate to the new administrator.

Purpose of Study

Understanding how a new leader assimilates into the K-12-unit school with its close relationship to leadership and community gives a background on the operations of this subset of

American education. Further, when looking at how new leadership assimilates into an existing culture, a better understanding of the K-12-unit school and how it connects to the community around it may emerge.

Significance of Study

When something or someone comes into the school that is outside of the school's normal structure, this change trickles into the culture of the school. Change naturally impacts culture (Gruenart and Whittaker, 2015), so in the K-12-unit school where community ties are strong and leadership has its own goals, the question becomes how this change is managed. Figure 1 illustrates how change to the K-12-unit school could affect the leadership, the community (including the school community of teachers and students as well as the surrounding community), and the culture of the school:

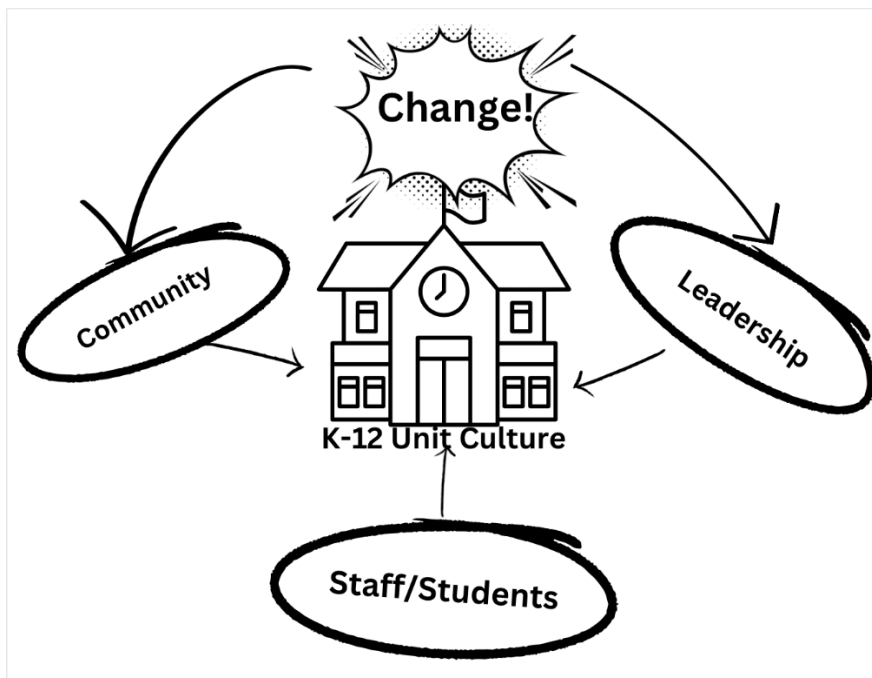


Figure 1: Impact of Change on the K-12-Unit School

When change, such as administration change, comes to a school that is one unit, the K-12-unit school may be more greatly impacted by the change. The change may cause change to occur in the culture, the community, the leadership, and other aspects of the K-12-unit school. One implication of this study was that readers will acquire a better understanding of how new leaders assimilated into this existing culture and the challenges they encountered through this assimilation.

Other potential implications of this study were that the study offered an understanding of how the open system influenced the community around a K-12-unit school and impacted how leadership influences the school. It showed how leadership impacted the community around the school. Ultimately, the study offered a better understanding of the connectivity between a K-12-unit school and its surrounding community, and it may lead to further research on how schools influence communities and how communities influence schools. The study may lead to further research to examine how culture of a school is influenced by forces outside of the administration, teachers, and students.

Research Questions

Because school culture is key to understanding the nature of the school and because change directly affects a culture, the K-12-unit school is unique due to its multi-grade band structure to understanding the role of leadership and community in change strategies for a school. The following research questions served as the driving features for this study:

1. How does a new administrator assimilate within the existing school culture initially accepted by teachers and community members in a K-12-unit school?

2. How does the culture and/or community also have to adjust during the assimilation of a new leader?

Summary

K-12-unit schools are unique in scope due to the number of grade bands that they service, the nature of the surrounding community to the school, and the environment in which they are situated. When the change in administration came to the school, there was an impact on the school and its surrounding community. Therefore, understanding how a new administrator assimilated or how the culture/community around the K-12-unit school adjusted to the administration helped to better understand the structure of the community and culture surrounding the school.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature on the K-12-unit school culture begins with examining and defining the school itself. Through surveying literature about the K-12-unit school, it was found that research on the K-12-unit school was more prevalent in the late 1990s and early 2000s though some resurgence in research around K-12-unit schools emerged around 2015. Research on the K-12-unit school was difficult to separate from the rural school because so many of these schools are defined as rural. Additionally, in looking at why some of these K-12-unit schools persist, it was necessary to look at the issue of consolidation in districts. Following this discussion, an overview of culture in schools is tied to this dissertation to help understand what drives culture. Then, a review of literature that examines culture in the rural school versus culture in the K-12-unit school is included. Of note, these are often the same norms because the two are difficult to separate. Finally, because this research question asks about leadership and community, literature was examined to determine how leadership shapes culture and then also how outside forces, such as community, shape culture.

While the K-12-unit school does not exist in abundance, it is interesting because of its unique situation in the formation of elementary through secondary education. Hopefully, through this literature review, a greater understanding of the design and impact of the K-12-unit school is presented.

K-12-unit School

The K-12-unit school can be found by a variety of different names. Howley and Harmon (1997) note that this school is also known as a “union” or “unit school serving all children in its attendance area” (p. 6). However, they have also been called “single-unit schools” (Bickel et al,

2001, p. 15), “one setting” schools (Starks et al, 2018, p. 24), “combination schools” (Franklin and Glascock, 1996, p. 7) and “K-12 graded schools” (Brumley, 2007, p. iii; Franklin and Glascock, 1996, p. 6). Regardless of name, these are all schools defined by having all grades K-12 or PK-12 in one building. For this dissertation, they will be referred to as K-12-unit schools.

Howley and Harmon (1997) explain that K-12-unit schools are not seen often across the country, which is what makes them an interesting unit to study (p. 8). At the time of their research, Howley and Harmon (1997) found that there were approximately 1000 K-12-unit schools in America. Based on a report run from the National Center for Education Statistics through their *Common Core of Data*, this number was updated in 2022. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), in 2022, there were 2609 schools that were PK-10th or 12th grade. Of those, 708 were charter or virtual schools leaving only 1900 schools that fall in the traditional public unit school definition. When researching these schools in the NCES database, under level, they are listed as “other.”

The traditional unit school is a one-building school that starts with Kindergarten or Pre-Kindergarten and progresses all the way through high school (Howley and Harmon, 1997; Starks et al, 2018). Bickel et al (2001) note that in a K-12-unit school, all the teachers and school administrators are also part of this same one building locale (p. 19). In 1997, Howley and Harmon looked at 1051 such schools that were, at the time, located in 706 districts. This means that in the thirty years since that study, there has been an increase in K-12-unit schools throughout the country as there are now 1900 schools that exist in the K-12-unit school framework according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Still, when paired against other grade span configurations, there are not as many K-12-unit schools as there are other grade span configurations (Coladarci et al, 2002, p. 4). Additionally, Bickel et al (2001) noted that in

one study, each of the “single unit schools” were different because of the number of grades that they serve and because they are often the only school in their district (p. 15). While unit schools are not always the only school in the district, that is an added uniqueness to some unit schools (Coladarci et al, 2002).

Evolution of the K-12 School. When education began in the United States, the one-room schoolhouse was the norm. The one-room schoolhouse needs to be considered in understanding the K-12-unit school because it helps frame education of many grade bands in one place. In the mid-1700s there were “212,000 one-room schools” where, at that time, only $\frac{1}{2}$ of the school-aged children were enrolled and wherein the school district was worked by only one person (Canales et al, 2008, p. 1). In his book on the history of education in the United States, Gyure (2018), traced schools from their conception in the United States through their more modern use and illustrated the influence of the one-room schoolhouse on modern schools.

To understand how schools have changed and how even the K-12-unit school has evolved, a brief history of these schools is important to review. First, schools began as one-room schoolhouses often in the teacher’s house. They later became “monitorial Schools” in the 19th century where one teacher further explained that schoolrooms expanded in the 19th century which led to the “monitorial school” with influence by schools in Great Britain. These schools allowed only one teacher to supervise up to “1000 students in a single vast, undivided room” (Gyure, 2018, p. 6). Finally, Gyure (2018) notes that in 1847, students began to be separated into grades which paved the way for the K-12-Unit school (p. 10). While all students might be housed in the same building, students were separated into grade bands.

During the 1800s, it became more common for schools to be separated by grades K-8 and then 9-12 (Capella et al, 2017). However, as the country got closer to 1900, there was a

movement by the National Education Association (NEA) to move schools to a more central location for education with cities leading the way towards the education mold that would come (Chalker, 1999). In the early 1900s, the schools often became a hub for the social aspects of society and were used by the community for community resources (Benson et al, 2009). History helped shape the face of schools, and especially high schools, as the Great Depression then World War II then the Civil Rights Movement all brought changes to high school structure (Thattai, 2017). These changes shaped high school into its current well-known form of grades 9-12 with a focus on post-secondary education.

Consolidation of School Districts. For some rural schools, the move to centralization did not occur until as late as the 1950s (Nelson, 1983). This consolidation of schools and school districts continues with a large shift going from 130,000 school districts in the United States in the 1930s to just over 15,000 school districts in the late 1990s (Ornstein, 1992; Thattai, 2017). As school districts were consolidated, more and more schools split into multiple buildings. It was then that the K-12-unit school (or the education of all grade bands in one place) became less prevalent. When the consolidation of schools occurs, small K-12-unit schools have often merged into larger comprehensive schools (Carlson, 2000). Howley et al (2011) explains that consolidation is defined in one of two ways: “(a) combining districts and (b) closing schools and sending students from the closed schools to other schools (or building a new and larger school)” (p. 5). While even the original one-room schoolhouse still exists (with approximately 400 of these found in the country in 2020), they have almost completely disappeared (Busteed, 2020). The one-room schoolhouse is different from the K-12-unit school in that the unit school still houses all grades using separated classrooms whereas the one-room schoolhouse educates multiple grade levels in one place. Furthermore, as schools and districts consolidate, even fewer

K-12-unit schools exist (National Center for Education Statistics). Howley (1996) explains that K-12-unit schools are often a “target” for consolidation.

Those K-12-unit schools that do remain are in rural communities which may be single K-12-unit school or multi-school K-12-unit school districts (Howley, 1996). In other words, the K-12-unit school may be the only school in the district, or it may be one of the many schools in the district. Howley (1996) explains that often, in single school districts, the more remote a school is, the more likely the necessity for or acceptance of it remaining a K-12-unit school persists. On the other hand, in multi-school K-12-unit school districts, the school often remains because of the community's desire to keep the school (Howley, 1996). This indicates that the area’s response and engagement with the school may be different depending on whether the school is a single K-12-unit school out of need due to remoteness or one that is in a multi-school district because the community desires it to stay.

Characteristics of the K-12 School. The K-12-unit schools have some universal characteristics that help separate them from larger comprehensive schools. Howley & Harmon (1996) note that “they are generally small; they have perhaps better opportunities (whether realized or not) to be closer to, and reflect the values of, their communities than most schools; they may more easily integrate children and youth across all ages, the ‘multi-age’ virtue” (p. 5). Students in a K-12 school do not have to make transitions from building to building or “from one school environment to another” such as is the case in grade band schools because students do not change building locations between elementary, middle, or high school (Howley and Harmon, 1997; Starks et al, 2018). Furthermore, it is noted that students often find more success in schools with fewer transitions (Coldarci et al, 2002; Dove, 2007; Coldarci and Hancock, 2002;

Starks et al, 2018). This has led to a resurgence in arguments that schools should return to the K-8 grade span to limit these transitions.

K-12-unit schools are typically categorized as small schools (Bickel et al, 2000). In research on school size, Bickel et al (2000) found that while K-12-unit schools are small, at least in Texas, they do not require additional funding resources for their operations when compared to larger schools. This means that for the schools studied in Texas, the cost of having one K-12-unit school is no worse than having broken up grade band schools, and at times may be cost-effective. However, in his report of “Case Studies of Rural Schools Implementing Comprehensive School Models,” Carlson (2000), found that two of the K-12-unit schools in these case studies struggled financially to meet the needs of the school due to their rural nature. One of these schools was in Texas. While it may not cause an increase in cost to run the K-12-unit school, finances can still be a problem for the K-12-unit school. Of note, Howley and Harmon (1996) pointed out that there are some larger K-12-units that have multiple buildings in some urban areas, though these are known as “campuses” rather than schools, so they have not typically been discussed in the literature and Howley and Harmon explain that this makes them outside the scope of the typical K-12-unit school.

The K-12-unit school seems to primarily exist in rural areas or in areas where the community has an attachment to the school unit. One such school with community attachment is seen in Thrasher School wherein the community has fought to ensure that the school is not consolidated (Howley et al, 2000, p. 110). Another common characteristic of the K-12-unit school is that the economy surrounding the K-12-unit school is often agricultural. Howley and Harmon (1996) surveyed 159 schools from 27 states and found that 59% of those districts had an agricultural economy while the other respondents noted a mixed (19%) or recreation/tourism

(9.5%) economy (p. 10). In addition to the typical K-12-unit school, there are now virtual schools and charter schools that have adopted the K-12-unit school structure (NCES, 2023).

Because the K-12-unit school is often small, Carlson (2000) notes that at one Texas K-12-unit school, Crossover, it is documented that the school maintains good community relations and the connection between the school and community is positive in nature (p. 35). This is further supported when Carlson (2000) explains that the size of the school partially contributes to the positive relationship with the school. In the small school setting, community members, teachers, and students made more meaningful connections. The same feeling is evident in a second K-12-unit school, Liberty, from Carlson's 2000 study that has a "close connections, frequent and informal interactions between school and community members, significant impact by a few persons resulting in getting others involved, a school board viewed very positively" (p. 45). Yet another case study focusing on K-12-unit schools quoted parents as sharing that the school's relationship to the community is one reason the school was their school of choice (Funnemark-Clapper, 2018, p. 124). Some individuals went as far as to say that the school is the "heart of the community" (Funnemark-Clapper, 2018, p. 84 and p. 125). While these characteristics may not be true of every K-12-unit school, they do provide examples of the type of school environment that may exist in this school design.

Another positive aspect that is discussed in relation to the K-12-unit school is the connection between parents and the school. The second school in Carlson's (2000) report, Liberty, documented the help that parents bring to the school by serving as tutors in the building, working as classroom aides, and being on school committees as one way that parents have positive community involvement (p. 37). Carlson (2000) also shared that while it may be difficult for parents in Crossover to volunteer at the school due to work obligations and other

responsibilities, they still feel comfortable contacting teachers and have no problems in getting responses from teachers. Similarly, Funnemark-Clapper (2018) notes that the range in parent involvement at Baxter (one K-12-unit school) varies. Some parents participate in board meetings regularly (p. 70), others participate in the Parent-Teacher Organization (p. 72), and others are involved with activities outside of the school (p. 74).

Relationships across the grade bands are a unique aspect of the K-12-unit school. In his dissertation, Funnemark-Clapper (2017) interviewed families who explained that the relationship between the older students and the younger students in the K-12-unit school was important for the student's connection to the school. They also noted that being able to send siblings to the same school across different grade bands is a positive piece of the K-12-unit school. School leaders at Baxter shared that the ability for students to have “powerful relationships” across grade bands has been another positive aspect of a K-12-unit School (p. 91). These relationships allow students to connect with other students across grade bands. In Funnemark-Clapper's (2017) study, the setting of the K-12-unit school was significant in the study's outcomes because “every person discussed the significance, and they discussed how the setting was an attractive feature” to the school (p. 91). This suggests that the unique nature of all grades in one building can be a positive feature to the K-12-unit school.

Finally, a repeated theme of the K-12-unit school in Funnemark-Clapper's study (2017) is the individualized attention that students are given in these case studies. Funnemark-Clapper (2017) explains that Baxter accommodates the needs of all students whether it be through connections with the local university or offering “individualized” attention to students, the small size of the school and the time that students spend at the school help ensure this attention (p. 102-103).

School Grade Bands. When looking at large grade band schools, there are variations in the grade bands that exist. Schools may be grouped in K-5, 6-8, 9-12; K-6, 7-8, 9-12; K-8, 9-12; or K-12 (Starks et al, 2018). In recent years, there has been an increase in the move from middle schools to K-8 schools because research has shown that there is benefit to the middle school student to stay in one school building through the 8th grade especially in rural areas where otherwise school population would be very low (Starks et al, 2018, p. 25). Rural schools seem to be more likely to have more grade bands in a single school than schools found in urban areas (Johnson et al, 2016, p. 393). Students who have fewer transitions seem to see more success academically, especially in the primary grades (Pardini, 2002; Starks et al, 2018).

While there has been an increase in the K-8 school grade band, there has been a decrease in K-12-unit schools as schools have separated into more specific grade bands, especially 9-12 buildings. Many of these unit schools have moved to the K-8 grade band with high school separating from the rest of the building. Additionally, there has been a trend that some elementary and middle schools are joining together to minimize the transitions that students must encounter (Coladarci & Hancock, 2002, Starks et al, 2019). Bickel et al (2000) explains that the K-12-unit “may prevent development of the usual articulation problems” and therefore reduce the “need for costly monitoring and supervision” because there are no transitions for students to make between grade bands and school buildings (p. 25).

Culture Defined

The definition of culture takes on a variety of different forms. Coyle (2018) states that “the inner workings of culture remain mysterious” (p. xviii). Muhammad (2018) offers a clear definition of culture because “culture is how we behave, and climate is how we feel” (p. 19).

Muhammad and Hollie (2012) argue that culture sets the “standard for what is normal and expected” in the school building (p. 21). Gruenert and Whittaker (2015) assert that “culture is not a problem that needs to be solved” instead it is the shaping that occurs when people work together and become a group of “individuals who share certain characteristics and take some pride in being set apart from those outside the group” (Location No. 80). Coyle (2018) explains that there are misnomers about successful cultures as they may not be “happy, lighthearted places” and, rather, they are “energized and engaged” because the members of a healthy culture are “oriented less around achieving happiness than around solving hard problems together” (p. 55). In his book *Range* (2019), David Epstein echoes this characteristic of a strong culture when he differentiates between “hierarchical cultures” and a mixture of “hierarchy and individualism” stating, “the teams needed elements of both hierarchy and individualism to both excel and survive” (p. 265). The variety of definitions of culture all have one thing in common which is that culture is focused on how people and organizations work together.

Once a clear understanding of culture is provided, it is necessary to delineate culture from climate. Gruenert and Whittaker (2015) differentiate culture from climate by explaining that “culture is a school’s personality” and “climate is its attitude” (Location No. 99). This is further explained by stating that culture is “why you do” the work instead of “what you do” (Location No. 164). The shaping of a school’s culture is impacted by the teacher’s traits that shape the school (Daniels, 2020, p. 74).

When thinking about school culture, it is impossible to define that culture without also thinking about the feelings and connections that surround the school as well as the community of the school (Muhammad, 2018, p. 27). This environment ties to the school’s “morale – the degree of happiness among the school staff” and “is particularly reflective of a school’s culture and has

a very strong effect on school climate” (Gruenert and Whittaker, 2015, Location No. 103). Of note, school culture may be healthy or toxic. Muhammad and Hollie (2012) define healthy school culture as one in which students are given high expectations and those high expectations are supported by the staff (p. 21) whereas a toxic school culture has a “dominant belief system that places success or failure on the shoulders of outside forces” (p. 23). School culture is tied to the school’s values and values may be held without conscious realization as they exist in the community’s subconscious (Location. No 124). Coyle agrees that there are multiple factors that impact the culture of a workplace. One of those factors is the people in the workplace. Coyle (2019) acknowledges that in successful teams, groups tend to define their relationship with their teammates as a family. He explains that “the pattern was located not in the big things but in the little moments of social connection” and that “these interactions were consistent” regardless of the group (p. 7).

K-12-unit School Culture. Based on the definitions offered above about culture, in looking at the K-12-unit school culture, there needs to be a discussion of how people and organizations work together in the K-12-unit school and the environment of the K-12-unit school. From the literature on K-12-unit schools, some common themes emerged that begin to paint a description of the culture in the schools by looking at people, organizations, and environments of such schools.

One common theme in the K-12-unit school is the feeling that accessibility of people in the school is important. Funnemark-Clapper (2017) explains that a core belief of Baxter School is that parents, students, and community members should be able to contact leadership of the school easily (p. 148). Another commonality in the K-12-unit school was that extracurricular activities are important to “life beyond school” and are emphasized by the school and the

community in discussion (Funnemark-Clapper, 2017, p. 149). Thrasher School provides an example of this wherein the student interviewed for the study reported that as a member of five clubs and as the editor of the yearbook, it is the extracurricular activities that make him feel a part of the school as a transfer student (Howley et al, 2000, p. 108). Behavior is also important to the school culture. Franklin and Glascock (1996) found in their study on grade configuration that students in combination schools had the second highest attendance for grade 7 students (second only to elementary schools) and that combination schools had lower suspension numbers than middle or secondary schools (p. 15).

Funnemark-Clapper (2017) found that the one building nature of the K-12-unit school had a positive impact on culture at the school because of convenience (p. 154). It was also expressed that parents and community members appreciated the ease of knowing one school and that students would have one place to attend all of their educational experience (Funnemark-Clapper, 2017). On the other hand, Howley et al (2000) found that even though they are in one building, there are distinct differences in character between the elementary grades K-6 and the secondary grades 7-12 so that they have a feeling of different schools.

Funnemark-Clapper (2017) goes on to define culture in the K-12-unit school as “a collection of traditions, stories, ceremonies, assumptions, beliefs, and values of the students, parents, staff, and community that share the environment and the socially constructed environment is a reflection of the people who are part of that environment” (p. 150).

Rural/small School Culture. The United States Census defines rural as “all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” An urban area is defined as an area that will “encompass at least 2,000 housing units or at least 5,000 people.” Showalter et al (2019) reported that one in five students in the country is educated in a rural school (p. 1). To

further demonstrate why an examination of small/rural schools is important, Showalter et al (2019) pose that there are more students attending rural schools in the country than “in the nation’s 85 largest school districts combined” (p. 1). Showalter et al (2019) cite that Texas hosts the most rural students followed by North Carolina, Georgia, Ohio, Tennessee, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Alabama, and Indiana (p. 1). Furthermore, it is clarified that the appearance of the rural school and community varies depending on the location so that every state has a stake in looking at the nature of rural education (Showalter et al, 2019, p. 2).

Breez Daniels in her book *PLC and Your Small School* (2020) explains that “Small schools – whether rural, charter, religious, urban content focused, private, or public – often have unique characteristics. They tend to reflect the communities they support” (p. 3). Many of these rural schools do not offer much racial diversity wherein if “you were to randomly choose two students from a school in a random rural district, there would be a 31.9% chance that the students would identify as different racial groups” (Showalter et al, 2019, p. 18). In other words, there would be a 68.1% chance that they would be the same racial group which indicates a lack of diversity in rural schools. Unfortunately, another commonality found in rural schools is a high rate of poverty with one in five students in the rural setting typically living in poverty (McHenry-Sorber, 2019, p. 63).

Chalker (1999) agrees that rural schools reflect the community around them and explains, “small schools in rural communities offer a path to excellence that eludes others” (p. 5). This path is paved partly by partnership between the parent and teacher and an area that places importance on the school (Chalker, 1999). In looking at characteristics of rural schools, it was noted that teachers in rural schools often originally attended the same community or rural school because of a desire to stay local and impact their community (Lavalley, 2018, p. 15). Rural/small

schools are also defined by their relationship in the community, yet they may be viewed as “small, isolated, autonomous, and self-sufficient” (Chalker, 2001, p. 140).

Some of the characteristics of small schools also impact their ability to be effectively monitored for the growth of students. Lorna Jimerson (2018) lists seven challenges that have evolved in the monitoring of small schools for No Child Left Behind. These include issues related to size, remoteness, finances, traditions, population decline, and changes to populations. Because of their isolation and community ties, school leaders must work to have “strong relationships and effective organizational structures in their communities and schools” (Chalker, 2001, p. 141). Another challenge of the rural school is that there is recognition by those who were not originally part of the school of the difficulty in garnering the trust of the school and the community (Bradshaw, 2022, p. 101).

School Leadership

In looking at the school, it is necessary to consider traits of the school leader. In general, school leaders are at the center of the school and its organization (Muhammad and Hollie, 2012; Kovacevic et al, 2020). When looking at types of leaders that can be found in school administration, a transformational leader is a repeated term that occurs. Burns (2003) explains that in any context, a transformational leader is one who “champions and inspires followers” so that individuals are empowered (p. 26). Aydin et al (2013) further this definition by explaining that a transformational leader is one who will be an example for others while engendering lofty ideals, motivation, and creativity which leads to a positive school climate (p. 807). Burns (2003) notes that the transformational leader's work impacts teacher commitment to the school's work (p. 809). In a quantitative survey study, Zainal et al (2021) found that when transformational

leadership is in place, teachers saw 47% more innovation in the classroom (p. 13). Cohen (2014) asserts that transformational leadership is inspirational and focused with a clear mission for teachers to support the school and the leader as part of the transformation process (p. 101).

A second type of school leader as noted by Aydin et al (2013) is that of the transactional leader. This leader is less likely to create a positive school climate because of its task-oriented approach that celebrates the completion of work duties (p.807). A transactional leader is a manager whose focus is not on putting forth change but in ensuring that metrics are met (Cohen, 2014, p. 101). Transactional leaders will not inspire employees to be innovative or creative and will require that employees just complete the work at hand (Aydin et al, 2013, p. 807; Cohen, 2014, p. 101; Kovacevic et al, 2020).

Still, a third type of leader exists. This type of leader is the servant-leader and is characterized by being a leader who promotes “the valuing and developing of people, the building of community, the practice of authenticity, the providing of leadership for the good of those led, and the sharing of power and status for the common good of each individual, the total organization, and those served by the organization” (Laub, 2005, p. 157).

Regardless of leadership name, in a case study research project, Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) found that when the leader is people-focused, a more positive climate exists in the school (p. 189). In the first principal interviewed through this case study, they found a positive climate existed because the principal engendered a clear vision for the school, included the staff in decisions, and made connections with the teachers (Devos & Bouckenooghe, 2009, p. 188). Based on the above-mentioned leadership styles, the first principal in this study engendered a transformational and/or servant-leadership approach. The second principal’s school did not have a positive climate according to Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) and was more focused on

administrative tasks and coordinating aspects of the school. Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) made a connection between the visionary principal and a positive school climate (p. 188).

K-12-unit School Leadership. In a narrative study of three K-12-unit Schools in Louisiana, it was found that all three possessed all the characteristics of servant-leadership; however, they all were observed strongest in how they valued people, built community, showed their authenticity, and offered leadership (Brumley, 2007, p. 140). Additionally, they all demonstrated developing staff and the shared leadership as their least recognized part of Laub's servant-leader definition (Brumley, 2007, p. 140). This dissertation was written to examine the servant-leadership in three K-12-unit schools, so this information is not all-inclusive of leaders in the K-12-unit school.

For some K-12-unit schools, perhaps because of their rural nature, leadership has been challenging. Carlson (2000) found that one of the problems for Crossover Community School was the number of times administrators were replaced with frequent turnover (p. 30). Carlson (2000) also notes that the school has a high teacher turnover each year with on average 5 out of the 29 teachers being replaced (p. 30). At Liberty, Carlson (2000) found that school leaders also serve in the classroom as teachers or guidance counselors as needed (p. 39). The small K-12-unit school is unique in asking an administrator to fulfill multiple roles/jobs within the school. Wieczorek and Maynard (2018) note that for rural administrators, not only are administrators expected to be school leaders, but they are also expected to be a visible part of the community. At a different K-12-unit school case study, the school leadership was unique because the principal lived on the campus of the school (Jackson, 2000, p. 105) while another assistant principal served additionally as a science teacher in the school (Jackson, 2000, p. 106).

Rural/Small School Culture, Legislation, and Leadership. Leadership in the small/rural school may seem different because of the school's size or the community surrounding it. Howley (1994) explains that a 400-student maximum may be one way to help leaders fulfill the needs and responsibilities of a school by limiting the leader's focus (p. 4). Daniels (2020) points out that one of the most needed resources in the small school is that of school personnel (p. 23). Bradshaw (2022) pointed out that in rural schools, the principals felt as though they needed to be a "jack of all trades" to successfully lead in the school (p. 98). McShane and Smarick (2020) echo this by explaining that one of the challenges that rural schools face is that of finding and hiring high-quality educators (para. 3). In a narrative study of rural school principals, Bradshaw found that principals in rural areas are often also from either the same or a similar rural area and are then mentored into leadership roles by other leaders in the area (Bradshaw, 2022, p. 94).

Daniels further explains the small school conundrum for educators by stating that "small schools often fall into the trap of allowing a lone teacher in a grade level or content area to make curriculum decisions about essential learning" (p. 25). However, in the small school, administrators and teachers are more likely to know the students, families, and community by nature of being small (Daniels, 2020, p. 128). Bradshaw (2022) also found that across the eight rural school principals that were interviewed, all eight had a focus on building relationships with all stakeholders in the building (teachers, staff, students) and in the area (community leaders, parents) (p. 96). Building community and having awareness of the needs of students in the building allows rural and small schools to individualize instruction more fully through differentiation to meet student needs (Daniels, 2020, p. 128). Because of the success that small schools have in this regard, some research shows that there is a move to break larger high

schools “down into smaller components of no more than 400 students” (Rochford, 2005, p. 4) to provide more individualized instruction like what naturally occurs in the small or rural school.

One potential concern in small schools is that the “big personalities” around the school can “run the show” (Daniels, 2020, p. 75). These “big personalities” can have an impact on the culture of the school because of their ability to determine what is happening in the school.

On the other hand, in small schools that are not part of a larger city, teachers may be the only teacher in their content area, so they may feel isolated in the work that is being done (Bradshaw, 2022; Daniels, 2020; Leane and Yost, 2022). In the narrative review of rural principals, Bradshaw (2022) found that six out of eight principals indicated a concern regarding the isolation of staff (p. 99). Isolation impacts the culture of the school.

Community Involvement in K-12-unit Schools

For rural/small schools, the community is part of the school which must, therefore, impact the culture. Blair (2001) explains that in these communities, “the school is truly inseparable from the community. In a town that lacks a movie theater, mall, or other entertainment, the school becomes the social and even moral center of the lives of the children and teenagers in the community” (p. 3). Howley and Eckman (1997) argue that it is especially important in the rural school that the school be careful of isolating itself from the community as both need each other (p. 17). Isolation is a recurrent theme in issues of small/rural schools whether it is of individual teachers or of the community at large.

For some K-12-unit schools, the community surrounding the school is what keeps the school going. Howley et al (2000) offered a Case Study of Thrasher School in Booneville, Mississippi and explained that without the support of the Thrasher community, there would be

no Thrasher school (p. 103). For Thrasher, community support comes in the form of support at athletic events, fundraisers, and building support. Howley et al (2000) explains that this community worked to rebuild the school after a fire and built a band hall by paying off the loan as a community (p. 103 and p. 108). The Booneville community works together to prevent consolidation from occurring, which would be a risk since the school is only five miles from another high school (p. 104). In an interview with McHenry-Sorber (2019), Showalter, a researcher on the nature of rural schools, explains that consolidation has a negative impact on the students and the communities where schools are lost and that locally operated schools are beneficial for the students (p. 64).

For other K-12-unit schools, the schools become an integral part of the community. In the case study examined by Funnemark-Clapper (2017), Baxter Community School offered a space that was also shared by the community such as the library and fitness center (99). Funnemark-Clapper (2017) further explains that within the K-12-unit school of Baxter, there is a feeling of community that is brought about because of the connection between the school and the community where it resides (p. 159).

Organizational Change.

Open System. Within the organizational learning theory is the open system view which Parastuty et al (2013) define as “the process of considering how people, processes, structures, and policies exist in the interconnected web of relationships” (p. 251). Lune (2010) further explains that an organization will often “define themselves, or present themselves, in terms of what others have done before them” (p. 106). Therefore, the culture of a school organization is built upon a long line of what has always been done.

In an open system, an organization cannot function or even exist without connection to influences outside of the organization. The organization does not stand alone (Lune, 2010). To understand an organization, the surrounding environment must also be considered (Lune, 2010). Further, Scott and Davis (2007) explain that open systems show how parts of an organization are linked together so that they ultimately are dependent upon one another. They can exist independently but have boundaries around them that influence what happens in them. These boundaries can be students, parents, and the community in the school organization (Scott and Davis, 2007). Keeping the boundaries from becoming overly influenced by the groups around the organization requires time and intentional management (Scott and Davis, 2007).

Organizational Change. Armenikis and Bedeian (1999) offer a review of organizational theory and change research to show that “changes may be brought about by regulatory shifts” or “may be prompted by competitive forces manifesting themselves as technological advancements” (p. 297). Bartunek et al (1987) further suggest looking at organizational change through three lenses: first order, second order, and third order so that the impact of the change can be understood. Bartunek et al (1987) show that first order change seems to allow the leader the most natural change process because stakeholders deem the change as needed or beneficial. They clarify that second order change comes with a crisis and is responsive and perhaps more resistant or difficult to achieve. Finally, they offer third order change as a process wherein persons from the organization “establish structures that consciously enable them to operate using different perspectives” (p. 436).

Van de Ven and Poole (1995) have a similar analysis of change focused on the four types of organizational change that occur: life-cycle, teleological, dialectical and evolutionary. They show that each of these types of change are relative to all change within the organization so that

researchers can more easily define and understand the change that occurs. Van de Ven and Poole (1995) offer “dialectical theory” of change which occurs when “colliding events, forces or contradictory values that compete with each other for domination and control” and “may be internal to an organizational entity” (p. 517). When leadership changes occurs in a school, it may mirror this dialectical theory of change because there could be “opposing values, forces or events” that ultimately “engage the status quo” (p. 517).

Summary

The literature review provided a historic account of the K-12-unit school's development. It also looked at characteristics of the K-12-unit school through background from several case studies and narratives that have been done in recent years regarding the K-12-unit school. The review of literature showed how consolidation has impacted the K-12-unit school and how grade band configuration includes a discussion of the K-12-unit school. From there, the literature review offered a definition of culture and attempted to demonstrate what is known of culture in the K-12-unit school and in small/rural schools. The exploration of small/rural schools is important to this literature review because many of the K-12-unit schools are in rural areas though, as the literature showed, this cannot be said of all K-12-unit schools. The literature review examined administrator leadership traits and how those traits are evident in K-12-unit schools and in rural schools. Finally, the literature review examined what is known about community involvement surrounding K-12-unit schools. The literature review found that more research was available about the K-12-unit school in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but there has been some recent research especially regarding leadership and open enrollment around the K-12-unit school.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

A key to understanding the impact of leadership change in a K-12-unit school can be obtained by understanding the dynamics of such a school, its community, and the history of such a school to understand how the new leader assimilates into the existing culture. School, community, and culture dynamics guided this study to understand how leadership change could be impacted in the K-12-unit school.

This study's purpose was to understand how leadership assimilated into the existing culture of the K-12-unit school and how the community adjusted to this leadership change.

Restatement of the Problem and Research Questions

This study sought to understand the interconnected relationship of leadership, community, and culture during a time when a new leader moved into a school. Therefore, to address this, the following research question were considered:

1. How does a new administrator assimilate within the existing school culture initially accepted by teachers and community members in a K-12-unit school?
2. How does the culture and/or community also need to adjust during the assimilation of a new leader?

Theoretical Framework

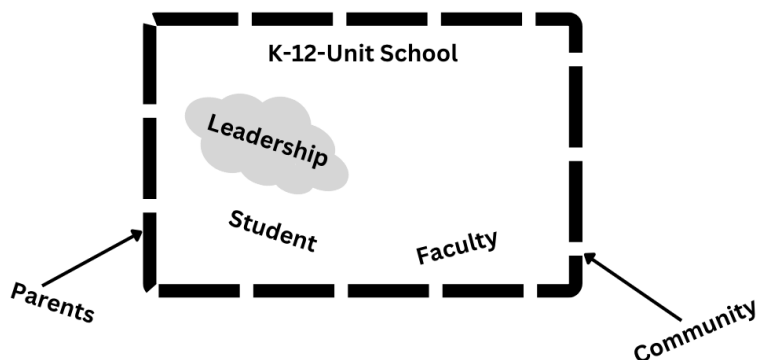


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework

Using organizational theory is one way to understand the relationship of a school to its community and the impact of leadership change. Parastuty et al (2013) aptly explain that organizational learning theory “views organization as a socially constructed system” (248). This social construct is the cornerstone of the research here as it influences how leadership is able or unable to create momentum in change. Parastuty et al (2013)’s definition of open systems as “the process of considering how people, processes, structures, and policies exist in the interconnected web of relationships” (p. 251) is key to the connection of how the relationships between community, leadership, and faculty all influence the function of the school. This open systems view bookended the exploration of new leadership and its impact to the K-12-unit school because it allowed us to understand how entities outside of the school may still guide it.

From this theoretical framework, there must be a realization that in seeking to understand the organizational unit and the change that transpires, the organization itself and the individuals within and around the organization played a critical role in the overall reality of the change process that occurred for the K-12-unit school (Van De Ven and Poole, 1995).

Subjectivity Statement

As with any research that occurs, it may be difficult to separate my own experiences from those of this K-12-unit school. As an educator, I have had the unique opportunity of working in the K-12-unit school system for over fifteen years. I have worked with school leaders who have been part of the K-12-unit school's community and with school administrators from outside of the community. Each leader has come to the unit school with their own leadership style and vision for the school. Because of this, each leader brought elements of change to the school. At times, those changes have been more readily accepted than at other times.

When I first began work in the K-12-unit school, I worked with an administrator who was a neighboring community member and long-time leader in the school. She had the trust of employees in the school because she worked alongside them and even lived near many of them. Because of this established trust, when changes came to the community, they seemed more readily accepted. For example, when she decided that to improve the school through examining best practices, the school would become a member of High Schools that Work and follow those initiatives, members of the school readily embraced her plan. For example, the school adjusted to the idea of all English Honors classes and that is what was offered. I am not aware of any parent concerns that came due to this shift; however, there was pushback from teachers. I wonder, though, if I was unaware of community pushback simply because I was new to the community and just wasn't aware of those connections. As a teacher coming from outside of the community, it took years before I was accepted into the routines of the community to know where concerns or questions existed.

Upon her retirement, the assistant principal who was also a long-time community member and was beloved by the school became the administrator. One way that he initiated

change was to look at the number of fundraisers led by the school. He determined that there were too many small fundraisers (from magazine drives to cookie dough) and that it was too much of a burden to the community. So, he decided to move to one big fundraiser for the building each year. Because teachers knew him and trusted him, this was readily accepted. He encouraged students to raise funds through one fundraiser per year to support the school. Families and students supported this and saw success in fundraising endeavors.

Upon his retirement, an administrator from outside of the community was hired. When a principal from outside the community entered during online and in-person teaching during COVID, he recognized the need to understand what was happening in the teacher's classrooms as a new administrator to this school, so he requested teachers to submit weekly lesson plans using a template that asked them to reflect on learning targets and class practices. However, he was faced with having to choose between initiatives that would impact instruction such as weekly lesson plans and initiatives that were simply mandated due to their times. It was not long into the school year that weekly lesson plans were abandoned due to frustration and vocalized grumblings from the teachers so that teachers could focus on the county-mandated COVID protocols that were required safety measures at the time. This made me wonder how administrators initiate initiatives that are important to them when entering schools where they are not rooted in the community and tradition.

Therefore, I became curious as to what drives the acceptance of change. I began to wonder how leadership and community work together in the K-12-unit school environment to allow the organization to evolve. Certainly, these experiences shaped my understanding of the K-12-unit school. Therefore, it was important to me to seek a K-12-unit school and its leadership

from outside of my own community to obtain a better understanding of how change, leadership, and community are intertwined within this organization.

I agree with Robert Stake (1995) in that there is importance in seeking and recognizing my own “intellectual shortcomings” and purging my own “misinterpretations” that may have occurred due to my prior experience and personal lens of the K-12-unit school (p. 45).

Throughout this research process, I sought to understand the case at hand without projecting my own experiences onto the research.

Rationale

This research is grounded in constructivist epistemology. Constructivism allows individuals to create meaning based on their experiences in the world around them as an objective reality (Creswell, 2008; Crotty, 1998; Hatch, 2002). The goal of this study was to better create meaning regarding the assimilation of new leadership in the K-12-unit school and its surrounding community as well as how the existing culture was impacted through these changes by engaging with new administration, teachers, and community. This epistemology was appropriate because of the uniquely individual experiences of leadership in the K-12-unit school. Hatch (2002) clarifies constructivism by noting that a final reality is forever unknown because reality is built upon experience and perspective. As evidenced in the Literature Review, K-12-unit schools are situated in communities and are key elements to that community. The K-12-unit school leader and its community bring individual understandings and experiences to changes that make a case study an appropriate methodology. Thus, the reality of each K-12-unit school is part of a specific community wherein the reality of that community may differ greatly from one to the

next either due to location, their histories, and their individual personalities, or even their economies.

In addition to constructivism, it is also appropriate that it followed the social constructivist paradigm. Creswell (2008) explains that through this paradigm, experiences lead to the creation of meaning based on an understanding of the individual's situation within the culture of a specific school and community. Further, Crotty (1998) places the social constructivist paradigm in the center of understanding culture as he notes that "without culture we could not function" (p. 53). In part, this study hoped to examine the organizational systems of the K-12-unit school and how new leadership either assimilated or struggled to assimilate into the community of the school. Furthermore, this study hoped to understand how the community might also need to adjust to the new outside leader.

Research Design

Robert E Stake's (1995) case studies methodologies guide this research. Stake (1995) explains that "the function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it" (p. 43). Creswell (2008) clarifies that case study is a form of qualitative research that looks at what is to be studied within a specific system. In this case, the system was one K-12-unit school that had recently experienced administrative change. Using one K-12-unit school offered a detailed description and explanation of the response of how this K-12-unit school adjusted to new leadership, the impact of the culture within the school, and the acceptance of the faculty and community to the changes that were brought by the leader.

Stake (1995) purports that case study is bound by something. In this case, the thing that binds the research was the K-12-unit school itself. Stake (1995) offers three types of case study:

intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. An intrinsic study takes place when the information that is being gained is specific to one particular case (Stake, 1995). An instrumental study, however, occurs when general information is sought to better understand a situation (Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) offers a third type of case study: the collective case. In this case study, several schools or teachers are examined to obtain a better understanding of a general inquiry (Stake, 1995).

For this research study, an instrumental approach is taken because this K-12-unit school had recently undergone a leadership change, thus presenting the opportunity to examine how this phenomenon unfolded in the K-12-unit school. Perhaps, the greatest cornerstone in understanding this research design is that it will not “conquer the world” in an understanding of the K-12-unit school, but it does seek to “sophisticate the beholding of it” or to better understand it through examining this one K-12-unit school.

In Stake’s (1995) design, the issue statement is cause-effect in nature. For this research, leadership change causes a response for the organization and its surrounding community. Throughout the work of this case study, there was a goal to understand the nature of the unique culture of a K-12-unit school and the impact of leadership change on the organization’s culture and its community.

Research Site

For the purposes of this research, Henderson Unit School, a pseudonym for a K-12-unit school in the southern United States served as the research site. This school was one of several K-12-unit schools in the area, but it had recently undergone two administration changes: a new principal has come to the school from a large neighboring district where he has been the administrator of an urban school. The new assistant principal was a former teacher at this K-12-

unit school, returning Assistant Principal of the school, and part of the Henderson community. These new administrators allowed me to explore how they have thus far assimilated into the school and how the school has adapted to their leadership.

With under 500 students, this small K-12-unit school saw a small increase in its enrollment in the last two years. The majority (88%) of the students at this K-12-unit school were white, 6% of the students were black, and 6% of the students were Hispanic. According to the State Report Card, in 2022, the school had a moderate rate of identified economically disadvantaged students with 19% of students falling into this subgroup as defined by Free and Reduced lunch status. 15% of the students identified by the State Report Card who attended the school were considered eligible for special education services. The K-12-unit school could have been considered insular in nature since all grade bands were contained by one building and contained in one area. The insular nature of the K-12-unit school and the entrance of a leader from outside the community made this site a natural case study in which to examine how the leader assimilated into the culture.

Participant Selection

For this research, participants were selected based on their Henderson Unit School affiliation. A key participant was the school administrator, having joined the school from a different county in July 2022, which meant that at the start of this dissertation, he was entering his second school year. The administrator agreed to this research study via which was then approved by the Institutional Review Board (see appendix A). His assistant principal was moved into the Assistant Principal role in the middle of the previous school last year. They were both selected for the administrator interviews conducted as part of this dissertation.

In addition to interviews with the principal and assistant principal, I interviewed teachers who were both new to the school and had been with the school for several years and previous administrations. To identify teachers who would be helpful to this study, the principal provided a list of names for interviews and followed up with more names when requested. All the teachers and staff that he provided were interviewed. Prior to conducting their interviews, participants completed the Informed Consent agreement (see Appendix B).

Stake (1995) asserts that “each interviewee is expected to have had unique experiences, special stories to tell” (p. 65). This principle guided the selection of the teachers as I requested that they be a cross-section of teachers and staff who had been in the school longer than either administration but had varying levels of experience to obtain their own special stories. I understand in seeking these interviews that “the case will not be seen the same by everyone” (Stake, 1995, p. 64) which made the need for a cross-section of employees even more stark.

Finally, three members of the community who worked closely with the school and were part of the community in that they lived in the school zone that naturally attended the school and were not attending the school on zone exemptions were identified for participation in the focus group by the principal. A fourth community member was also identified by the principal, but this community member did not respond to requests for participation. Additionally, participating community members served either as leaders in the community, such as the City Council or other city groups. The principal provided names of community members who had close connections to the school.

Instrumentation/Data Collection

The data collection process for this case study had three primary sources: interviews, focus group, and artifacts. Interviews were used with the administration and the teacher sample that were collected. Interviews were targeted for teachers who were new and experienced at the school. Interviews were appropriate for this case study because in the interview, the individual's story came to light while offering the opportunity to share a story, example, or reason for why a phenomenon exists (Stake, 1995).

In addition to interviews, the focus group was a way to gather multiple community members together to get an understanding of the relationship between the school and its community. The focus group was appropriate for community members because they were able to expand their ideas more clearly when they heard the experience of other community members and built off each other's ideas and memories. Hatch (2002) notes that a key to focus group interviews is the interaction that takes place as individuals participate in said focus group. A benefit of the focus group is that it "can generate a lot of data in a relatively short period of time" while it may "capture the dynamics of group interaction" (Hatch, 2002, p. 132).

The study of artifacts was appropriate for this Case Study because these documents allowed the researcher to obtain information about the school that was available otherwise and supported what was being learned through the interviews and focus group (Stake, 1995). For this study, social media posts, newspaper articles, School Improvement plans, and state report card data were used to gain additional understanding of the school and the community. Each category had protocols to allow the story of the participants of the K-12-unit school and its community to unfold.

Interviews had two different protocols that were followed. One protocol focused on administrators interviewed (see Appendix C) and a second on teachers interviewed (see Appendix D).

Interviews were conducted either over Zoom or in person, as the interviewee's time allowed. Interviews were recorded using the Otter app to aid in data analysis. Interviews took place from November-February 2023-2024. This was at the midpoint of second year with this administration and many initiatives that were taking place in that school year were already underway. This was an appropriate time to begin to get an understanding of how the faculty was responding to the new administrator because they had time for a second school year to begin with the administrator and to respond to changes and work that were taking place in the school. Interviews were intentionally organized to address specific relevant pieces of information as follows:

Table 1: Interview Overview

	Administrator Interviews	Teacher Interview
Length of Interview	Approx 1 hour-1.5 hours	Typically 45 minutes to 1 hour
Categories for interview	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Experience in meeting faculty and staff at the school. 2. Initiatives and goals for the school (both before becoming administrator and in the administrator role). 3. Community Involvement. 4. Role of school in the community. 5. Expectations. 6. Knowledge of teachers and community 7. Culture of the school. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Experience in meeting and engaging with the new administrator. 2. Elements of the school that the teacher likes (prior to the new administrator and after his/her arrival). 3. Knowledge of the culture of the school. 4. Expectations and supports from the administrator. 5. Culture of the school.

Each category connected to the overarching research question by looking at the involvement of community, the existing expectations of faculty, and the understanding of culture in the school.

Community members shared their experiences with the school in one focus group discussion. There was a protocol used in this focus group format too (see Appendix E). Some additional clarification was obtained through email with one focus group member after she read the transcript of the interview. Stake (1995) supports this organic process of data collection as he explains that the researcher should be “ready for unanticipated happenings that reveal the nature of the case” (p, 55). Participants in the focus group responded to questions that connected to the following categories:

1. Experience as a community member in relationship to the school.
2. Experience in working with the new administrator(s).
3. Previous experiences with the school.
4. Feelings about the school’s role in the community.
5. Culture of the school.

Finally, artifacts were collected to gather more information about the school and its established culture and about individuals surrounding it. The following artifacts were collected:

1. Social Media Posts that were relevant to the school.
2. Newspaper articles that announced the new principal.
3. School Improvement plan: one before the new administrator and the current plan.
4. State Survey information: teacher responses to state survey questions as published one year afterwards. Only the 2022 school year was available, so surveys from the new administration were not obtained.

These materials were gathered through visits to the school, searches on the internet, and requests made to the administration.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interviews were transcribed using Otter software (2024). Those transcriptions were matched with the audio for any words or phrases that were inaccurate or confusing. Interviews were then analyzed through four rounds of coding. Saldana's (2013) coding process guided this analysis. Salanda (2013) offers a menu of ways that coding can be completed and explains that coding is "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). The coding process took four main forms: descriptive, process, values, and patterns. Descriptive coding sought big ideas that emerged from the interviews, focus groups, and artifacts. Saldana (2013) notes that these codes look for the primary topic and then summarize it. In a second round of coding, process coding was used to label places in interviews, focus groups, or artifacts where action was taking place (Saldana, 2013). Values coding was used in a third round of coding to look for ideas that were held with great importance through the interviews, focus groups, or artifacts which Saldana (2013) explains seeks to understand their individual perspectives. Pattern coding was used in the fourth round of coding to seek ways similar ideas emerged through word choices and responses (Saldana, 2013). The following table details the different parts of the research question and what pieces of information and coding processes were used to gain understanding of the data.

Table 2: Logic of Research Design

Parts of research question	Corresponding Source of Information	Corresponding Data Analysis/Reporting Procedures
Part I: New Administrator experience	Administrator interview Potential artifacts	Descriptive Coding and Process Coding
Part II: Teacher response to Administrator	Teacher interviews (see chart for identification of teachers) Potential artifacts	Descriptive Coding, Values Coding, and Pattern Coding
Part III: Community response to administrator	Community member focus group Potential artifacts	Descriptive Coding, Values Coding, and Pattern Coding
Part IV: Culture	Administrator Interviews Community Member Focus Group Teacher Interviews Artifacts	Descriptive Coding and Process Coding
Part V: Organizational System framework	Interview Questions	Initial and Pattern Coding

After completing the coding, Dedoose software (2023) was used to further analyze themes that arose across the coding that occurred. Stake (1995) expresses the importance of searching for norms and patterns through the coding process that comes through looking for

categories such as those determined through the creation of the interview protocol. Stake (1995) shares that the researcher must determine early in the interview and data gathering process “how much to rely on coded data and how much to rely on interpretation directly from observation” (p. 29). He notes that interpretation leans towards “a description of events to bring out the essential character” (p. 29).

Validation

It is of utmost importance to ensure the validity and reliability of the information that is gathered through this process. Stake (1995) explains that validation occurs through accuracy of research and its interpretation. For research to be valid, Stake (1995) suggests the method of triangulation. Triangulation for any potentially complicated information occurred using “methodological triangulation” by using multiple approaches in the study and by allowing all participants the opportunity to “member check” or review what was written after the interview or focus group takes place (Stake, 1995). To ensure triangulation occurs, multiple data sources were used to gather information. Artifacts, interviews, and focus groups worked together to ensure accurate representation of information. Interviewees were selected with a range of years of service to capture various opinions and experiences. Shenton (2004) notes that the utilization of a wide range of informants is one way to ensure that triangulation occurs.

Stake (1995) also encourages that participants check the work that is written after interviews or focus groups are held to ensure that they review the “material for accuracy and palatability” (p. 115). This process was followed after each section or interview was conducted and written to ensure that the participant agreed with the representation herein by sending participants a copy of first the transcript and then what was written via email for them to review.

Participants were given an opportunity to respond to the transcript. Only three participants responded. One participant offered clarification made in the write-up and resent; another affirmed all information included; and a third acknowledged receipt of the information. No other participant responded to the email (See Appendix F for a copy of the email that was sent to each participant). Stake (1995) explains that this process of member checking is important to the overarching research as some additional material may come from the participant, but also and more importantly, to allow the participant the opportunity to respond to what has been written.

In addition, the assurance of privacy for individuals who participated in interviews and focus groups was critical to the research's success. Stake (1995) confirms that privacy is key to protecting individuals from any personal exposure through the research process. Assurance of such privacy is one way to help ensure the reliability of the work that is done. The school, community, and participants were all given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and the state and location of the school was not disclosed through this dissertation.

Because this research was qualitative in nature as guided through interviews, focus groups, and artifacts to allow the story of the participants of this K-12-unit school and its community to unfold, it was important to protect the identity of participants. This is done by giving each participant, the location, and the school pseudonyms. To know more about the school, its administration, teachers and community, there is background for each participant that is given focused on only the facts about the participant and the school. The goal of this is to allow readers to draw their own conclusion about the information provided (Stake, 1995). Any potentially disputable information is provided with more elaborate detail and description to help the reader understand what is shared. Interpretation was added as needed allowing for other interpretations to occur (Stake, 1995).

Summary

Answering the question of how administrators navigate and assimilate into the culture initially accepted by teachers and community members in a K-12-unit school was interesting because it addressed leadership, community, culture, and organizational systems. The constructivist epistemology was appropriate for this research because this meaning making approach brought clarity to the process of the administrator assimilating in the K-12-unit school. By focusing on a case study, I saw how one K-12-unit school introduced new administration to the building, and I sought to understand how that administration assimilated into the culture and community of the school.

The questions posed in this study were multifaceted, so talking to individuals who were navigating this was appropriate to understand their journey. This approach included interviews, focus groups, and artifacts to gather enough data to see how new administrators assimilated into an existing school culture and how the surrounding community or teachers may also have made changes for that assimilation to occur.

CHAPTER IV: OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

This chapter includes the findings of the data collection that was followed through this qualitative case study research with leadership, culture, change, and K-12-unit schools as the focus. Henderson Unit School, a pseudonym for the school that is included in this research, is a small K-12-unit school in the southern United States. The school had a population of less than 500 K-12 students and included 29 teachers for all K-12 students. The school's principal was hired from a larger metropolis area and did not have any connection to the school prior to becoming principal. This research study began in November of his second year as principal of the school.

This chapter offers an overview of the participants in the research study. This qualitative case study seeks to understand how one new outside administrator in one K-12-unit school has or has not assimilated into the school's culture and community and how the school and community have or have not adjusted to the new administrator.

Coding and Participant Overview of School Personnel

This study included eight interviews and one focus group. Two interviews were conducted in person while six interviews were conducted on zoom. The two in-person interviews were held in the office or classroom of the participant after confirming a convenient time. Teacher interviews typically lasted less than one hour whereas administrator interviews lasted from 40 minutes to an hour and fourteen minutes. The focus group was comprised of three community members and lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. The focus group meeting took place in the school using a teacher's classroom who was the spouse of one of the focus group

members. As results are reported from these interviews and focus groups, all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Each interview and focus group underwent four rounds of coding. Round one focused on descriptive coding where primary topics were uncovered. These topics comprise the overarching themes represented in this paper: K-12-Unit School, Culture, Community, Administration, and Teachers and Staff. After the initial descriptive coding was completed, process coding was used to identify actions that took place through the implementation of the new administration to changes that administration made and actions that were made by the faculty, staff, and community members. Values coding identified areas held in high regard by the interview participants. Finally, pattern coding was used to look across all data sets and identify patterns in thinking about these primary topics. Dedoose software (2023) was utilized in analyzing the commonalities across data sets after initial coding was completed.

In the reporting of results that follow, this data will be organized to give an overview of the information contained in the interviews, focus groups, and artifacts as well as themes that arose from the interviews and focus groups and how those artifacts supported those themes.

Participant A - Principal Montgomery. Montgomery had been with Henderson Unit School for 1.5 years at the time of this interview. Education was his second career having worked in business first. He moved from a large metropolitan area to another large metropolitan area where he first worked for the Central Office and then worked as a principal of a large school. He moved to Henderson from this large metropolitan school having never previously worked with a K-12-unit school and having all high school experience. Principal Montgomery's one hour and fifteen-minute interview yielded over two hundred places where codes were

applied in his interview and thirty themes that emerged. The most repeated codes were captured as follows:

1. Background	11. Community Support	21. Leadership Goals
2. Change	12. First Impressions	22. New
3. Challenge	13. Influence	23. Previous
4. Discipline	14. Culture	24. Style
5. District Mandate Change	15. First Impressions	25. Good Leadership
6. Philosophy	16. K-12-Unit School	26. Listening
7. Subliminal Change	17. Growth	27. School Demographic
8. Community	18. Leadership	28. Teacher response to new
9. Community Connections	19. Expectations	29. Teacher training
10. Community Involvement	20. Grades	30. Professional Development

Figure 3: Codes from Participant A – Principal Montgomery

Participant B – Assistant Principal Shirley. Assistant Principal (AP) Shirley was a graduate of Henderson Unit School and had been with the school for sixteen years. She first became an Assistant Principal under the previous administration and left to work at the Central Office. She returned in the fall of Principal Montgomery’s first year. AP Shirley’s interview lasted 30 minutes. These most frequently used codes were captured as follows:

1. Background	11. Traditions	21. Negative Experience
2. Time at school	12. K-12-Unit School	22. Teacher turnover
3. Change	13. Growth	23. Style
4. Challenge	14. Leadership	24. Teacher and Staff
5. Discipline	15. Assistant Principal	25. Teacher response to change
6. Community	16. AP Leadership Philosophy	
7. Community Connections	17. New	
8. Community Involvement	18. Administrator Support	
9. Community Support	19. Previous	
10. Culture	20. Micro-manage	

Figure 4: Codes from Participant B – Assistant Principal Shirley

Participant C – Mr. Barry. Mr. Barry was a CTE teacher and athletic director at Henderson Unit School. Mr. Barry had been with the school for five years, and Principal Montgomery was his second administrator. Mr. Barry’s interview lasted 26 minutes. The most frequently used codes were captured as follows:

1. Background	11. Parent relationships	21. Leadership
2. Time at school	12. Size	22. Assistant Principal
3. Change	13. Community change	23. Expectations
4. Discipline	14. Culture	24. Grades
5. Subliminal Change	15. Current Administrator	25. Negative Experience
6. Community	16. First Impressions	26. Style
7. Community Connections	17. Previous Administrator	27. Listening
8. Community Involvement	18. Traditions	28. Initial Perception
9. Community Support	19. Culture Shift	29. Student Knowledge
10. Influence	20. K-12-Unit School	30. Teacher Input
		31. Teacher Networks

Figure 5: Codes from Participant C – Mr. Barry

Participant D – Ms. Johnson. Ms. Johnson was an elementary teacher and academic coach at Henderson Unit School. Ms. Johnson had been with the school for twelve years, and Principal Montgomery was her third principal to work with at the school. Ms. Johnson’s interview lasted 18 minutes. The most frequently used codes were captured as follows:

1. Background	11. K-12-Unit school	21. Teacher turnover
2. Time at School	12. Growth	22. Style
3. Change	13. Leadership	23. Teacher and staff
4. Challenge	14. Assistant Principal	24. Teacher response to change
5. District Mandated Change	15. AP Philosophy	
6. Philosophy	16. New Leadership	
7. Community	17. Administrator support	
8. Community Support	18. Previous Leadership	
9. Culture	19. Micro-manage	
10. Traditions	20. Negative experience	

Figure 6: Codes from Participant D – Ms. Johnson

Participant E - Ms. Allan. Ms. Allan was a staff member at Henderson Unit School. She had been with the school for twenty-two years, and Principal Montgomery was her fourth principal to work with at the school. She offered insight of all three previous administrators. Ms. Allan’s interview lasted 40 minutes. These most frequently used codes were captured as follows:

1. Background	11. Size	21. New Administrator
2. Time at School	12. Community Change	22. Communication
3. Change	13. Culture	23. Previous Administrator
4. Discipline	14. Current Administrator	24. Micromanage
5. Philosophy	15. Traditions	25. Negative experience
6. Community	16. Culture Shifts	26. Style
7. Community Connections	17. K-12-Unit School	27. Teacher and Staff
8. Community Support	18. Growth	28. Initial Perception
9. Community Involvement	19. Leadership	29. Teacher Networks
10. First Impressions	20. Expectations	30. Teacher response to new admin

Figure 7: Codes from Participant E - Ms. Allan

Participant F - Ms. Gillis. Ms. Gillis was an elementary teacher at Henderson Unit School. This was her first year at the school, and Principal Montgomery was her only principal to work with at the school. Ms. Gillis came from a different school in the same county at the start of this school year. Ms. Gillis' interview lasted 37 minutes. These most frequently used codes were captured as follows:

1. Background	14. Elementary Connection to HS	27. Initial Perception
2. Time at School	15. K-12-Unit School	28. Student knowledge
3. Carnival	16. Growth	29. Teacher Networks
4. Community	17. Leadership	30. Administrator purpose
5. Community Connections	18. New	31. Approachable
6. Community Support	19. Administrator Support	32. Communication with parents
7. Community Involvement	20. Communication	33. Move from larger to smaller
8. Parent Relationships	21. Not Micromanaged	34. New teachers
9. Size	22. Style	35. No favoritism
10. Culture	23. Good leadership	36. Open position
11. Current Administrator	24. School demographic	37. Out of county students
12. Traditions	25. Student relations	38. Safe feeling
13. Data analysis	26. Teacher and Staff	39. Teacher's support

Figure 8: Codes from Participant F – Ms. Gillis

Participant G – Ms. Stacey. Ms. Stacey was a middle school teacher at Henderson Unit School. She had been with the school for three years, and Principal Montgomery was her second principal to work with at the school. Ms. Stacey had lived near the school for twenty years, having taught at other schools in the surrounding area during that time and spending time at

home with her children. Ms. Stacey's interview lasted 42 minutes. These most frequently used codes were captured as follows:

1. Background	8. Leadership	15. Teacher Input
2. Community	9. Previous Discipline Policy	16. Teacher Networks
3. Culture	10. New Discipline Policy	17. Teacher response to change
4. Community Connections	11. Micromanaged	18. District Mandated Change
5. Previous Administration	12. Teacher and Staff	19. Data Analysis
6. Current Administration	13. Initial Perception	20. Diversity
7. Culture Shifts	14. Student Knowledge	

Figure 9: Codes from Participant F – Ms. Stacey

Each interview offered information to better understand the leadership of the current administration, previous administration, culture of the school, changes that have occurred in the school and responses made to these changes. These interviews are captured in the following sections.

CHAPTER V: ADMINISTRATION

There were two administrators serving Henderson Unit School at the time of this study. Principal Montgomery and Assistant Principal Shirley led the school. Principal Montgomery came to Henderson Unit School from a metropolis area while Assistant Principal Shirley was raised in Henderson. The two worked together in hopes of creating a sense of balance and trust in the leadership of the school while striving to ensure the school operates effectively. Principal Montgomery was the first interview conducted as part of this study. It was important to understand his perspective of his leadership style, changes he made in the school, and his perception of the faculty and community's response to his leadership before talking to members of his faculty and staff. It was also important to spend time with Assistant Principal Shirley as someone who had been in leadership at the school under a previous administration, left, and returned to the school in that same position. She offered a unique perspective on the school's history and its current leadership practices.

Principal Montgomery

Leadership Philosophy. Principal Montgomery's prior business experience and work at Central Office influenced his leadership philosophy. His leadership philosophy included listening, focusing on student impact, and being intentional about the people that he surrounded himself with in the school. Principal Montgomery noted that "a good leader surrounds themselves with good people...[who] see the vision, they understand it, they are behind it" even if "they may not always agree with it." He also explained that "a good leader is also willing to listen where adjustments may need to be taken into consideration. For me, it's always an open door – willing to talk; always having the caveat, I suppose, that at the end of the day, it's still my

decision.” As Principal Montgomery talked about leadership, several themes emerged: listening, intentionality, and support.

Listening was a theme that occurred in several ways through Principal Montgomery’s interview in relation to his leadership style. He shared how he sought to create an environment that encourages listening and sharing ideas. He also shared that in implementing changes, listening for feedback and listening to learn are part of successfully implementing change. Table 4 displays how listening emerged in Principal Montgomery’s interview:

Table 3: Principal Montgomery's Listening as Part of Leadership

Table 3: Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Listening	Listening for Feedback on Changes	Discipline Change Classroom Management Feedback Listened	“But I also listened. So, at the end of the year, I got feedback that the teachers felt like we weren't doing enough. And so I came back, and I said, Alright, so over the summer I revamped our discipline, to give teachers a little more opportunity to report issues and hold on to want them to hold on to their classroom management.”
	Listening to find connection points	Professional Development Conferences Tweaking change	“But then I listened to Okay, well, what did you do to help with that little piece? Right. You know, maybe, you know, I'm not going to revamp our school to match your school. We're not your school. But there's little things that I pick up when I go to conferences, and I'll read books or listen to speakers to talk about that kind of stuff that I incorporate into.”
	Listening to build relationships	Approachable Willing to listen	“I think some of it also goes back to, kind of, my personality. I'm one of those people that - I'm easy to get along with, that will stand firm on what I believe in. And I think that that mindset, walking into an environment, any environment just opens the door to people wanting and willing to listen and talk and change, right.”
	Listening to Understand	Teacher training Teacher response to change Good leadership Talk about it	“I've seen teachers and I've seen staff that are like they're the deer in headlights, but there's so self-absorbed or negative about whatever's going on. That you can't even see how to break through the barrier to get them to start moving forward. They're just stuck. I don't have anybody that's stuck. You know, I've got some that need: I just don't understand how you want me to do this. Okay, well, let's talk about it. How can we make this work for you? And data is one of those spots where you know if you've been a teacher for 30 years, seems that the world has changed.”

The repetition of listening to others, identifying changes, listening to improve changes, and understanding illustrates how Principal Montgomery leaned into listening as part of his leadership style. Principal Montgomery indicated that this is part of how he leads in general, but these traits have been helpful during these times of change.

The next theme that emerged through this interview was that of intentionality as it relates to making leadership decisions. Principal Montgomery was intentional in the move from working in business to working in education. He was also intentional in how he approached his work in leadership with a desire to grow and be a person who made a difference in the lives of students. His overarching purpose in education and willingness to learn and grow contribute to the theme of intentionality in leadership. These themes are illustrated in the following table:

Table 4: Principal Montgomery's Intentionality as Part of Leadership

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Leadership Goals	Leadership Goals	Administrator Purpose Student connections Impact	“I wanted to make a difference in the lives of the students and that you know, that's not just academics. You know, how they're doing socially and you know, all that stuff. And really wanted to make an impact in their lives going forward.”
	Growth	Willing to learn Willing to change Willing to grow	“Because if you're not constantly learning and changing and molding, how you lead, you're gonna get stuck in this rut that you can't get out of. And so there's that. So there's that, that buying part that being able to listen and understand and take advice and take criticism, right? And then, you know, learning still, you know, constantly watching and learning from others.”

Principal Montgomery identified as a person who “wanted to make a difference.” He explained that this came from knowing students deeply beyond academics to include how they

were doing socially. He explained his own desire to grow through advice, criticism, learning, and watching others. These ideas connect to demonstrate his intentionality in focusing on his leadership style.

The final aspect of Principal Montgomery's leadership style was that of supporting the staff and the school to improve what already existed. Principal Montgomery shared that he aimed to work toward improving the school and he wanted everyone to understand that his primary goal was to "make the school better." Through improving, Principal Montgomery suggested that he aimed to support what already existed. Table 5 illustrates how support reflected in Principal Montgomery's leadership style:

Table 5: Principal Montgomery's Support as Part of Leadership

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Support	Leadership Goal	Improvement Goal Common understanding	"everyone understands that everything I do is to make the school better, provide better services to the students and make this a better workplace."
	Leadership Goal	Willing to learn Teacher experience Support	"My goal was to - I wanted to learn about the staff in the school. And you know, it's one of those things where I didn't want to walk in and tell them how to do their business. I know that especially here most of the teachers that are here have a lot of experience. And so that was my goal was not to come in and tell them how to run their classroom. My goal was to come in and support them in doing that."
	Leadership style	Not micromanaged Expectations Space to work Supporting ideas and questions Space to work	"I'm not gonna micromanage you. And some of that, you know, it's action in words, right. I can say it all day long, but I'm sure there were several of them waiting to find out. Is he really going to do that? ... But I think it was empowering to them to say, you know, you don't have to come to me for every little thing. If you want to bounce stuff off of me, please. You know if you don't know that it's the right thing to do, please. But if you know that this part of your job, just do your job."

Quotes that illustrated Principal Montgomery's willingness to support his staff also reflected a leadership goal of improvement for the school and acknowledgement of teacher experience so that teachers could have the space to do their jobs. He wanted his teachers to feel empowered in their roles.

Culture. According to Principal Montgomery, much of the culture of the school comes from being a K-12-unit school. When he came to the school, he acknowledged that he "had never experienced a K-12 school like this" and "barely even knew they existed." However, because the school is a K-12-unit school, he explained that as a principal, he could know students across all

grade bands as opposed to a high school principal who only knows them for their four years of high school. He explained that this affected the culture of the school because in a traditional school, “you see the kids when they become ninth graders. You know nothing about them. Typically. And whatever burdens they carry as they as they come through your school, here, we pretty much know them and all their good and their bad. And so, the great thing about being in this position is being able to not only encourage the great things that they're doing, but also have a consistent opportunity to try to correct the problems that they're having. That just doesn't happen.” Themes that emerged surrounding culture in the school included family atmosphere, K-12-unit school atmosphere, and teacher connections. Table 6 illustrates how being a K-12-unit school permeated the discussion on culture.

Table 6: Culture and K-12-unit school

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
K-12 Unit School	Influence	Know the students Kindergarten to Graduation Retirement Student engagement	“We had a graduating class last year. I only knew them for a year but you know, I really engaged with them about what's next. And you know, the juniors - they're seniors this year are getting two years of me engaging them that in that way and that's the kind of what I want to continue to build as that engagement with the kids.”
	School community	Grade bands K-12 growth Connection Encouragement Knowledge of students Consistency	“But that getting to know them when they're so young. When you're a high school principal and you're strictly High School, you don't get to do that. You see the kids when they become ninth graders. You know nothing about them. Typically. And whatever burdens they carry as they as they come through your school. Here, we pretty much know them and all their good and their bad.”
	Connectedness	Connection throughout Support After School activities	“But the commitments after school are less time consuming than if I was just a high school principal. I mean, there's plenty of things that we do and do all those things, so that's been my favorite thing about the schools about unit schools is the is the connection throughout the after work you know.”

Principal Montgomery emphasized that the K-12-unit school offered opportunities to know students more deeply because they stayed with one building, one administration, and one community for all thirteen years of school. He acknowledged that while he may not still be at the school when the group that was in kindergarten graduates, he does have the opportunity to know them more deeply than when he worked in a high school. He explained that seeing students grow

allowed them to understand student backgrounds and needs more deeply than when a student enters a school in high school.

In addition to knowing his students, Principal Montgomery shared that knowing the staff and building connections with the staff affects the culture of the school. Also, he talked about how the teachers worked together to connect with him in his first weeks at the school. Table 7 illustrates how Principal Montgomery was welcomed into the school.

Table 7: Themes related to meeting the staff

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Teacher Connections	Welcome	First Impressions New principal Middle and elementary teachers Basket Informal natural introduction	“so I started I started on July 1, so school had not started but I'm here in the office right? And I had groups from each grade level middle elementary, high school drop by and gave me a welcome basket. They just decided to do that. They're on their own right so they were very welcoming which made it very easy to have that kind of informal introduction. Get me introduced to everybody even though I didn't even remember everybody when school started, but it was a very nice thing that maybe in some more traditional schools that may not have happened not to that level.”
	Introductions	Staff meeting Transition First Impressions New principal Culture Willing to answer	“You know, like I think all the elementary teachers came up one day and then like met with me just for a few minutes and you know, that kind of thing. And so that made that process very easy. So then when we when everybody comes in, of course we have a staff meeting or wherever and just start talking about stuff. But they were already very open to that kind of transition.”

Principal Montgomery emphasized this organic process of meeting the staff as they came to him over the summer with welcome baskets, and then he later saw that the staff was open to talking about the transition process in the initial staff meetings. In his first official meeting with the staff, Principal Montgomery explained that it was important to him that he set the expectation with teachers that he was not here to “micromanage” them and that they “do not need my permission to do your job.” He noted that coming to him made him feel welcome. As he reflected on the culture of the school, he described it as a “family oriented” culture in the existing school atmosphere.

Change. Principal Montgomery noted that he did not come into the school to make large changes. He said, “my golden rule was always walk in and learn, don’t change anything for a semester.” As the school leader, Principal Montgomery explained that the school operated well without his “interference,” and he did not have to tell groups how to continue working through long-standing traditions because they already knew what to do. Ultimately, Principal Montgomery’s change philosophy centered around the idea that “you have to pick and choose what you’re going to change” and that you must “choose your battles.” However, as he continued in his interview, he revealed that there were two areas important enough to warrant change: classroom management/discipline and extracurricular activities/grades. Additionally, the theme of response to district mandated change emerged in conversation about change. Table 8 illustrates the general philosophy that Principal Montgomery shared when talking about change.

Table 8: Principal Montgomery's General Philosophy around change

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
General Change Philosophy	Personal Development	Growth mindset Avoid the rut	“Because if you're not constantly learning and changing and molding, how you lead, you're gonna get stuck in this rut that you can't get out of.”
	Informed change	Conferences Understand the needs Application of ideas	“You know, I'm one of those people that you know, you can read books and go to conferences and to do all this stuff....But there's little things that I pick up when I go to conferences and I'll read books or listen to speakers to talk about that kind of stuff that I incorporate into.”
	Golden Rule	Intentional change Watch and learn Change where needed only	“And so that kind of stuff, my golden rule, don't come in and really start changing things you got to learn what's working. And then if you see opportunities for change, then you can make them.”
	Status Quo	Avoid causing problems if possible Watch and learn Value tradition	“And like we did Halloween walk this year, I didn't change anything. We're going to do Christmas parties. I didn't change anything. We made that we may have made the check in checkout process a little more streamlined, but that's just little tweaks and adjustments. Everything at the school runs well without my interference.”

Principal Montgomery explained that he did not see his job as administrator to come into the school to create change. Rather, he saw change as only needing to take place after time to learn has occurred and through intentionality, research, listening, and care. As Principal Montgomery talked, he expressed that if something works, his strategy is to leave it alone because “I’m going to create problems for myself that I don’t need to” otherwise.

Principal Montgomery, following his axiom for not hastening to impose changes, watched, listened, and learned for the first semester at Henderson Unit School, and identified the discipline management process as one area that needed change. In his first year, he made a move to electronic tracking of discipline problems, but then revised that going into the second year. However, the focus of the change was less about how discipline was being tracked and more about keeping students in their classrooms and out of ISS. He explained that when he came to the school, the “discipline rate was very high.” Principal Montgomery also spoke of making changes in the grade expectations for student athletes with the goal that students needed to “be in class learning and doing what needs to be done.” Table 9 details themes around Principal Montgomery’s explanations of changes that were made:

Table 9: Themes related to changes made by Principal Montgomery

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Change Implemented	Athletic Grade Expectations	Grades School policy change Athletics Increased expectation Parent support Listening to coaches and teachers	“What's something interesting about things that change? I think we've changed stuff, student expectations. More like, like athletics...I feel like we've made some adjustments to hold the kids more accountable... So if you want to play you must maintain a 70 at every grading period, and the coaches are supportive of that. They're the ones that asked me to do it..... And so we changed it and got no pushback from parents.”
	Discipline Policy	Initial discipline rate Increased student time in class Teacher versus administration responsibility A win Listened Revamped Revised a second time	“I came in our discipline rate was very high, and to the point that we have like a lot of students that are in our ISS room or, or things like that, and so I intentionally swung the pendulum and reduced the amount of discipline that we were doing because kids are not in class, they're not learning and our scores reflected this...So at the end of the year, I got feedback that the teachers felt like we weren't doing enough. And so I came back and I said, alright, so over the summer I revamped our discipline, to give teachers a little more opportunity to report issues and hold on to want them to hold on to their classroom management.”

When asked about how teachers responded to the diverse types of changes, Principal

Montgomery revealed various levels of acceptance with different changes. When it came to athletics, teachers and even parents acknowledged that they “agree that if they’re [going to] play” then they should have higher expectations. When introducing a deeper dive into data, Principal Montgomery noted that he saw some teachers who were like “deer in headlights” but they were not “negative.” This echoed in his explanation of how people respond to change in

general when he explained that “Some people change very easily they flow with it, they like it, they embrace it, and some are scared to death of it.” Table 10 illustrates Principal Montgomery’s reflections on how staff, parents, and the community responded to changes.

Table 10: Themes related to Principal Montgomery’s perception on acceptance and push back to change

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Change Acceptance and Pushback	Response to Change	Varying levels of acceptance Physical response to change Not outright complaining	“Some people change very easily they flow with it, they like it, they embrace it, and some are scared to death of it. And I've got some teachers that are used to the status quo. And so pushing change on them.”
	Response to change	Agreement Parent acceptance Extracurricular activities	“They did not say anything. They were like, we agree. We agree that if they're gonna do you know, extracurricular stuff is not it's not mandated.”
	Response to change	Support Levels of acceptance Willing to help	“And the great thing has been that they're willing to go to the teachers that don't embrace the technology as well to help them take as much advantage of it as they can. I know that I have some teachers that will never embrace the technology like others.”

These quotes illustrate that while teachers are not outright expressing how they feel about change, their response to the change is evident in how they approach the tasks at hand. While Principal Montgomery acknowledged that there have been some challenges in the acceptance of change, overall, he says that “everyone here is willing to do what they need to do.”

Community Connection. Principal Montgomery explained that the Community is a key part of the school. He expressed that “the community is very engaged with us as we need them to be;” however, “I don’t have anybody necessarily just coming in all the time trying to ask for time with the kids for this and time with the kids for that – they're very respectful.” Furthermore, he noted that this embedded connection “allows us to do a lot more with the kids in the community.

Because we don't have to jump over or get over those barriers, and you know, people already support the school.” This balance of connection to the community and traditions was reflected through the major themes of Principal Montgomery’s discussion on community. Even Principal Montgomery’s introduction to the community happened organically as community members “came in with the people I was already talking with.” He gave the example of meeting people who came to the agriculture teacher to buy flowers or people from local churches who came to meet to talk about how they could support the school. He met many members of the community through the community’s outreach to the school because “different groups wanted to come and do different things.” Principal Montgomery acknowledged the support of the community to the school because the community “wants to see the school be successful because if the school is successful, their students are getting a good education.”

Principal Montgomery acknowledged that the community was involved with the school in supporting traditions that have been part of the school and community. Specifically, he mentioned the carnival, the career day, and Arlington cemetery as traditions that involve the school and the community.

Table 11 details the community-school traditions from the Principal Montgomery’s point of view.

Table 11: Principal Montgomery's Themes Community Traditions

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Community Support	Opportunities	Student Volunteers Community outreach Arlington Cemetery Community initiates	“We've got kids going to the Arlington Cemetery to put candles out....And so it's an opportunity for them to get volunteer hours and you know, the community reaches out to us. Hey, you have any kids that might want to do this? But they don't. They don't push on us. You know, it's our choice.”
	Community Engagement	Carnival Career Day	“But you know, the community support for things like carnival, Career Day. And we let our elementary kids like go do the career day thing. It's great, you know, just to let them go through and see starting training.”
	Parent-Community connection	Generational Connection Out of zone Safe environment Allows connection	“And we have a lot of parents, a good percentage of our students come from out of our zone, really because they want it and some of it's generational kids; their parents may have gone here, their grandparents may have gone here that you know, the parents of the student....And you know, people already support the school.”

As Principal Montgomery reflected on the connection between the school and the community, he noted that the culture of the school was a “very family-oriented culture” which was reflected in how the community and families engaged with the school. The community was a present factor for the school while not being overbearing to the school.

Participant B: Assistant Principal Shirley

Leadership. Assistant Principal Shirley offered a unique perspective as an employee of multiple administrators and as someone in a leadership position. As a leader, AP Shirley defined leadership as a support and “safety net” to the work that teachers do in the classroom. Assistant Principal Shirley was in an assistant principal role with the previous administrator, left and returned to Henderson Unit School because of the changes that occurred when the previous

administrator left. Themes that emerged as AP Shirley talked about leadership focused on the supportive role of the school leader. These themes are reflected in Table 12 below:

Table 12: AP Shirley's themes on Leadership

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Leader as Support	Role of the leader	Available Present Supportive Safety net Competent Willing	“So whenever I was a classroom teacher, the things that I appreciated most as a leader was someone who appreciated me as a professional allowed me to do my job, but yet was almost a safety net, or when you know, I had questions, or when something was just beyond what I felt like was the scope of the classroom needing support. ...And so I really try to kind of adopt that as a leader. Just being there in that role for the educators in this building, trusting them as professionals, not micromanaging, allowing them to do their jobs. But yet still being a very strong availability presence for them when necessary.”
	Leadership type	Servant leader Side by Side For the teachers Defining leader	“So, you know. Everybody throws around those words Servant Leader or you know this type of you know side by side leadership, and I don't know that my philosophy has a name. I just know what I wanted as a classroom teacher, and I strive to be that for the teachers here.”

While AP Shirley sought to define what it means to be a leader, knowing the type of leader that supported her and that affected her in the classroom bookends that definition. She reflected that she knew what she “wanted as a classroom teacher” and that memory guided her in her own work as a leader.

School Culture in working with Previous Administration. AP Shirley was in a unique position because she worked with the previous administrator, left, and requested to return when “dynamics changed.” She worked with two administrations prior to Principal Montgomery. The first administrator she worked with at the school was a teacher and then hired as Assistant Principal. AP Shirley noted that each administrator offered distinctly different leadership styles. As she reflected on her

work with her previous administration, many of her memories were overshadowed by the fact that the previous administrator tended to micromanage and be swayed by her personal beliefs and biases. Her experience with her previous administrator is outlined by the themes represented in Table 13 below.

Table 13: AP Shirley Previous Leadership themes

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Micromanager	Previous Experience	Micromanaged Not able to make decisions Previous leadership frustrating	“I wasn't free in a real capacity to give real answers or make real decisions without running it through our the principal before, because I just never knew if I like, what she was, gonna say or do.”
	Previous experience	Previous leadership Micromanaged Uncertainty Lack of freedom	“before I would do something and then have to guess how she was going to respond.”
	Previous Experience	Micromanager trauma	“there was a lot of a lot of trauma from teachers that he - he had to work to overcome a lot of distrust towards admin. Our previous administrator was very micromanaging.”

AP Shirley noted several times in the interview that the micromanaging style of the previous administration made it hard not only to trust in the administration but also to trust in herself to get tasks done. She also shared that while working with the previous administration, there were inconsistencies in how employees and students were treated. Table 14 details these inconsistencies.

Table 14: AP Shirley on Inconsistencies with Staff and Previous Administration

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Inconsistencies	Previous Experience	Personal Issues Bee in her bonnet Inconsistent Easily influenced Previous Leadership	“Our previous administrator was ... very easily influenced by her personal issues, personal beliefs, personal feelings. And it was very inconsistent. If she liked you, you were pretty good; things were pretty golden. If you became a bee in her bonnet, it was over and so there was a whole lot of trauma from that that.”
	Previous experience	Previous leadership Family Connections Local Cater to some Too close	“The prior administrator. She was from Henderson; she was, which was very interesting... You can be too close to the situation, and she had the difference in us. She had a whole lot of family or family friends or relational connections several families here, and whereas I did graduate from Henderson. I don't have that as much....Whereas it worked in her favor to be a community person, to know the culture of the community, and to have that. It also was a little too close to home.”

AP Shirley noted inconsistencies in how the previous administration worked with teachers based on favoritism and with students based on discipline procedures. She noted that at the end of the previous administration's time at the school, many of the teachers had left and there were only a few who stayed for the duration of this administration. This led AP Shirley to share more about how the school transitioned to a new administrator not from Henderson.

School Culture with New Administrator. AP Shirley shared some stark changes in working with Principal Montgomery. As she shared, she pointed out that his transition to Henderson was not necessarily easy because there was already “trauma” due to the micromanaging nature that occurred with the previous administration. She explained that people

were so used to being micromanaged that they had lost trust in the administration which she accounted for as trauma. She noted that “he was set up for success in a way, and then he was behind the eight-ball in a way.” She explained that when he first came, there was a general wondering if “you stay with the devil you know, because you know them and take it or take a chance on someone new?” This reflected through everything she shared about how Principal Montgomery’s leadership contrasted with the prior administration. The main theme from her discussion of Principal Montgomery was widespread support for teachers, staff, and herself. This theme is detailed in Table 15.

Table 15: AP Shirley reflects on Support from Principal Montgomery

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Support	Leadership style	Approachable Teacher Trust Initial distrust Contrast	"And so once, once they realized that it was a very different leadership style. That he you know, was here to do his job and didn't let personal in opinions and influences and things like that influence his decisions."
	Leadership role	Empowered Confident Not micromanaged Able to make decisions	"I mean, I feel empowered and confident to be able to go about my job, make decisions, troubleshoot, help teachers out and not worry. You know, if I miss step, he's gonna correct me, but not undo everything I've done, because it just is not the way he would have done."
	Previous Experience	Trust Shared roles and responsibilities No second guessing	"probably one of the biggest ways that he has supported me is he's just trusted me to do my job....He just trust that it's gonna get done and leaves me to it. And so, while that seems kind of like an an opposite answer of support, he doesn't do anything huge way to support me in my role, because before I would do something and then have to guess how she was going to respond. Now I can just do it"

AP Shirley focused on the biggest change from the previous administration to the current administration was that of support for his staff. However, she also explained that the staff needed time to understand that he would support them and used her as a go-between during that time.

Table 16 reflects the transition time that AP Shirley explained.

Table 16: Teacher Transition Time with New Administration

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Teacher Transitions with new Administration	Trust	Teacher Conversation Encouraged to Principal First year Go-between	“The first year he was here they were a lot of conversations that went. Yes, I'll talk to him. I'll help you through this. However, go to him yourself, not gonna hold this against you. He's not going to take this personally. He's not going to take vengeance on you when you least expect it. He's approachable. Go talk to him and teachers, you know. It took a little while for them to trust that.”
	Trust	Go-between	“They were more comfortable kind of getting in my ear: Can you talk to him about this? Can you help us work on this? So, a lot of that feedback did come through me now. They didn't mind, you know that they knew I was sharing everything with them.”

When Principal Montgomery came to Henderson Unit School, teachers were hesitant to go to him. AP Shirley shared that they struggled to find out if they could trust him, and some of them came from a place of “trauma” after working with the previous administration due to her micromanaging and controlling leadership style. However, the connection with AP Shirley was a bridge between the teachers and the new administration.

AP Shirley noted that some of the school's culture shifted drastically after Principal Montgomery joined the school. When thinking about how culture shifted after Principal Montgomery arrived at the school, she explained that the culture has changed and now people were willing to approach administration with questions and concerns.

When asked about teacher turnover since Principal Montgomery came to the school, she noted that while some teachers had left since his time at the school, “no one has pointed at leadership as the reason, whereas before it was ‘I can’t work there anymore – I can’t work for that person anymore.’” This change in retention rate was also reflected in the State’s Report card. In reviewing the State Report Card for the School, it was found that in the year 2021-2022 with the previous administrator, there was a 66% teacher retention rate which was lower than the district or the state’s retention rate of 84.6% and 92.1% respectively. The 2023 State Report card indicated that there was 82.4% teacher retention in 2023 which was still lower than the district or state’s retention rate of 84.7 and 91.3 respectively.

According to AP Shirley, the changes that came with Principal Montgomery have made things “great and fabulous and wonderful;” however, she realized that things change in schools all the time. She explained that because Principal Montgomery was closer to retirement age and eventually would retire and “you just have to be prepared to roll with the changes as they come, and sometimes you gamble and win, and sometimes you gamble, and things get a little harder.”

Change with Principal Montgomery. AP Shirley noted that overall, most of the logistics of the school stayed the same with the arrival of Principal Montgomery. However, she noted that “one of the biggest raw spots with previous administration” was the discipline policy. As AP Shirley traced the evolution of the changes to the discipline policy, she shared an arc of how it was a problem with the previous administration, then “went from one extreme to the other for a year” but now has “kind of swung back towards the middle.” Table 17 traces that evolution.

Table 17: Process of Change to the Discipline Policy

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Discipline Policy Change	Discipline under Previous Administrator	Raw spot Inconsistent ISS heavy	“The discipline procedures of previous administration was very in school suspension heavy like. and it was willy nilly, I mean... So there's the inconsistency of how things were done.”
	First Year with Principal Montgomery	Online tracking Inconsistent	“And so the his first year here it was very much. Hands off very. Look you, you've got the power back in your classrooms to handle. Your discipline will handle big issues. But this Monday, you know, sending the kid with a right up to the principal's office for not having a pencil. That's gonna stop. And so he pulled a lot of stuff digital. So the difference between office referrals and classroom referrals. The class of referrals. It was more like a spreadsheet. It was just kind of documented, and that was very uncomfortable for our teachers.”
	Second Year with Principal Montgomery	Compromise New system of tracking	“We kind of compromised and brought this year a little bit of a different system with the classroom issues. And did like small like triplicate forms, duplicate forms that teachers have their classroom. It's physical paper documentation. And then our well, suspension teacher, she keeps track of those. We went from one extreme to the other for a year. Just to kind of separate. And then for this second year, things have kind of swung back towards the middle and teachers are much happier and feel much better about the whole situation.”

AP Shirley outlined the initial frustration with discipline that was overarching and inconsistent to frustration with discipline that was hard to track and often missed to finding a middle ground that worked for the teachers and the students in the school. AP Shirley noted that in Principal Montgomery's first year, the staff “weren't necessarily unhappy” but they “were unsettled” and “they weren't confident in the process.” In part, this was because Principal Montgomery's

tracking process was online and “a lot of our faculty is not ready for that.” So, between AP Shirley sharing concerns with Principal Montgomery as a “go between” and the teachers “in each grade band that are confident or willing to be bold” to share that “this is not working, or we really don’t like this, or there’s unsettledness” in order to help move the change forward for year two wherein “teachers are much happier and feel much better about the whole situation.”

The focus on discipline with both administrations was also evident in the School’s Improvement Plan. Both administrations addressed discipline in the School Improvement Plan. In the 2021-2022 School Improvement plan, the prior administration noted that “Close gaps for all students in office discipline referrals; A continued decrease in the number of students who attend District Discipline Hearings; A decrease in data pulled from Student Information System showing the number of Office Discipline Reports referrals pertaining to disruptions, fights, rude, and disrespect; additional data from RTI-B (Response to Intervention) meetings showing positive Tier movement across all grades and subgroups.” For the 2023-2024 School year, the School Improvement plan detailed that they needed to “Close gaps for all students in office discipline referrals; A continued decrease in the number of students who attend District Discipline Hearings; A decrease in data pulled from Student Information System showing the number of Office Discipline Reports referrals pertaining to disruptions, fights, rude, and disrespect; additional data from RTI-B (Response to Intervention) meetings showing positive Tier movement across all grades and subgroups.” Both administrations focused on discipline; however, AP Shirley noted intentional changes to the office referral and discipline procedures occurred with the new administration.

Community Connection and Involvement. AP Shirley had been part of the community for sixteen years. Because of her time in the community, she had a clear understanding of the

community. During her conversation about the community, she talked about the importance of the K-12-unit school. When AP Shirley was asked about things that bring her pride in being at the school, she immediately said that it was “the small community.” The impact of the small community influenced her perception of the nature of K-12-unit school on the community. Table 18 illustrates how the K-12-unit school influences AP Shirley’s perception of community.

Table 18: AP Shirley on the K-12 Unit School

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
K-12 Unit School	Traditions	Pep Rallies Cross grade band engagement Culture Small Moments	“the whole concept of the unit school. But the small moments are not lost every time we have a pep rally and our little ones are sitting in there, and they're shaking little Pom Poms, and they're getting to be a part of building long term school spirit culture, you know. Not that any other first grader gets to go sit at the High School homecoming, pep, rally and see the you know, the big kids all dressed up and doing their thing. So little moments like that. I try not to let escape as far as taking for granted, because we do have such amazing opportunities for our students to just engage with one another.”
	Cross Grade Bands	Connectedness	“You know we've got our high school students that several of them go down and they help in the in the elementary classrooms. They read to the kids, their teachers, aides..”

AP Shirley did not separate the K-12 Unit school from the community. However, when she was asked to talk about the connection between the school and the community, she noted that “the strength for our community lives within the community.” She explained that even when an administrator came to the school from outside of the community, the support of the community for the school remained unchanged. She explained that “they are supportive and involved, no matter who’s there in that leadership group.” Further, she noted that “our families love Henderson Unit School. They are the constant and administration and teachers and all – that is what changes. And so, they’re not easily influenced and swayed by leadership changes or leadership styles.”

Summary

Principal Montgomery and Assistant Principal Shirley spoke about the types of leaders they aspire to be at Henderson Unit School. Principal Montgomery noted that he wants to be perceived as an administrator who does not micromanage but who supports the things that work well at the school while making changes to procedures and practices as needed to improve the school. Assistant Principal Shirley recounted the difficulty she had in working with the previous administration and explained that one of the biggest changes in the introduction of Principal Montgomery was that of the school's culture moving away from micromanagement and distrust. Both Principal Montgomery and Assistant Principal Shirley shared the unique situation of leading a K-12-unit school. For Principal Montgomery, this was his first time leading a school with lower grade bands. While Assistant Principal Shirley was familiar with the nature of the K-12-unit school, she still highlighted the unique structure of the multigrade band school and the traditions that bring students from grades K through 12 together.

CHAPTER VI: FACULTY AND STAFF

Five teachers and staff were interviewed as part of this research study. The purpose of these interviews was to better understand the teacher and staff perception of the K-12-unit school, the previous administration, the current administration, change processes, and responses to those changes. Teachers and staff were selected with a range of tenure at the K-12-unit school. Some teachers and staff members had worked for many years with the school and had served multiple administrators while one teacher was in her first year at the school. By interviewing teachers and staff across a range of service levels at Henderson Unit School, a better understanding of faculty and staff experience with leadership, culture, and change was sought.

Participant C – Mr. Barry

Mr. Barry had been with Henderson Unit School for five years and came to the school with his own connections as his son-in-law was also the bookkeeper's son. At the time of the interview, he had worked with two administrators at the school, so he understood what the culture was like with the previous administrator versus the new administrator. Mr. Barry worked in business before becoming a teacher and had taught for twenty-eight years.

Culture with Previous Administration. Mr. Barry started at Henderson Unit School five years ago and explained that when he first came, “the lady who recruited me was very positive. Everything was great.” However, Mr. Barry detailed how the culture shifted for some teachers at the school who he called “step-children” to the previous administration. Mr. Barry explained that teachers who had connections with the previous administration in his view were given precedence over other teachers. He seemed to feel that teachers who did not have those connections were left to feel inferior. The following table illustrates Mr. Barry's view of the culture in the school while working with the previous administration.

Table 19: Mr. Barry's themes regarding Culture with the Previous Administration

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Administration Favorites	Change in Treatment from Admin	Relationship to boss Tides turned Puppy analogy warned	“And then I was actually warned that this would happen. Things will go well for a while and at some point, she will turn on you. Just, you know, it's kind of like a little puppy – everybody loves on the little puppy then it grows up. We don't want the dog anymore.”
	Inconsistencies	Culture Step Children Unequal Treatment	“Inconsistent. Didn't know what to expect from day to day. It was a family atmosphere. But there were some stepchildren and just there were times that some were not treated equally as others.”
	Favoritism	Negative experience Not forgiving favorites	“I think part of it was a couple of people had the ears of the principal and if they got down on another teacher or a child it was taken - Okay, that's the way it is. Without investigation.”

Mr. Barry did not talk about the previous administration without making connections to how she had favorites or how her time at the school impacted what she knew of teachers and students at the school. He explained that because she was a graduate and was a respected basketball player from the school, he thought that in general people who had long term connections at the school were too comfortable with her. The following table from the State Survey reflects teacher "perceptions of leadership" at that time (note: only 46% of teachers responded to this survey). However, it is of note that 41% of the teachers who responded to the survey did not feel comfortable raising issues or concerns with the previous administration, which mirrors Mr. Barry's perspective. Table 20 is a copy of this data from the state survey.

Table 20: 2022 State Teacher Survey Responses

Prompt	See Column	Selecte d	Strongl y Disagr ee	Disagr ee	Agr ee	Stron gly Agree
	N		5	18	57	20
Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.	N		8	8	50	33
The principal at my school communicates a clear vision for this school.	N		8	17	58	17
The staff feels comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them with school leaders.	N		8	33	33	25
I like the way things are run at this school.	N		0	25	58	17
My school's leader regularly models effective instruction.	N		17	25	50	8
My school's leader regularly gives feedback on my instruction.	N		0	17	67	17
My school's leader knows my instructional strengths and areas of growth.	N		8	8	58	25
My school's leader is knowledgeable about the curricula being used.	N		0	33	50	17
My school's leader is knowledgeable about the non-academic needs of my students.	N		0	8	75	17
School leadership effectively handles student discipline and behavioral problems.	N		0	8	67	25

Culture with New Administration. Mr. Barry explained that the culture of the school experienced a shift with the arrival of Principal Montgomery and that he was now a happier employee and felt valued. He explained that Principal Montgomery sought him out for his opinion as a person who had been in education for twenty-eight years which made him feel valued: “And as a veteran teacher, you appreciate that because I've seen a lot.” He explained that teachers found they can trust the new administration. The theme of trust evolved as he spoke of the culture in the school with the new administrator. Table 21 illustrates this theme.

Table 21: Mr. Barry's themes related to trust and the new administration.

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Trust	Trust from new Admin	Teacher input Listening Subliminal change	“But this administration again treats me like he might know what he's doing. You know, they'll actually come to me and say, Have you ever seen this happen? Did you say how someone else handled it? Was it a positive was it a negative? Do you have a suggestion? And as a veteran teacher, you appreciate that.”
	Trust in new admin	Culture Assimilate First faculty meeting	“And so we just didn't know how he would assimilate to how things work here. So there was some wariness going into it. Actually, the first faculty meeting he pretty much won people over to give him a chance. He came in with the right attitude. You know, ‘I'm not here to change the way ya'll do things. I'm here to learn.”
	Relationships with new admin	Teacher representative No grudges Open door Listening	“Now I'm kind of the council (teacher) representative. If he has something to tell the council they will come to me because we're about the same age. The rest of Council is extremely younger than me. Most people are but if they have something sometimes they're still scared to go talk to him. You know, he doesn't scare me at all. So there's been that, but he's really follow through. He does not hold grudges whatsoever.”

While Mr. Barry recognized that not all teachers were completely comfortable to talk to

Principal Montgomery yet, he did note that teachers were learning that he kept confidence for teachers and listened even when he did not agree. Mr. Barry reflected that this was a shift from the experience with the previous administration.

K-12 Unit School and culture. Some of Mr. Barry’s reflections about the school’s culture had little to do with its administration; rather, the focus was on the nature of a K-12-unit school and its size. These themes develop in the table below.

Table 22: Mr. Barry on the K-12 Unit School

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
K-12 Unit School	Size influence on culture	Traditions Reward positive behavior Quarterly celebration Small environment 25 grads per year	“We do every quarter we do what we call it a bash. And high school goes somewhere every quarter like we took him to the fire in September to the mall in Cool springs in December. But you also got to realize our high school is 120 kids so when you eliminate those who didn't qualify or those who don't want to go, we've been on two buses. And we have two of our high school teachers who have CDLs, so we can hop on a bus and go so it's a lot easier. And we graduate about 25 students a year. So when you're in a smaller environment that allows you to do these things, but that that culture you know, does make you proud..”
	Size and Knowledge	Connectedness Student knowledge Family connections Small school	“Our teachers know our kids. Yeah. That's one of the beautiful things about a small scale. Yeah, it is. That they do know the kids you know, they know their parents, they know their grandparents and their aunts and uncles.”

The ability to celebrate students and to know the students was key to Mr. Barry’s reflections on the nature of the K-12-unit school because the school is small and multi-generational.

Changes Implemented with New Administration. Mr. Barry acknowledged that there have been some practical changes in the school with the arrival of the new administration. While he noted that staff were “wary” of these changes initially, he illustrated how this perception changed over time.

Table 23: Mr. Barry on New Administration change

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Discipline policy	Change	ISS for missing work Vs ISS for discipline only Change to more teacher authority Administrator support	“So with our past administrator, if a student didn't do their work, they'd been placed in school suspension to the guy that made up this semester to come and said, that's doing absolutely no good because they're missing other classes to try to make up for one class. Totally agree. And I'm not impugning the last one because she was grasping at straws. We've got to fix this somehow, for those students who just won't do anything. And so, he came in and kind of changed that aspect where in school suspension is used strictly for discipline cases and not for academic endeavors.”
	Academics	Expectations Follow through Focus shift	“We've kind of gotten away from that attitude of academics or while we're here, and I feel like we're heading back in that direction. He's holding people's feet to the fire if a student just refuses to work in a class, he has a one-on-one talk with him.”

Mr. Barry focused on the positive changes that Principal Montgomery made in streamlining discipline and enforcing academic expectations. Mr. Barry's perspective about discipline and academics was also affected by his experiences with other schools.

Community Connection. As a former President of the Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Barry had a clear connection and understanding in working with the community. He shared that in his role with the Chamber of Commerce, he made connections with the community. This role allowed students to work with the community in service.

Table 24: Mr. Barry on Community Connection

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Community Connection	Outreach	Give Back CTE Pink Out	“Our students are very willing to give back. So I'm a CTE teacher - I teach CTE business and CTE director in the county just sent out something asking for a recap of what your club has done this year. And I got to looking at it...And so we started the year by making 300 shirts. One of our students had cancer, we made over 300 shirts, and gave proceeds from that to that family. We did Pink Out shirts, we just present a check for \$1,000 Tomorrow Regional Hospital for women's breast cancer.”
	Volunteer	Cemetery decorations Volunteer in community	“My students that went to the cemetery put veterans flags on the graves and that went to cemetery and put candles out of Christmas. And so I got to thinking you know, all these volunteer things that our kids have done, and they love it.”

For Mr. Barry, these acts of service were a primary way that the students engaged with the community. Mr. Barry also noted that for many of the students, they would not leave this community. He shared concerns that this can make motivating students difficult because they do not see beyond the surrounding area. Table 25 illustrates themes around the size of the community and its impact on the students.

Table 25: Mr. Barry on Community Size and Opportunity

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Opportunity	Industry	One-stoplight No industry Connections beyond community	“ Whereas Henderson is such a small community. It's tiny....There's no industry there's no opportunity for that.”
	Career path	No industry Student potential Small size Student motivation Settle	“I would say is being the small community center sometimes it's hard to motivate students because they don't know what's outside of it. And there's no industry so they can't see like, you know, I can be I can make \$80,000 a year if I just go get this training....Many of our students settle for what they know and be in that small community.”

Mr. Barry shared that they do offer a career fair to help students see opportunities and industry outside of the community. However, he acknowledged that often to take those opportunities, students must leave the community because “there's nothing available for them, and so they go off somewhere else and then their children are raised somewhere else,” which limits its growth.

Participant D – Ms. Johnson

As a Kindergarten teacher, Ms. Johnson brought the perspective of a different part of the K-12-unit school from that of Mr. Barry’s high school perspective. She explained that while all the administrators she experienced had been supportive, most of them come from a high school background and “just didn't know exactly what to do with kindergarten.”

Culture with Previous Administration. Ms. Johnson noted that Principal Montgomery was the third principal she worked for at Henderson Unit School. She briefly mentioned that the first principal that she worked for was a bit of a “micromanager” but that she “had a good relationship” with her. She spent more time explaining the culture with the administrator who preceded Principal Montgomery since the focus of the questions were about that transition. The

following tables show themes arose from her discussion of the previous administrator, such as leadership style and changes they made in school processes.

Table 26: Ms. Johnson on the previous administrator's leadership style

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Management Style	Increased strict management	Began laid back Transitioned managed everything	“She kind of started off very laid back and over time became more and more strict about settings about everything. She had a lot of she put in a lot of changes.... from small things like car rider procedures. Those completely changed, like things that were small but kind of added up and impacted almost the school culture.”
	Detail management	Changed even minor things Stringent policy	“Previous administrators had come in and just changed just about everything. The way we did lunch the way we did car rider lines or the way we did bathroom breaks down to every single thing we did.”
	Frequent meetings	Regular meetings Could be emails	“Previous leadership had us meeting a lot. And, you know, with the whole, this meeting, could be an email situation.”

Ms. Johnson did not use the term micromanager to describe the leadership style of the previous administrator, but she did talk about the changes that the previous leader made to enforce all the minor details of the school as well as frequent meetings that impacted the staff. Ms. Johnson reinforced that while the previous administrator was at the school, teacher turnover was around “six to seven a year” prior to Principal Montgomery’s arrival.

Culture with new administrator. Ms. Johnson was part of the group that welcomed Principal Montgomery to Henderson Unit School before his first year. She recalled that “he was hired that summer and in all there are only 10 elementary teachers in our school. Total. And so we just kind of bombarded him over the summer to welcome him but it probably seemed like an

ambush.” She explained that he came as an unknown to the school because he was not from the community, and they had expected the position to go to someone who was local to the area. However, the teachers who participated on the interview committee shared with other teachers that they were excited about him. As she talked about Principal Montgomery’s time at the school, the theme of teacher support was repeated. Table 27 illustrates the theme of administrator support.

Table 27: Ms. Johnson on New Administration Support

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Support	School Knowledge	Observe Get to know staff, students Status Quo Minimal change	“He did not come in and change. Like his whole thing last year was he wasn't going to change anything. Because he, he wanted to get to know us and the students and the, you know, the community.”
	Teacher advocate	Escalate concerns Immediate response Constant follow up	“If I have ever gone to him with a question or a concern, he's immediately taking care of it. At the beginning of this year. I had 28 Kindergarteners...And so every single day, for 20 days, or 20 school days, he called Central Office to ask for another teacher until they finally allowed him to post it. So he was he's not you know, he's, he's not shy to go above.”
	Available	Open-door policy Always visible	“he's always readily available. I mean, definitely open door policy, but he's, he's hardly ever in his office. So he's usually like in the hall and easily found.”
	Teacher workload	Unnecessary work Positive change listened	“He came in and took a lot off of our workload of unnecessary, unnecessary things. And he's listened, you know, if we said, we don't really need to do this, he's taken that off of our workload. So that's been that's been a positive change.
	Procedures	Solved problems logic	“And he just came in or and if something didn't make sense, like why are we doing this when we don't have to? He helped us figure out that situation. You know, he helped us to, like, we used to have to take bathroom break. specific time, which doesn't really go for kindergarten, right? And so he's like, Oh, no, that doesn't make any sense.”

Ms. Johnson shared that some changes since Principal Montgomery's arrival have been district mandated, so those have just had to be worked through together. She gave the example of keeping the doors open during COVID and now keeping the doors shut for safety as district mandated changes to building procedures. She explained that initially “I think he got a little bit

of pushback from some of those things that maybe he didn't have anything to do with” but that “ultimately everything resolved pretty easily.” One of the greatest challenges and changes since Principal Montgomery came to the school, according to Ms. Johnson, was the growth that occurred as the school was now out of classrooms. She explained that Principal Montgomery was challenged to find places for every teacher and intervention group.

K-12 Unit School Culture. Ms. Johnson explained that she sensed that coming to a K-12-unit school was a bit of a “culture shock” to Principal Montgomery. There were traditions in place like high school students helping in kindergarten classrooms that were new to him and caused concerns for him as far as ensuring policies for cross-grade band connections were followed. Table 28 illustrates themes surrounding Principal Montgomery’s initial reaction to the K-12-unit school structure.

Table 28: Ms. Johnson on the K-12 Unit School grade band connections.

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Cross-Grade Band Connections	High School-Elementary Connection	Tradition Student aides	" my high schoolers just left my classroom where they come in and help my kids, my kindergarteners, they come in and, you know, like, help them read or just help them, you know, change out their books or, you know, do things like that. And so, they that was started with my very first principal, she made sure that the older kids came in and helped with the younger kids. And there was always a big community feeling here. And then the next administrator carried that on as well."
	Culture Shock	Initially changed student aides District procedure Difficult change	"And I do think it was difficult for him to come. And no, like I just said that, like my high school girls were in here earlier. And so when he came, he wanted to make sure that he was following district procedure really well. Wanted to make sure that was an okay thing to do. So at first, he was like, 'No, I don't think they need to do that.' You know that. Because he came from an inner city school, where that probably would never have worked out. But that's how we've always done things here. And so I think that kind of the culture shock for him was interesting to watch."

When thinking about the school, Ms. Johnson described it as “adorable.” She explained that size and student connections make it special. Table 29 illustrates Ms. Johnson’s description of the community within the K-12-unit school.

Table 29: K-12 Unit School inner community

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
K-12 Unit School Community	High School-Elementary Connection	School Community Nine week celebrations	"I mean, we used to have every nine weeks, we have a behavior party. And when I first came here, 12 years ago, it was a school wide party every nine weeks, and it was a full day party, which was beyond anything....So when I came here, it was definitely a shock to see like 18-year-olds helping with five-year-olds. Yeah. But and so like that, you know, that part of it has kind of changed over the years for sure. But there's definitely just a big community feeling within the school."
	Teacher connections	Close-knit Mentor program Mid-year transitions	"We have, we have a mentor program, which honestly did not happen until after I came here. But it's nice for our newer teachers. It's kind of, like I said, it's just a really close knit, like close knit school. I do feel like maybe some people who come like after the year has begun may not receive as much support or network, you know, which, like I say, I feel like it's attempted, but I feel like sometimes people just get thrown in when they're new here. So just, that's something as teachers we have to be really cognizant of."

As Ms. Johnson reflected on the K-12-unit school, she expressed that "I think every single day I say I love this place. Because it's just, it's just a sweet little place." However, she noted that one challenge for administrators was to balance the attention to all grade bands within the school especially with only one administrator and one assistant principal in place. She explained that one of the greatest challenges for an administration was "reaching every grade level equally" because, from her perspective, high school and middle school required most of the administrator's time. This left elementary teachers feeling like they were not always well-represented, according to Ms. Johnson. She explained that overall, it was hard for one administrator "to be able to be equitable across all grade levels." Ms. Johnson did not elaborate any further on how the Henderson Community responded to Principal Montgomery except to say

that they had responded to him, “really well. They seem to have embraced him. I think it's gone well.”

Participant E – Ms. Allan

Ms. Allan served the school as a staff member. She was working with her fourth principal at the school and remembered when the school did not have an Assistant Principal. She noted that “we were very excited when we found out there was an AP position here because it was the first one ever.” AP Shirley was her fifth assistant principal here, but she was also her third assistant principal at the school since she left and returned. She reflected on the leadership styles of all four principals that she worked with during her time at Henderson and explained that “I think with the four different principals, there's been a different leadership style about them all, you know, the first two were pretty similar. But even different, you know, the same but different.” Each person brought different leadership qualities to the school.

Culture with Previous Administrator. Because Ms. Allan worked with so many administrators, she experienced this variety of leadership styles. She reflected most deeply on the previous administration to Principal Montgomery. Ms. Allan explained that the previous administrator did not come directly from an administrative role but was serving as a data coach at a different school. She worked at several different schools in different roles. Table 30 illustrates her perception of how the previous administrator approached her work at the school and approached discipline in the school.

Table 30: Ms. Allan's overview of time with the previous administration

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Leadership impact	Initial Period	Honeymoon phase	"A couple years we had some good years, but we kind of thought, you know, honeymoon phase was over. And it was, it started to we started to see changes. But honestly, I don't think it was we were seeing a new person. We were seeing the true person."
	Turnover	Impression of leadership turnover	"The last few years with that one was It was rough. It was rough. For most everybody in this building a lot of turnover in the nine years she was here.."
	Discipline policy	Discipline Favoritism Connection	"she disciplined and she did things sometimes based on who the child was."

A parent made a similar comment to Ms. Allan in referencing the honeymoon period that occurred when first working with the previous administration through a Facebook Post as illustrated in the below figure.

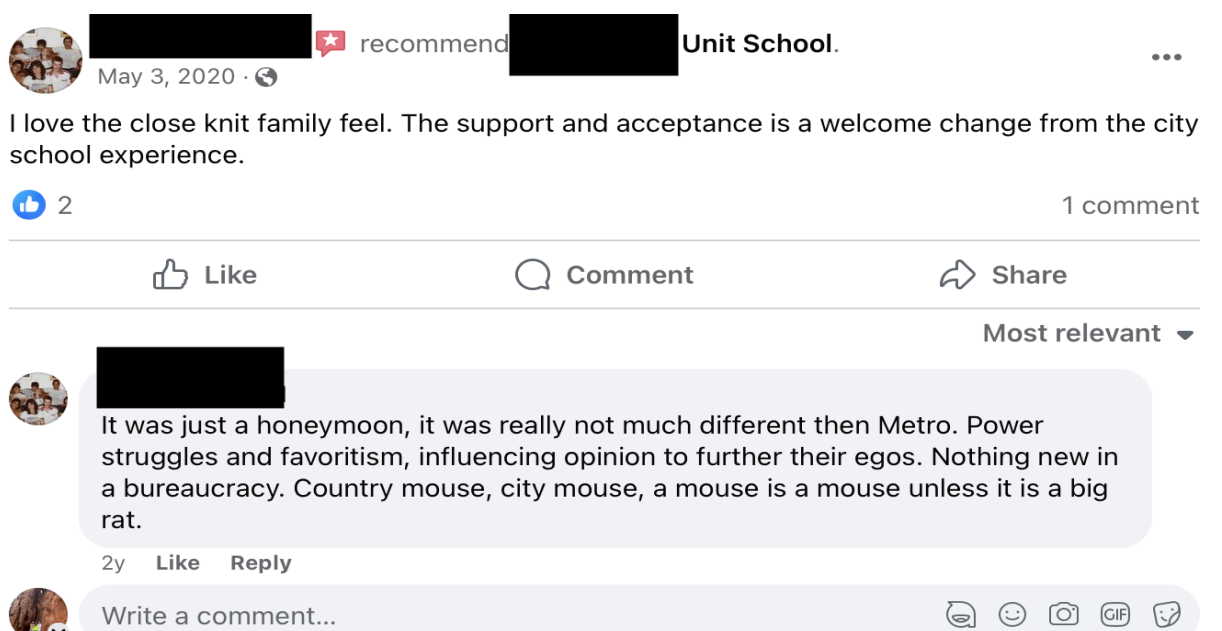


Figure 10: Social Media Post

Ms. Allan also explained that the previous administrator was strongly connected in the community. She shared that this administrator graduated from Henderson, had family in Henderson, and was well connected in the area. As she talked about the policies of this previous administrator, she explained that the discipline procedures were not consistent during her time at the school depending on “social status.”

Culture with Current Administration. Ms. Allan started by explaining that when Principal Montgomery came to the school, it was a “blessing.” As she talked about Principal Montgomery, several themes emerged around his leadership style such as support and student discipline. Ms. Allan shared that Principal Montgomery started at the school with a leadership style that focused on an open-door policy and a hesitancy to micromanage. She shared that she felt supported by him “daily.” Table 31 captures Ms. Allan’s thoughts on Principal Montgomery’s leadership style:

Table 31: Ms. Allan's thoughts on Principal Montgomery's leadership style

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Leadership Style	Support	Not micromanage Present if needed Come to me	"I'm not gonna micromanage. We're all adults. I'm gonna let you do your job. You do your job, you know where I am. If you need me, and that was such a huge"
	Trust	Not micromanage Adults Do your job Change in expectation	"for him to come in and go, we're all adults here. You know, I'm not going to tell you what you need to wear to school or how to, you know, you come professional, you know, and you do what you're supposed to do in your classroom. You know, if it begins if it starts to be an issue, then then I'll step in, but until then, you think job. Yeah, I think that's been that's been like I said, it's been a load lifted."
	Discipline	Consistent Fair Regardless	"You know, you're the same whether you are valedictorian, or your last in your class, or your parent makes six figures are your own free or reduced. I'm gonna treat you the same way. Because every student is individual here. You get the same punishment, regardless of your social status, right? That wasn't always the case with two and three."
	Status Quo	Hesitant to make major changes Support in current work	"keep trucking like you've been trucking,"

The shift in leadership style that Ms. Allan highlighted focused on Principal Montgomery's expectations with his staff and students. She explained elements that contrasted with previous administrators such as "not micromanage" and "do what you're supposed to do." Similarly, she focused on contrasts to previous administration when talking about how Principal Montgomery approached discipline by sharing how Principal Montgomery's discipline was consistent across all student populations. These things contrasted with those of the previous administration, according to Ms. Allan, so they represented the changes Ms. Allan addressed in her interview.

K-12 Unit School Culture. Ms. Allan also talked about the nature of the K-12-unit school and how, in having all three grade bands in one building, it created its own culture and subculture. Table 32 shows themes that arose regarding the school's subcultures because of the grade bands represented.

Table 32: Ms. Allan on K-12 Unit School and subcultures

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Grade Band Cultures	Elementary	Self-sufficient	"Elementary is on their own island. They're their own school. They can. They're self sufficient. They run themselves down there."
	Middle School	Like Kids Close knit	"middle school teachers, I think are like middle school kids. They're their own person, you know, they do their own thing. Now, there's a few that have, you know, that have special bonds or whatever."
	Middle School	Support one-another Family Response in tragedy	"We have one teacher in particular, I think it's been three years ago now. Her son was tragically killed. And so those teachers kind of, you know, sheltered her covered her with love and you know, that kind of thing. And it's helped her get through and it helped her keep, keep truckin."
	High School	Consistent Fair Regardless	"Our high school teachers up here, they're special breed. They call themselves the council. I don't know who nicknamed them that. But anyway, they're very close knit group. They share a lot with each other. And they have their own little Council texting group or whatever and they, you know, they're very, very in tune with what each other's doing."

Ms. Allan explained that these different personalities made the culture of the school and that "there's no place I'd rather be." As she talked about culture, she also talked about the unique nature of having students across all grade bands in one building. She explained that "it's really cool to see. You know, kids start and finish." Table 33 illustrates themes that emerged in working with all grade bands of students and traditions that exist within the school.

Table 33: Ms. Allan's reflections on traditions in the K-12 Unit School

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Traditions	Senior Walk	Clap out My kids	"When these kids do their clap out, the seniors when they're on their last day here and they come up through you and I'm just like, you know, I want to cry because those are my kids, you know?"
	Safe	Known for being a safe place Reputation	"Because we've had such a good reputation for having a good school that's safe. And one that really cares about kids and, you know, overall has a really good culture."

As Ms. Allan talked about the K-12-unit school, she focused most on how watching the students grow from kindergarten through senior year built the culture and community of the school.

Changes implemented with New Administration. During the conversation, most of the changes that Ms. Allan shared were changes that happened in contrast of one administrator to another as shown above. However, she also shared how Principal Montgomery streamlined paperwork processes for her to make her job easier. She noted that "one thing that he did put into place as far as my job, like anything that needed a signature, he wanted to come through me, okay. And I give them all to him at one time. He's like, I don't want people and stuff on my desk or put it in my door. He said I collect and give them all to you, and you give them to me at one time. Okay, and it makes perfect sense because it helps the workflow." This change to streamline the paperwork process was notable for Ms. Alen because it affected communication and workflow.

Community Connection. Ms. Allan explained that the community connection was one of the strongest parts of the K-12-unit school because the "the school is probably the focal point of this community. This is what this little town runs on. Is this school." She explained that when there are special events at the school and traditions that have been going for decades, such as the

carnival, the community comes out to support the school – even “people who graduated in the 70s.” She noted that this was because “this is what we are, and this is what a lot of people live for.” She reflected on how Principal Montgomery assimilated into the community. Her reflections centered around his willingness to make connections in the community and are illustrated in Table 34 below.

Table 34: Ms. Allan’s reflections on Principal Montgomery and the community

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Community Assimilation	Visible	Welcome Getting familiar Making connections	" think it's been a great response just because he's been visible. He's been, hey, he doesn't mind picking up the phone to call a parent. Regardless. He's here at all the extra curricular things. He's here at all the ball games. And he's just...he's very welcoming."
	Leadership	Introduction Connections Lead the school	“You know, he'll speak to you, you know, introduce himself every time he says somebody he's not seen before and I think people have felt a sense of security with him. You know, because I think he's, he's, he's developed that he's come in here, ready to lead the school. He didn't come in here to make friends. He came in here to lead the school and make it successful.”

Ms. Allan noted that even though Principal Montgomery came to the school outside of the community, his willingness to be open and make introductions and be welcoming helped in his transition into the community.

Participant F – Ms. Gillis

Ms. Gillis just joined Henderson Unit School from another local elementary school. She explained that she came from a school of 600 to the K-12-unit school of 450. She explained that this school was extremely small with the largest class being a middle school grade of 42 students.

Because this was Ms. Gillis' first year at the school, she did not have anything to share about the previous administration or about changes that Principal Montgomery made in the school, but she did share things that she noticed about the culture, K-12 unit school, community and leadership style during her time with Principal Montgomery.

Culture with Current Administration. Ms. Gillis explained that she first encountered Principal Montgomery at graduation last spring for her cousin. Her first impression came from the speech that he gave at graduation when he quoted Tim McGraw's song and said, "always stay humble and kind." She jokingly added that her first thought was "if you're gonna stand up there and quote Tim McGraw, I like you." However, her first real introduction to Principal Montgomery came during her interview. She explained that her impression of Principal Montgomery was that "he doesn't put on a show" and he was not like others who were politically involved in the school. She continued to explain that he was not there to "climb the ladder" but that he was "truly invested." She explained that "I think he's just really, just really clear. You know, these are the expectations, you know. I think he wants to keep it. The community vibe the family feel." As she talked, she explained her impression of Principal Montgomery's leadership style. Table 35 illustrates the themes that arose around his leadership style.

Table 35: Ms. Gillis on Principal Montgomery's Leadership Style

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Leadership Style	Laid Back	Support Approachable No favoritism	“He's just been very just very laid back. Just very very easy, you know, very easy to approach, you know, like I said, if I had a problem I don't go to the office in fear, you know, if there is a problem I don't. I don't - you know - It's just a very mutual playing field here to me. Everyone's on the same, the same level, and I enjoy that. It's been very, very beneficial for me.”
	Leadership	Support Proactive No Favoritism Benefit the children	“There's not a lot of favoritism. It's just he. He's here to be respectful to everyone to treat everyone the same. If I've had a problem. He's been very proactive.”
	Visible	Visible Tours Growth	“I actually, I see our principal. probably about once a week. He's walking a new family around because there are people that want to come tour the school.....so I see him about once a week, and he has a family, or he has a mom, or he has someone who is coming.”

Ms. Gillis noted that being at the school had been a good transition for her. She shared that

Principal Montgomery explained at the last faculty meeting that “Obviously, we're doing something right if people are calling and people are coming, and you know they want to come here.”

K-12 Unit School Culture. Perhaps because this was Ms. Gillis' first year at the school, she spent more time sharing about the differences in the K-12-unit school and traditional schools. Regarding the K-12 Unit School, her focus was on the connection between the grade bands at the school. Table 36 illustrates those themes.

Table 36: K-12 Unit School Grade Band Connections

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
K-12 Unit School Grade Band Connections	Pep Rallies	Elementary participation Whole School	“So there's just things that they wouldn't have experienced in an elementary setting. So. But they understand, you know, when there's a pep rally we all go to the gym. The cheerleaders cheer, and so it's just I thought they would have never! They wouldn't have got to be a part of that.”
	Elementary Connection	Cheer camp High school opportunity Community feel connection	“They did a little mini cheer camp for k-4. So they got to come on a Saturday they stayed about 3 hours, and then they got to come back on a Thursday night, and they got to perform at half time with the High School cheerleaders. She had about 40-42 girls come. And then and then that night at the ball game. There was nowhere to park.”
	Student Helpers	HS Role Models Student Helpers Student connections	Every day for about 45 min I have a high school helper who comes in...And she comes every day, and she knows all of the kids by name and so they. She was one of the top 10, the student that comes in she's a senior, and so they did a little video. And they sent it out. And they were all like, ‘Oh, that's Miss Mary.’ She's on the video because she made - And then she was she got one of the senior superlatives, so they recognize her when they see her. And so I thought, well, that she's a great role model for them. And I just thought they have that relationship with her. They wouldn't have in a elementary setting.

From a teacher who was new to the school, Ms. Gillis remarked repeatedly about the connections between the high school students and the elementary students that “wouldn’t have in an elementary setting.” This was included here as it was part of the perspective of a new teacher to the school in seeking to understand the school culture. She also noted that the size of the school was important. She shared that “my daughter is in the 10th grade and one of her English classes has 9 kids.” She explained that the size of the classrooms affects instruction. Table 37 details themes that arose because of school size.

Table 37: K-12 Unit School Grade Size

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Classroom Culture	Instruction	Student Knowledge Individualized Elementary nothing above 16 students	“So when your numbers, you know, when your numbers are that low you can do a little bit more individualized instruction. And, I think you know your students better because there’s fewer of them.”
	Discipline	Fewer problems	“There’s fewer disruptions. There’s fewer behavior problems because there’s fewer students.”
	Diversity	Not much Homogenous community	“There’s not a lot of minority kids here. There’s not a lot of economic disadvantaged kids. There’s not a lot of social-emotional trauma. Not a lot of those things that usually play into a school day.”
	Student relationships	Same class Close knit No drama	“In my other schools, a lot of clicks and drama. And these kids – you know – the girls wouldn’t play with these girls. Here, it’s just very – well, they were all in the same kindergarten class last year – there was 25 of them – and they were all in the same class together all year. So, they’re just a very close knit group of people.”

She also shared that one of the challenges this year was in filling an elementary Special Education position that opened after the school year started. She noted that it was hard to find someone since at this point in the year, you cannot change schools within the county. In reflecting on teaching at Henderson, she said that “it’s pretty easy.”

Community Connections. While Ms. Gillis had only been at the school for a portion of the school year, she had already begun to see the importance of community connections. For her, the community connection came in the form of support, specifically with the traditional Carnival where she received \$200 for her classroom funds that “I’m not used to having – I usually would’ve spent out of my own pocket.” She also explained that the communication with the community and members of the PTO was clear because “everybody communicates well.”

Participant G – Ms. Stacey

Ms. Stacey was strongly connected to the Henderson Unit School and the community. Her husband grew up in Henderson and attended school there until the seventh grade when he left to attend a school that offered football. Ms. Stacey explained that she had been a teacher in the county for a long time but took a break after adopting two children to stay at home. When she returned to teaching, she came to Henderson Unit School.

Culture with Previous administrator. Ms. Stacey reflected on the previous administration; she explained that she “got along” with her but “not everyone did.” As she shared her experience with the previous administrator, she focused on her management style. Table 38 illustrates themes that arose from her discussion on the previous administrator’s management.

Table 38: Previous Administration Management Style with Teachers

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Management Style	Strict	Hard-handed Discouraged Fearful	“our last administrator was very hard handed. And so I have told people that, you know, you felt like you had your foot, foot on your throat sometimes. And so we really, people were discouraged..”
	Management with Fear	Fear environment	“Whereas before, it was just in a straight fear – in a place with the teachers, I should say, with teachers.”
	Management	Awkward interactions Hard to watch	“While she was fine with me, did I witness her not being fine with others and the way she conducted herself with them, and it was extremely awkward when you, you know, had to witness that.”
	Relationships	Rule follower Conflict	“I also want to say this. She, - I got along just fine with her. And I'm a rule follower. And so, you know, if you tell me, you want me to stand on my head, and, you know, teach prepositions, then I'm gonna do the best I can to stand on my feet. Right. And so, I got along. Not everyone did.”
	Expectations	Data analysis No follow-up Accountability	“I think that there were expectations and the expectations, some of the things that are respected you data. It was it was I felt like my classroom was very data driven. Um, in our professional development days, we, we dissected data. So you know, a lot of times you get left to do that on your own. And but she had, she had a form now, you know, she may not two months down the road, she may never look at your forms, but you at least right reflected on what you needed to do.”

Ms. Stacey explained that students also felt an oppressive culture with the previous administrator because they knew they constantly got “in trouble.” She explained that with the students, they received write ups for even minor infractions such as forgetting a pencil. This

created an environment where “they were so used to getting in trouble for every little thing. Sometimes when you do that, then it turns into, I don’t care about anything – I’m going to get in trouble for it anyway.” Additionally, she noted that the previous administrator was not present at special events, and she felt disconnected from these events. However, she did feel that there “was a very small group of people who were in the know” about things with the previous administrator.

New Administrator. As a participant on the interview committee, Ms. Stacey came to the panel seeking an administrator who possessed some of the qualities that she thought were missing from the previous administrator. She sought someone who was “going to lift us up” and who was “going to be present” for special events and community engagements. When she reflected on the culture shift in the school with Principal Montgomery, she said that “the air is lighter.” She acknowledged that there remained “a healthy fear here now of consequences and that kind of thing, a respectful fear.” She explained that “he handles things when he needs to handle things.” As she reflected on her experience with Principal Montgomery, she shared information about his leadership style. Table 30 captures the leadership style of Principal Montgomery according to Ms. Stacey.

Table 39: Principal Montgomery's Leadership Style

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Leadership Style	Supportive	Call Central Office Case assessment	“And so he's supportive, because I was totally expecting us to go to his office to say, well, you know, that is not really how it's intended to be...And so I was fully expecting him to say, you know, it's intended to be like this, but they didn't. And he called, you know, central office and told him, you know, we've got these problems. And he has also requested that they not ever, you know, give us that, that browser.”
	Feedback	Willing to listen Escalated to Central Office if needed Case Assessment	“Then he also asked for our feedback....And so he took that feedback [about the benchmark assessment and grading], back to them [Central Office].”

Ms. Stacey felt supported because Principal Montgomery listened to her and then asked for feedback regarding an assessment that took class time. He took that one step further by following up with Central Office to prevent similar problems from occurring in the future.

Community. While Ms. Stacey did not talk about any community traditions, she shared that the key thing to know about the community is that it is just “very small” with little to no “diversity.” She explained that her one concern about the area was that “people are not accepting of diversity” and felt that it was like “stepping back in time.” However, she also shared that the community responded well to Principal Montgomery and explained that Principal Montgomery connected with the community because even the community was accustomed to the previous administration being “heavy handed.” According to Ms. Stacey, the community was ready for a change in administration. She believed that his calm, laid back personality allowed him to make these connections. Ms. Stacey explained that without this type of personality, she did not think it would have worked.

Change with New Administrator. Ms. Stacey noted that she did not feel like Principal Montgomery came to the school to make many changes. She explained that he just said, “let me know what you’re doing. I don’t need to fix what’s not broken.” Ms. Stacey shared that some of the changes that came with Principal Montgomery were due to overall district changes, especially in the schedule. Because the district mandated a move from the high school 4x4 block schedule to a traditional schedule, middle school schedule stayed in the block. The concern for middle school teachers in this shift was that it shortened the middle school teacher’s planning time.

However, she also shared that from a student’s perspective, one major change that came from Principal Montgomery was in the policy on hats in the building. She explained that this has been a cause for frustration for the students because they are accustomed to wearing their hats 24/7. So, teachers were now constantly reminding male students to remove their hats.

At the end of the interview, Ms. Stacey shared that regardless of who the administrator was at the school, the focus was on “teaching and learning” so that “teachers do what teachers do no matter who is at the helm” because they were “obligated to these children.”

Summary of interviews.

Throughout these teacher interviews, teachers focused consistently on memories of the previous administrator being someone who micromanaged and managed by favorites. All the school personnel, from the assistant principal to the teachers to the staff, shared ways that they felt that the culture shifted in a more positive tone whether describing that shift as feeling “lighter” or less difficult to work with in the school. Teachers also shared consistently that school size affected how students engaged across grade bands. The size of the community encouraged community support and engagement. Administrators shared that they sought to foster open door relationships with the teachers and teachers reinforced that they have an open relationship with

administrators and felt supported through changes that occurred in the school. Teachers cited a variety of changes from the district-mandated scheduling change to discipline to hat policies. Administration focused on the discipline policy change as the primary change implemented with the new administration. In reviewing the interviews, the following themes experienced as depicted in Figure 11:

Reflection on Leadership and school:	Previous Administrator:	New Administrator:
Leadership Style Traditions: Carnival, PTO, Pep Rally, K-12 student helpers Size	Micromanaging Favoritism Turnover	Trust Status Quo Discipline plan Visible Laid Back Supportive

Figure 11: Interview Themes

The only teacher who did not reflect on the culture change was the one hired this year. All teachers shared that Principal Montgomery was approachable and supportive of them. Both elementary teachers noted that his visibility was important to them. Assistant Principal Shirley echoed these changes with a focus on the shift of the school climate and culture away from micromanagement. The teachers reflected what Principal Montgomery noted as his leadership style which was to be supportive, allow people to do their jobs, and work for improvement in partnership with teachers. Every participant spoke on the importance of traditions to the school and the community and elaborated on how these traditions have not changed with Principal Montgomery.

CHAPTER VII: COMMUNITY MEMBERS

To gather an understanding of the relationship between community members and the school, a focus group meeting was held. The focus group consisted of three community member participants, two male and one female. All three participants attended Henderson Unit School as part of their own education time. Two of the participants had children either in the school or recently graduated. One of these two participants had a daughter who had just started kindergarten and met Principal Montgomery when he enrolled her. One participant did not have children who attended the school but had a spouse who currently taught there. All three members lived in the Henderson Community. One Focus Group member was also an employee at the School System's Central Office and worked in the Human Resources Department. Two Focus Group members shared that they were on a board that was formerly known as the "Agriculture Board" and was now known as the "Foundation Board." All three members of the Focus Group grew up together.

The focus group met for one hour and seventeen minutes and followed the focus group interview protocol. During this time, the following topics drove the conversation: perception of the new administration, perception of Henderson Unit School, and School Community Connections. Figure 12 details the ten main ideas that held additional subtopics that were the most frequently coded from this Focus Group meeting.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Background 2. Community Connections 3. Traditions 4. Carnival 5. Ag Board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Size 7. Concerns about shut down 8. Characteristics of Unit School 9. Introduction with New Principal 10. Change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Introduction with New Principal 10. Change
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Figure 12: Focus Group Main Ideas

Perception of New Administration

Each member of the focus group met the administration at various times, but the overall perception of the new administrator was similar across all Focus Group members. Focus Group members shared that they noticed his visibility as being key to his engagement at the school. One Focus Group member also pointed out that Principal Shirley “is from the community” and she was “approachable by most people.”

Table 40 illustrates the Focus Group’s comments on the new administrator’s visibility in the school:

Table 40: Administrator Visibility and Approachability

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Visibility	Initial Introduction	Big meeting Overview Approachable	“We had a meeting in the cafeteria at the very beginning. He was there with his wife, and we were talking about the city. And he told me about being a principal up there and some of the challenges he had, and I told him about putting a bunch of bad people in jail. And so we kind of bonded over that.”
	Athletic Events	Approachable Ballgames Few interactions	“I mean, just casual interactions with him either at a ball game or during the school day, but I mean, he's very approachable. He always speaks he doesn't seem very standoffish or or anything.”
	Daily	Car Rider Line Greeting Students	“I know what mornings I have come by. I see both of them out there. And you know, that to me is, I wouldn't necessarily say it's an important thing that they do, but the fact that they're greeting these kids come in as a kindergarten or first grade or a second grader, and seeing them, in my opinion, that that makes them approachable from the students' perspective.”
	Daily	Car Rider Line Parent engagement Greeting School events	“I see Principal Montgomery in the greeting line, both on pickup and drop off; so he literally when he told me about you, he walked by one afternoon because we sit there 30 minutes to pick up and rolled out my window. It's very comfortable for me. And I like knowing who everyone is, and I want them to know who I am. And that's just the way it was. Principal Montgomery, AP Shirley, they're both very approachable because you do see them at a lot of the school events, and you have seen them in the little hawks basketball program.”

Administration visibility and approachability were two of the characteristics that the Focus Group explained are important to them in their expectations of a K-12 Unit School administrator.

Table 41 illustrates expectations that these community members have of the administration.

Table 41: Community Member Expectations

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Community Member Expectations of Admin	Visible	Community Events Present Athletic Events	"You have to be a little more involved with your community. You have to be when you have events at the school, you have to be there - present. You have to kind of know not just your parents but you know the grandparents, the aunts and uncles, the cousins, who lives you know, two doors down. It's just kind of unimportant. It's just in a small community. It's just kind of an important thing to be involved, but more so involved."
	Share information	Weekly newsletters Regular Communication	"Communication. You want them to at least keep you informed of what's going on - what's happening. Doesn't necessarily have to be on a daily basis, but I know they have a weekly call out and a reminder message that goes out that kind of gives the schedule for the week and that's a good thing just to kind of give you the rundown on what's going on during the week. Big picture stuff."
	Listen	All interest groups Willing Care	"To listen to all the interested groups to care about the kids and want us to keep kicking"

Principal Montgomery’s communication with the community was displayed through a weekly Facebook “what’s happening” post as shown in Figure 13:

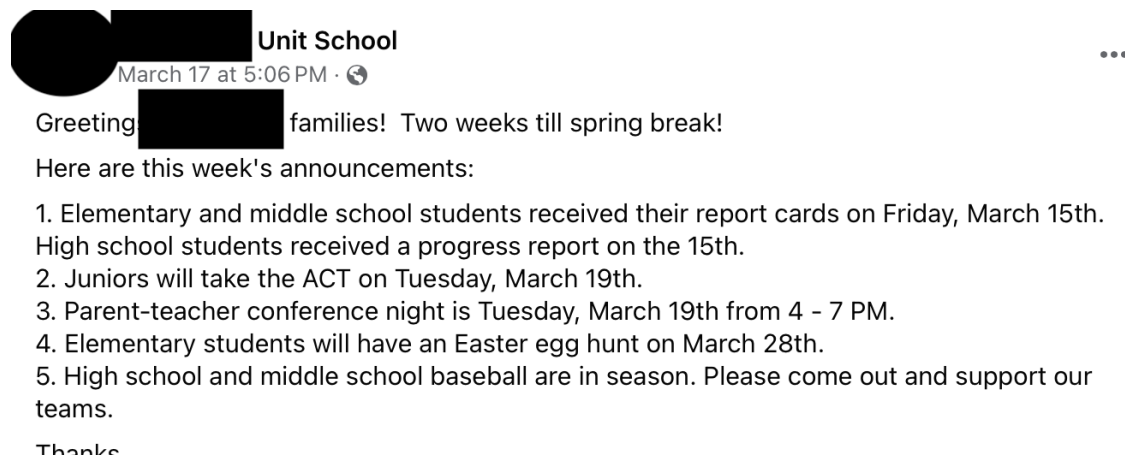


Figure 13: Social Media Post

While the Focus group shared that they felt that Principal Montgomery has been involved, communicated, and listened, they still had concerns about how he would continue to keep a culture of success with the students in the school. One focus group member explained that “I just hope that things don't go south. Over, you know, the years that's just been one of the things that we've always been known for is being a really good school, where our students could stand out anywhere, and my son is one of them. He graduated with a 99 point something average. And I know he could do whatever he wanted anywhere, but I don't want to see that change over the years, so I want to keep the same standard. You know, I don't only want to get better - I don't want to go the other way.” Another focus group member explained that the change in the K-12-unit school was scary particularly due to the small environment. This participant stated, “in this type of environment, change - a lot of people sometimes get very afraid of change. Oh, it's a new principal or it's new teachers. Or it's this or it's that I mean...And so, I think, you know, and that's true of any school, not just a unit school, but of every school and you hope that your administrators are cognizant enough to see who does what well and try to instill that behavior or those characteristics and all of your faculty are all of your students.” Additionally, they shared

frustrations about changes that occurred with the Agriculture Board since Principal Montgomery arrived. While they explained that they were not certain that this change came because of Principal Montgomery, they were concerned that the Agriculture Board lost its long-standing university connection. One Focus Group member shared that there was a feeling that the community would continue to support the work of this Department and that “seldom am I disappointed by things in this school. Seldom and I've been associated with it for a very long time. But considering the amount of time that had been spent on that program, and the people that were willing to give of their time freely, the resources, the connections to things that could have been done. I was disappointed in that. Now, not to say that we're not still going we've got something planned right now we're meeting Thursday night and we're all we all agreed to give all of our time and resources to all of the CTE groups and we're going to do that, but I think we were all a little disappointed in the change.” While this Focus Group member did not state that the concern rested with Principal Montgomery’s work with the Agriculture Board, the focus group member did share disappointment in how the changes unfolded in the last two years. The Agriculture Board was serving all CTE Departments rather than being focused on agriculture and was now called the Foundation Board (Personal communication, April 24, 2024).

School Culture and Community

Members of the Focus Group spoke in depth about the connection of the school and the community. One focus group member made the connection that the school was the center for the community because “if you think about it, I mean, population wise, a third - 30 to 40% of the population - is here from 7:30 to 3:00 every day. I mean, aside from you know, now, I'm not here, but you know, in a smaller community there every day for 40 plus hours a week and like

you said on the weekend for the junior league basketball or the carnival, that's, that's where it's the center of activity.” Another focus group member shared that “the school pretty much is the community.”

They shared traditions such as the Carnival and Halloween Trick or Treating in the community during the school day that existed since their time as students in the 1970s and 1980s. Table 42 shows some of the traditions shared by members of the focus group and how they impact the community.

Table 42: Community and School Connection through Tradition

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
Tradition	Carnival	Community Event Principal connection	"A principal at a school like this is kind of nice to know everybody because if there's a school carnival, then you know, a lot of people come and they're not necessarily here because of a child. It's just like the thing to know to maybe do on a Saturday night."
	Halloween	K-4 parade Family Support	"So this year I came down and was dropping something off but they did it. They started at like one o'clock or something. And I mean the crowd of people. I would say less than 10% of the K through four kids did not have someone in their immediate family walking with them."
	Halloween	Community Support Size Location	"I know for Halloween, the kids dress up and they parade over into downtown. And you know, the people hand out candy and stuff to them and during the school day. And it's Halloween, you know, and again, it's not that that is exclusive to here but again we have the best setup. If you were in a more centralized or an urban location, it would be impossible to you probably wouldn't want the kids going parading around through some of the neighborhoods or whatever."

The carnival and the Halloween festivities were also highlighted in social media posts, as shown in Figure 14 and 15 below.



Figure 14: Social Media Post



Figure 15: Social Media Post

In addition to community activities that are for the school, the Focus Group members shared how the school had a place in the community. Table 43 illustrates how the school was the center of the community.

Table 43: School in the Community

Theme	Categories	Codes	Illustrative Quote
School-Community Connection	Unit School	Part of Community Different Unique	"The big sport here is basketball. So you know, if you've got a great winning team or something and you have a huge game on, let's say a Friday night, then you know, everybody in the community -this is where they'll be on a Friday night. So that's why I'm saying - your school is what the community's doing. And, if you're really good then this the community's gonna go."
	Sports	Shut down town to support Travel State tournament	"If we had a great team and they were winning and they went to the state tournament Well, everybody in Henderson would go absolutely would go to that game. So that's just literally be a ghost town. Extra bus you know, it's been a long time, but we have done it."

They also shared information about the school size and impact of that size on the school. The Focus Group members worried about the school being shut down because of its size and shared how this has been an on-going concern for over fifty years. They explained that anytime new board members or county commissioners are elected, the conversation around consolidation occurs with them noting that "if you consolidate and do away with this, you know, how much money would it save and this or that." One member furthered this discussion by explaining the following:

And so, I think, you know, and that's true of any school, not just at this school, but of every school, and you hope that your administrators are cognizant enough to see who does what well and try to instill that behavior or those characteristics, and all of your faculty are all of your students or to expect the most of everyone here because when you are used to fighting often for your school, and there has been the threat of and oftentimes in the middle of the night at a special called school board meeting like close Henderson

Unit School. I mean, my parents, my mom and dad both served on the county commission. So and his parents were always very involved as well. So this is our threat. But when you're used to that out threat, you know that you need your school to maintain its good qualities.

They wanted to know that the school's administration would ensure it was not shut down and that it would continue to flourish with Principal Montgomery. This fear and concern were, perhaps, what stood out most in the discussion with the Focus Group members.

Summary

The Focus Group members had long ties to the school as former students in the school and now members of the Henderson Community. They reflected fondly on traditions that were held as part of the school during their time as students that continue today. They had strong school connections through the Foundation Board, previously known as the Agriculture Board. Their primary leadership concerns stem from support of community ideals such as the Agriculture Board, success of the school, and continuation of the school. They saw the school as a focal point of the community and want to continue to see its success as a K-12-unit school.

CHAPTER VIII: DISCUSSION

This qualitative study sought to understand the effect of leadership change in one K-12-unit school on the school's culture and community. The study used interviews with new administration, teachers, staff members, and community members to understand the perceptions of the school's culture both prior to and after the administration change. Additionally, artifacts were collected including two school improvement plans, social media posts, and 2022 state teacher survey responses. The following two research questions were addressed through this study:

1. How does a new administrator assimilate within the existing school culture initially accepted by teachers and community members in a K-12-unit school?
2. How does the culture and/or community also have to adjust during the assimilation of a new leader?

In considering the first research question, the assimilation of an individual into a community is complex; however, through reflecting on this study, there are some potential recommendations for leadership methods that may make assimilation easier: establish a strong local connection, maintain traditions, be visible, and be intentional about the types of changes that are implemented.

First, the connection between Principal Montgomery and Assistant Principal Shirley as a liaison in the school may have been one way that Principal Montgomery was able to more easily assimilate into the school. Assistant Principal Shirley noted that during Principal Montgomery's first year, teachers were "more comfortable" talking to her or bringing concerns to her. This, then, allowed her to partner with Principal Montgomery through any concerns brought to her. Assistant Principal Shirley acknowledged that when the previous administrator was there, she

was known as the “voice of reason,” so teachers already had a connection to her. The focus group members further supported this when reflecting on school leadership by explaining that she is “approachable by most people” as she is already “from the community.” Mr. Barry further agreed with this by talking about how it helps teachers to know that there is a person in leadership who is a Henderson graduate, and they feel like she understands them. Mr. Barry also shared that teachers felt comfortable in talking to him as another liaison to Principal Montgomery. By having a person or more than one person who is approachable and known by the community, Principal Montgomery benefited in assimilating more easily. Assistant Principal Shirley and Mr. Barry created a bridge between teachers and Principal Montgomery in his first year at the school which helped him assimilate. Principal Montgomery fostered that bridge through his “open door” policy and willingness to listen. While teachers may not have felt ready to approach him, Assistant Principal Shirley and Mr. Barry did. While it is true that “organizational development and change are influenced by diverse units and actors” (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995, p. 526), having a source of continuity, may help in adjusting to change. Therefore, it may be important for new administrators in the K-12-unit school to build a liaison with a person either in administration or on staff who is known and respected in the school to help understand and meet its needs. Wieczorek and Manard (2018) show that these liaisons are part of focusing on first building relationships in the buildings for improvement to occur.

If an administrator is to assimilate into the K-12-unit school, they should also recognize the importance of traditions to the school and community. School traditions surfaced in every conversation with repetition of key traditions including the school carnival, the Halloween parade, the Senior Clap Out, and school K-12 pep rallies. Funnemark-Clapper (2017) notes that the K-12-unit school is a collection of “traditions, stories, ceremonies, assumptions, beliefs, and

values.” These events' importance is rooted in the memories of the Focus Group members of their childhood experiences and now adult experiences with the school's traditions. These traditions remain a focus point of the school. Therefore, when a new administrator comes into a K-12-unit school, if assimilation is to occur, these traditions should continue. Wieczorek and Maynard (2018) assert that in small communities, especially, “traditions and personal connections are centralized and valued” (p. 8). Principal Montgomery recognized this through his belief in the importance of refraining from change in the first semester and from his willingness to allow what works at the school to continue. He explained that for these things that work, he understands that he needs to leave it alone because “I’m going to create problems for myself that I don’t need to.” Thus, through watching and listening to the already established norms of the school, the administrator of the K-12-unit school becomes the perpetuator of school traditions in allowing and enabling these events to continue.

To assimilate in the community of the K-12-Unit school, the administrator should remain visible in the school and community. Focus Group members shared that one expectation they have of the K-12-unit school administrator is that this person is visible and approachable. Furthermore, teachers and staff noted the importance of Principal Montgomery’s visibility. Ms. Johnson shared that he was rarely in his office, but he was most frequently found in the halls being visible, and Ms. Gillis shared that she sees him at least once a week in the building's halls. Ms. Allan also noted the importance of his visibility to the school. Teachers felt his visibility in the building during the school day was important while Focus Group Members shared the importance of seeing the administrator at basketball games and in the car line. They also shared that they needed to feel as if they could approach the new administrator. Wieczorek and Maynard

(2018) explain that this is not uncommon for the K-12-unit school administrator as they may feel they need to be “seen everywhere” so that they are considered “engaged” in the school.

When new leaders come to the K-12-unit school, the type of changes that should be initiated need to be carefully considered so that they can be more easily accepted. New leaders should start with first order change or natural change as frequently as possible (Bartunek et al, 1987; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995), rather than making major overhaul changes, individuals may be more willing to accept these changes. In the case of Principal Montgomery, the main changes that he initiated were around discipline, grades for student-athletes, and workflow processes. The change to the grading expectations for student athletes as explained by Principal Montgomery would be an example of a first-order change because the change did not require students to change the minimum grade number that was achieved since a 70 under the previous grading scale was passing. After one year of using the new scale for the athlete’s minimum grade, they returned to requiring a 70. While there was adjustment that had to be made from that year, Principal Montgomery acknowledged that there was “no pushback from parents. That's my They did not say anything. They were like, we agree. We agree that if they're gonna do you know, extracurricular stuff is not it's not mandated.” Parents, students and teachers were able to adjust to this change in part because it only returned them to what they had already known and was a mechanism to help students be successful. Thus, this change connects to the characteristics of first order change in that stakeholders deem it necessary or beneficial and they even “make sense withing an established framework” (Bartunek et al, 1987, p. 484).

The changes to the Discipline Policy were the most discussed changes that arose in interviews as Principal Montgomery, Assistant Principal Shirley, and Mr. Barry shared their experiences with this change. Mr. Barry explained that when he arrived at the school, he realized

that the discipline policy needed to shift because “kids are not in class, they're not learning, and our scores reflected this.” This change was more critical because of its impact on the general instruction taking place at the school. From Principal Montgomery’s perspective, students were losing time in the classroom unnecessarily due to the abundance of disciplinary matters sent to the office. The 2023-2024 School Improvement Plan shared the focus of making changes in the discipline policy noting that there was a goal to “Close gaps for all students in office discipline referrals.” Assistant Principal Shirley agreed that the Discipline Plan change was the biggest change brought to the school by Principal Montgomery noting that his initial changes to the discipline policy and procedures were more than teachers could adjust to so that they have come together to find a way to move “back towards the middle” in how discipline is handled in his second year so that “teachers are much happier.” The change to how discipline was managed in Principal first year was a second-order change or a “conscious modification of present schemata” (Bartunek et al, 1987, p. 486) and initially teachers seemed to struggle more with this change. However, in the second year, by listening to the teachers, they modified the process to make the change more “consistent with already present schemata” which was easier for teachers to adjust to overall (Bartunek et al, 1987, p. 486). Therefore, one potential way that administrators may be able to assimilate more easily into the culture of the K-12-unit school is, when possible, to focus on change in the first order so that it connects to the established understanding of the existing norm (Bartunek et al, 1987; Parastuty et al, 2013; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). Principal Montgomery created “synthesis” in his change management of discipline by listening to teachers and his Assistant Principal and getting additional training on ways to impact discipline processes in the school so that he helped teachers replace the “status quo” (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995, p. 517).

Perhaps, one of the most critical things that a new leader needs to do to be able to assimilate into the culture and community of the K-12-unit school is to be open and willing to listen, learn, and adjust. Principal Montgomery purported having an “open door policy.” The ability to have a leader to support and listen to teachers was key to building trust with teachers as evidenced by many of their reflections of his leadership. For Assistant Principal Shirley, his willingness to listen made her “feel supported.” Ms. Johnson echoed this as she not only said he was “easy to approach” but also that he would go as far as reaching out to the Board of Education to support her when she had a need. Principal Montgomery also explained that if he received feedback that something wasn’t working, he was willing to learn more to improve. This was evident when he took feedback from the first year’s discipline policy, went to training, and then revised how the policy worked in the school. Assistant Principal Shirley felt that his willingness to revisit the discipline policy after the first year allowed them to find a more successful balance in the management of that policy. Canales (2008) found that representation of teachers and their needs was the most important behavior in their study for leaders. Similarly, Wieczorek & Maynard (2018) purport that to initiate changes, principals should first “recognize and listen to their stakeholders and create an atmosphere of trust and safety” (p. 11). When Principal Montgomery listens, learns, and changes, he takes steps towards this key need for teachers. This people-focused approach mirrors Devos & Bouckennooghe’s (2009) findings that shared the importance of making connections.

Summary of Results

Two administrator interviews and interviews with five faculty members and staff members were conducted as part of this study. Three community members participated in the

focus group. Two of these community members were engaged with the school before the new administration, and all three were raised in this community. Additionally, artifacts were utilized from social media, the School Improvement Plan over two years (one with the previous administration and one with the current administration), and the state published teacher survey to gain an understanding of the school culture prior to the new administration and with current administration. This data was coded four times and analyzed to shed light on how Principal Montgomery successfully assimilated into school culture, with a realization that the community is still evaluating his success and he has not yet fully assimilated into the community. Additionally, while teachers, assistant administration, and community members voiced positive responses to the new administrator, they also shared ways in which their expectations and procedures have had to adjust with him. Figure 16 revisits the Theoretical Framework.

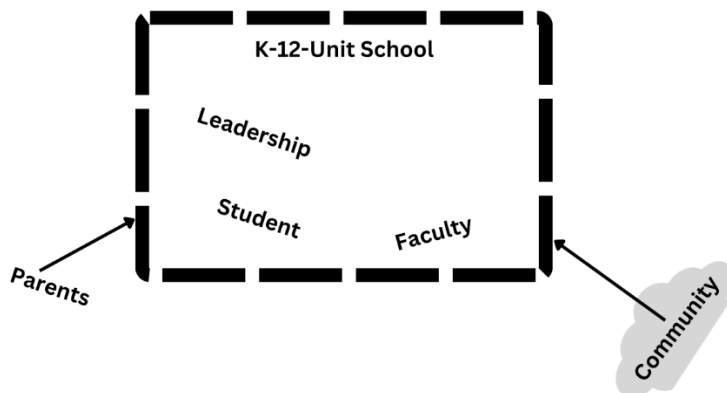


Figure 16: Revised Theoretical Framework

At this time, the administrator's assimilation into the school culture is represented by removing the cloud that surrounded the administrator in Figure 2 because the administrator has assimilated

into the school with faculty and staff acceptance of him, but the cloud is now around the community because some members of the community are still undecided about Principal Montgomery. The open system that includes this “interconnected web of relationships” between the community, the school, the administration, the staff and the students allows movement within the construct of the organization and on the outside (Parastuty et al, 2013). To further conceptualize the results of these interviews, focus groups, and artifacts, the following figure will be developed throughout chapter 8:

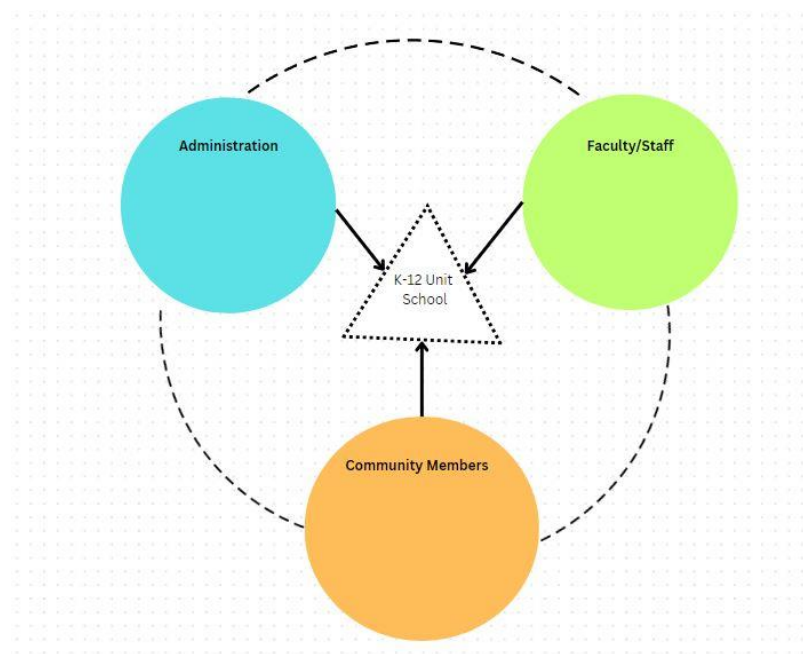


Figure 17: Summary of Findings Overview

This figure places the K-12-Unit school at the center of the image to illustrate that the K-12-unit school was cited as the central part of the community throughout interviews and discussions. The arrow from administration, faculty/staff, and community members shows that each of these groups has influence over what happens in the K-12-unit School. The dotted lines connecting these groups illustrate that the groups are also intertwined around the school and community. As

results are discussed below, this figure will be updated to reflect the findings and characteristics of each group.

New Administration Assimilation into Existing School Culture

This research first sought to answer the following question: How does a new administrator assimilate within the existing school culture initially accepted by teachers and community members in a K-12-unit school?

Recognition of the Unique Nature of the K-12-Unit School. Principal Montgomery explained that he immediately recognized the unique nature of the K-12-unit school. He talked about being excited to work with students in one building from kindergarten to graduation. Teachers at the school talked about the close-knit bonds that students have across age groups. Both elementary teachers shared how important it is to have high school students work with elementary students. Similarly, the staff member shared that the cross grade-band bonds that were evident through the “Clap Out” that takes place before senior graduation is an example of the nature of the K-12-unit school.

Funnemark-Clapper (2018) described the K-12-unit school as “the heart of the community.” Furthermore, Wiczorek and Manard (2018) noted that principals in rural communities may feel a “pressure to meet their community’s expectations” (p. 8). Assistant Principal Shirley explained that the community is the “constant” for the school. Assistant Principal Shirley and Ms. Johnson acknowledged that the move from a large inner-city school to Henderson was a huge shift for Principal Montgomery and he had to learn about some of the ways that the K-12-unit school operates across grade bands, such as high school students helping

in elementary school. Rural schools, by nature, are unique and have unique that set them apart from the urban school that Principal Montgomery previously knew (Lavalley, 2018).

Slow to Implement Additional Change. Part of the assimilation of the new administration into the school culture was established through the new administration's hesitancy to make major changes during his first year in the school. Principal Montgomery shared his "golden rule" which states that he would not "come in and really start changing things; you've got to learn what's working. And then if you see opportunities for change, then you can make them." He explained that he did not make any changes to school traditions, activities, or teacher expectations as far as instruction. He also explained that things at the school run well without "my interference." Because he did not immediately jump to major change in the building, he allowed the primary change to be the change in administration. It seems that Principal Montgomery is trying balance leadership, relationships, and support and accountability to make change movements in a goal to help "satisfy followers' internal capacity" so that they will "adopt the organization's goal as their own" (Muhammad and Cruz, 2019, p.20).

Principal Montgomery seems to attempt to keep change at the first order level by working with stakeholders to make changes as they are needed (Bartunek et al, 1987). For example, Principal Montgomery and Assistant Principal Shirley shared that the major change was focused on the tracking of discipline and how discipline was handled (by the classroom teacher or the administrator). The change to the discipline policy was the exception to the "wait and see" policy on change that Principal Montgomery noted because of its impact on student learning and was made during his first year as administrator because it was viewed as an immediate need. When change needs to be made for student safety or student learning, the change cannot be delayed. Two of the teacher interviews reinforced that the major change had to do with the tracking of

discipline and that the process of how this was done was difficult in the first year but after revisions in the second year became easier because teacher and staff feedback was incorporated into how discipline was reported and recorded the following year thus Principal Montgomery still worked with stakeholders even though immediate change was taken.

Despite the immediate need for discipline process changes, across the teacher, staff, and administrator interviews, it was shared that the new administration was slow to make major changes. Ms. Johnson highlighted “the most important thing that he did was to not come in and immediately change what we were doing when he started here.” Similarly, Ms. Allan explained that when she first met him, she was told to “just keep trucking like you’ve been trucking.” Principal Montgomery was not seeking to make changes to emphasize his control of the school, so he avoided dialectical change (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). By minimizing change and taking time to get to know teachers, Principal Montgomery made a step towards assimilation because there was recognition that “traditions and personal connections are centralized and valued” (Wieczorek and Manard, 2018).

Culture and Climate Shift Within the School. Teachers, staff and the assistant principal shared that the culture and climate at the school shifted to be more positive since Principal Montgomery joined the school.

The interviews with the Assistant Principal, teachers, and staff shared a focus in a shift in the feeling at the school, which they described as culture, but Muhammad (2018) would describe as climate. Assistant Principal Shirley explained that Principal Montgomery was “set up for success in a way” due to the culture that existed previously. Ms. Johnson explained that since Principal Montgomery's arrival at the school there was “very big culture shift.” Her explanation of the culture shift came with an example of teacher retention because there was only one teacher

who left since Principal Montgomery's time at the school whereas in previous years, there were "six to seven a year." This shift was further substantiated by the state report card wherein there was a 66% teacher retention rate in the last year of the previous administrator versus 82.4% teacher retention in 2023 after Principal Montgomery's first year.

When talking about the culture in the school, teachers and the assistant principal referenced a feeling of "fear" with the previous administrator that they do not feel exists anymore. Mr. Williams explained that teachers are more willing to be open and share because they do not fear retribution with the new administration. This aligned with Assistant Principal Shirley who explained that "he won't take vengeance on you when you least expect it." Across all interviews, teachers shared that they feel like they are empowered to share concerns and work with Principal Montgomery. The feeling of fear and finger pointing those teachers addressed when referencing the prior administration echoes the principles of a toxic culture that is exhibited through a cycle of blame. Teachers who felt micromanaged experienced the leadership's desire to "control their environment" through micromanaging the situation (Muhammad and Hollie, 2012, p. 39). By allowing teachers to feel that they can share their voice without retribution, Principal Montgomery is more likely to create a culture that allows change to occur because of his ability to be flexible and collaborative so that the change can be a "multilevel phenomenon" (Kovacevic et al, 2020, p. 239).

Principal Montgomery explained that when he introduced himself to the school, he told them that he would not micromanage them. For Principal Montgomery, this meant allowing teachers to have the freedom to act in their classrooms. Canales et al (2008) deem this leadership as offering "Tolerance of Freedom" and explain that this tolerance is a key leadership behavior for leadership success (p. 7). Teachers and the Assistant Principal noted that this was a change

from the previous administrator. The concern about being micromanaged was cited by Principal Montgomery, who appears to be a leader who listens to his staff and who others feel they can approach. Devos and Boukenoughe (2009) explain that when a leader is people focused, there is more likely to be a positive climate. Further, Muhammad and Cruz (2019) note the importance of rationale as trust when making change through leadership. Therefore, these examples lead to the conclusion that when a new administrator comes from outside of the school community but follows someone who the faculty and staff struggled to work with and focuses on the people in the school, then that new administrator has an easier time assimilating into the culture of the school.

Leadership Style. Principal Montgomery's leadership style appears to be a mixture of transformational and servant-leadership whereas the previous administration appeared to have a transactional or task-oriented leadership style. When faculty and staff talked about the previous administrator, they repeatedly referred to her as a micromanager and an administrator who had favorites. Principal Montgomery addressed the number of discipline concerns documented under the previous administrator as one of the key things he sought to change in the school. The focus on the task of discipline and the negative perception of school climate match the definition of a transactional leader (Aydin et al, 2013; Cohen, 2014). Muhammad and Cruz (2019) explain this through using the term "task-focused" leadership and note that one disadvantage of this is that it promotes "alienation" (p. 17).

Principal Montgomery has some characteristics of a transformational leader because he encourages teachers to exert freedom of what and how they teach in their classroom (Canales et al 2008). Burns (2003) explained that the transformational leader is a leader who inspires and has a clear mission or vision. Principal Montgomery inspires his teachers by including them and

seeking their opinions on changes that he makes in the school. Further, Principal Montgomery cited an understanding of his vision as being key to his leadership style when he said, “a good leader surrounds themselves with good people...[who] see the vision, they understand it, they are behind it.” Mr. Barry shared that Principal Montgomery comes to him and asks for his thoughts when he goes to make decisions and changes. Mr. Barry also shared that Principal Montgomery encourages teachers to find opportunities for students outside of the building. For Mr. Barry, that means going to the community to find ways that students can volunteer. Transformational leaders empower teachers to make decisions and act on them. Assistant Principal Shirley shared that in working with Principal Montgomery, she feels supported to make decisions and has his support in these decisions, so that she does not feel she has to constantly second-guess her work. She stated that she “feels empowered and confident to go about my job, help teachers out, make decisions, and not worry.” Principal Montgomery echoed this in his own leadership philosophy by explaining that he wants them to feel empowered so that they do not “have to come to me for every little thing.” He wants them to feel like they can “bounce stuff” off him but that they also are free to try things in their classrooms to get their jobs done. This is another example of how Principal Montgomery inspires his faculty and staff in the role of a transformational leader. Muhammad and Cruz (2019) explain that a transformational leader creates an environment that is “motivating, inclusive, organized, and focused on outcomes” (p. 17). Principal Montgomery seems to be working to create such an environment especially when focused on inclusivity, organization, and outcomes.

When Principal Montgomery described his goals as a leader, he explained that his purpose is to “make the difference in the lives of students” beyond academics considering them “socially and emotionally” as well. His goal to make a difference is characteristic of a servant

leader who “promotes the valuing and developing of people” (Laub, 2005, p. 157). Principal Montgomery works to support and share leadership with his faculty and staff. Ms. Johnson sees Principal Montgomery’s support by his advocating for an additional kindergarten teacher when her class sizes were too large. She explained that he reached out to central office “every single day for 20 days” until the position was filled. She also said that he supports teachers by taking extra responsibilities off them to allow them to do their jobs. She gave the example of him minimizing the number of meetings that they have when an email would suffice. Principal Montgomery also explained that he believes a good leader “surrounds himself with good people” who may not always agree with one another but who is “willing to listen” and take other ideas into consideration. This follows Laub’s (2005) definition of a servant leader as Principal Montgomery is willing to share power and status if it is good for the organization. He explained that his goal is not to tell people how to do their job. Finally, Principal Montgomery seeks to be approachable by his faculty and staff. Ms. Johnson talked about his open-door policy and Ms. Gillis explained that he is “laid back” and “easy to approach.” Laub (2005) notes that the servant leader is one who seeks to build the community and listening to faculty and staff while encouraging them to have autonomy in the classroom is one way that Principal Montgomery seems to build community.

Regardless of whether Principal Montgomery fosters a fully transformational leadership model or a servant leadership model or a combination of both, the climate under Principal Montgomery is described repeatedly as being more positive than it previously was. Devos & Bouckenooghe (2009) found that this occurs when there is a clear vision for the school, the staff are included in decisions, and there are connections with the teachers. Principal Montgomery’s perspective is that the faculty and staff understand that his decisions come from a place of

wanting to do “what is best for the school.” Principal Montgomery invites the staff to be included in decisions. When he first rolled out the new discipline plan, Assistant Principal Shirley explained that it was too focused on technology. As he listened to the feedback from the staff, he then attended training and revamped the plan in a way that was more manageable for the teachers. Table 44 illustrates the leadership style of the previous and current administrator at Henderson Unit School.

Table 44: Leadership Styles of Previous and Current Administration

Transactional	Transformational	Servant-Leader
General Characteristics: task oriented, focused (Muhammad and Cruz, 2019)	General Characteristics: encourages creativity and growth, supportive, shared leadership (Laub, 2005)	General Characteristics: seeks to lead through service (Muhammad and Cruz, 2019)
Previous administrator: characterized as micromanager; prone to favorites Current administrator: discipline plan that must be followed	Current administrator: characterized as open-door policy, supportive, fostering leadership skills, encouraging ideas	Current Administrator: has a goal to serve students especially and appreciates the opportunity to work with them from K through 12 th grade.

Support of the Assistant Principal. Principal Montgomery has also been able to assimilate into the school because of the support that he has from Assistant Principal Shirley. The Assistant Principal at the school is a person who has been and is part of the Henderson Community. She explained that when changes to the discipline policy were first made and teachers were struggling with the technology in Principal Montgomery's first year, teachers came to her because "they were more comfortable getting in my ear." Mr. Bary also highlighted the connection between Principal Montgomery and Assistant Principal Shirley when he explained that "it does help that the Assistant Principal is a Henderson graduate." This liaison between Principal Montgomery and Assistant Principal may be one way that Principal Montgomery has been able to assimilate into the school. Assistant Principal Shirley explained

that she is so much happier working with Principal Montgomery than the previous administrator, so this would make her more likely to support his work to other teachers. Figure 18 is updated below to illustrate the characteristics of the administration as shared by the administration as well as the values shared by the teachers/staff at the school:

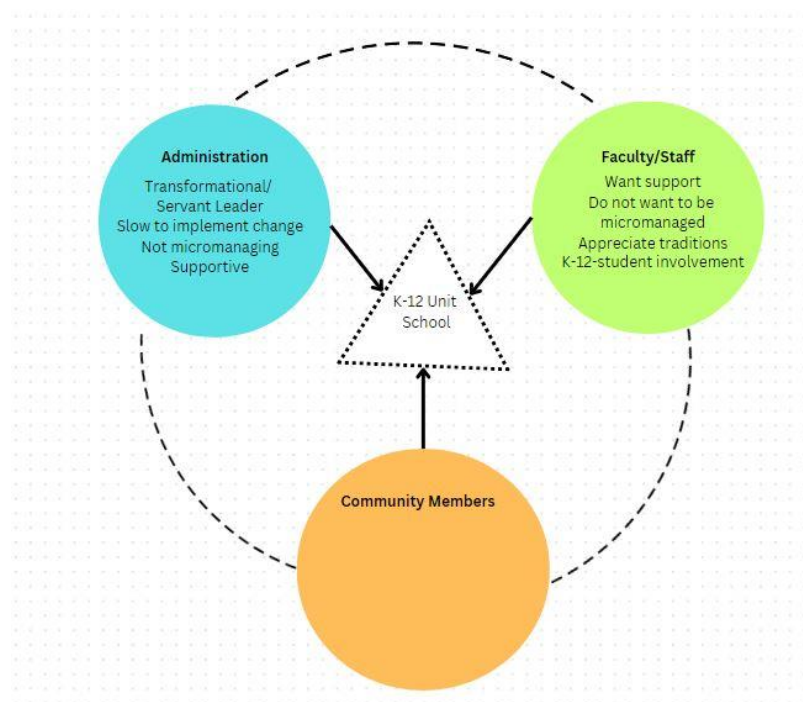


Figure 18: Administration and Faculty Staff Reflections

K-12 Unit School, Traditions and Community. K-12-unit schools are often held at the center of the community (Funnemark-Clapper, 2017; Jackson, 2000; Villa & Knutas, 2020). This central focus comes, in part, because of the small community surrounding the school and, in the case of Henderson Unit School, keeps traditions that connect the school to the community. The traditions of Henderson Unit School held detailed memories for members of the Focus Group as they shared stories about their time as students in the school when they participated in the Halloween Trick or Treating and the Carnival. Principal Montgomery has not made any changes to these long-held traditions. As a rural K-12-unit school, Henderson Unit School is important to

the community just as the community is important to the school (Villa and Knutas, 2020). By not changing these traditions, Principal Montgomery could more easily partially assimilate into the school's community. On the traditions, Principal Montgomery noted that when he started, traditions were beginning to return after COVID. Rather than implementing changes, he explained that he just asked “did it work? Yes, it worked fine, then done – I’m not going to change anything.” The teachers echoed this in noting that he continued all the traditions in place from the senior clap to the Halloween trick or treating to the Carnival. Things that were already happening and special to the school continued upon his arrival.

When considering things that needed to change, Principal Montgomery looked at the “why” of change and when change was not necessary, he did not try to force it. Understanding the why behind change is one of the main factors of being able to successfully implement change (Heath and Heath, 2010; Muhammad and Cruz, 2019; Parustuty et al, 2013). From Principal Montgomery’s perspective, it was “nice” to have these structures established and put in place successfully so that as he looked to what needed to change, he could immediately focus on critical areas that affected student learning.

By keeping the traditions in place, Principal Montgomery supported the definition of culture as provided by Funnemark-Clapper (2017) wherein in the K-12-unit school, culture is “a collection of traditions, stories, ceremonies, beliefs, and values of the students, parents, staff, and community that share the environment” (p. 150). The traditions such as the carnival and the Halloween walk were discussed in detail by the Focus Group and held memories from them dating back to the 1970s. When Principal Montgomery could not justify a reason to make a change, he left the process as it was. Potentially, making changes to these traditions would cause

a deep separation between Principal Montgomery and the school and community and would have prevented him from assimilating into the community.

Challenges with Administrator Assimilation. While many aspects of Principal Montgomery's assimilation into the culture and community of Henderson Unit School have gone well, there have been some challenges. First, when Principal Montgomery arrived at the school, any concerns that teachers had about the changes in how discipline was tracked in the school were not initially reported to him. Assistant Principal Shirley shared that she was a go-between for the teachers and Principal Montgomery during this time. Additionally, Assistant Principal Shirley, Principal Montgomery, Mr. Barry, and Ms. Stacey all talked about how there was an initial uncertainty about how Principal Montgomery would lead. Teachers were not certain if they could trust that he would not micromanage them and that he would allow them to be left alone to teach. Over time, teachers began to see that Principal Montgomery would not micromanage them. Bradshaw (2022) explains that it is natural for principals who are not from the rural area to be seen as outside from those who are from the community; therefore, they need time to build trust and relationships to become part of that community. Principal Montgomery seems to have realized that focusing on relationships and being slow to make major changes was a key to his assimilation.

The community members cited a few ways in which Principal Montgomery has not fully assimilated into the community. First, they shared stories about how the town has fought to keep the school a K-12-unit school and they shared how this is often a topic that comes up at school board meetings. It is not uncommon for K-12-unit schools to be required to rally together to keep the school intact and avoid consolidation. Howley and Harmon (1996) purport that the K-12-unit school may be the last step in the consolidation process because they are so intertwined with

their communities. Jackson (2000) gives the example of Thrasher School coming together as a community to avoid consolidation in the same way that Henderson has fought to avoid consolidation. The community and Mr. Barry talked about rallying the school and the community to ensure that this K-12-unit school continues to exist. Howley and Harmon (1996) explained that K-12-unit schools often remain because of the community's desire to keep the school. Henderson Unit School is an example of this type of school. The community members want to see Principal Montgomery continue to advocate for the school and shared concern that there may be a time when they would again need to rally to keep the K-12-unit school. The community members noted some "disappointment" that the Agriculture Board was not more strongly supported or considered when making changes to how the board functioned for students at the school when the grant phased out and it was changed to become the Foundation Board.

Community members also shared that the school has been successful under the prior leadership, even though the leader was known to micromanage, have problems, and have favorites. The community members noted that they will "wait and see" for success to continue at the school. While the community members did not say that they did not like Principal Montgomery or appreciate his work, they did share that they are waiting to observe how the school is managed over the coming years in hopes that it will continue to have success. Principal Montgomery has the chance to assimilate with the community, but it will continue to take time and deepened connections with them for this to happen. Figure 19 highlights the areas that the community values about the school and their concern in making the transition to new leadership:

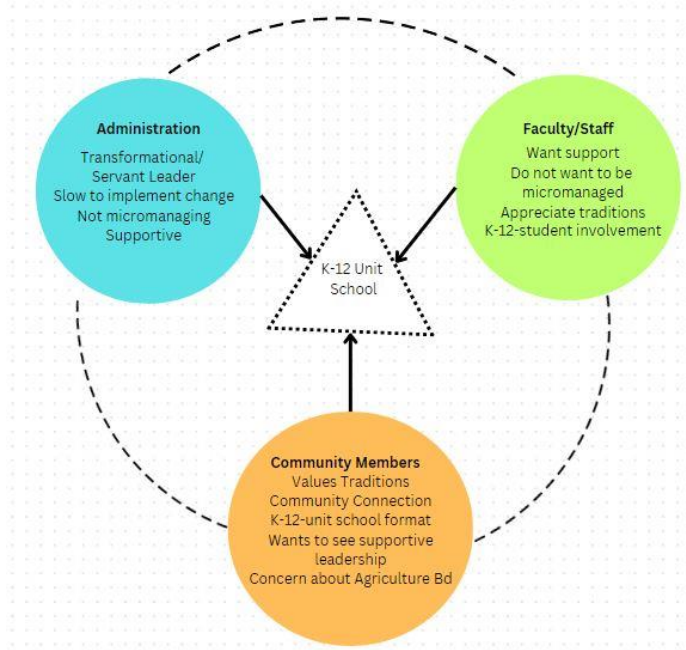


Figure 19: Community Values and Concerns

School Adjustments to New Administrator

This research also sought to answer the following question: How does the culture and/or community also adjust during the assimilation of a new leader?

Administrator Expectations. Principal Montgomery comes from an inner-city school with a much larger population. He is not from a school where the administration deals with all discipline procedures. He is also from a background that utilizes computer programs for tracking and communicating. Teachers at Henderson Unit School were accustomed to sending all discipline to the office. Teachers previously used paper forms to track discipline and some teachers were not accustomed to using the computers for tracking information at all. In Principal Montgomery's first year, changes that he made to this process put all tracking online and minimized office referrals. Teachers had concerns about the electronic tracking and worked with Assistant Principal Shirley who also worked with Principal Montgomery to make changes.

Principal Montgomery then attended specific training sessions on discipline in schools to make additional adjustments going into this second year as principal. Teachers had to be flexible through this process as Principal Montgomery made changes to the discipline procedure.

Assistant Principal Shirley served as a go-between until teachers began to realize that Principal Montgomery would listen. Mr. Barry served as a liaison for high school teachers, nicknamed The Council, in working with Principal Montgomery on changes and concerns that they have.

Teachers had to adjust how they track and follow up on discipline and how they handle discipline in their classrooms. The change that Principal Montgomery sought to establish would be considered a “second order change” because it changed the schema of the responsibility of handling discipline (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). While this change included a change in procedure (or first order change), it was more than a procedural shift because it forced teachers to own more of their discipline rather than sending all discipline to the office.

For the community, the Agriculture Board was disbanded after COVID, and Principal Montgomery worked with that board to create a council that offers a variety of CTE opportunities for students known as the Foundation Board. This was not the original goal of this board, so they had to adjust how they work and their focus in working with students and Principal Montgomery. This is also an example of second order change because it changes the framework and functionality of this group (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). It seemed that members of the previously identified Agriculture Board had a harder time with this change because it changed the scope of their work and their perception of the board. The experience of the Agriculture Board could be considered a dialectical change because it highlights opposing values of the administration, other CTE teachers, and the community (Van de Van & Poole, 1995). However, it could also be argued that this change was more representative of “organic growth”

because the change occurred due to a series of events that led to a broader CTE focus with parts of the change being outside of Principal Montgomery's control (Van de Van & Pool, 1995).

Reflections

Through this research, the assimilation of Principal Montgomery seems to have occurred as much because of the negative experiences of the faculty and staff with the previous administration as due to things that Principal Montgomery is doing to help his assimilation into the school, such as being slow to change, maintaining traditions, being willing to listen, and being supportive of his team. Principal Montgomery came to the school at a time when teacher turnover was on the rise and the Assistant Principal moved to a position at Central Office. She returned shortly after he came to the school. These things indicate a toxicity about the school's climate, which made an opening for Principal Montgomery to assimilate more easily into the school. Teachers and staff were ready for change.

The community members represented in the focus group accept Principal Montgomery to a point. These members were pleased that the traditions of the school have remained intact. However, the community members want to see Principal Montgomery advocate for things that will help the Henderson community. The focus group of community members shared that during previous administrations, the school, community, and administration have rallied to keep the school a K-12-unit school. They want to feel that this type of support will happen under the leadership of Principal Montgomery. The community members also are pleased with the success of Henderson Unit School in prior years, and they are concerned about waiting and seeing if this success will continue. Finally, the community members voiced concerns about the Agriculture Program that has shifted into a general CTE focus to be called the Foundation Board. They

shared that they are a primarily agricultural community, so they want to have a strong partnership with local universities and grant opportunities to build these programs. They recognized that the shift was not solely the administrator's responsibility, but they still had concerns. Principal Montgomery will need to continue working with the community members, support the school, and advocate for its programs to fully assimilate into the community. Because the school is embedded in the community, the school is a good example of the open system where the community and parents have influence in what happens in the school.

Limitations

This study, like all studies, is subject to certain limitations that ought to be considered. This qualitative study is limited because while the previous administration is referenced several times throughout the study and while conclusions are drawn about her leadership style, she was never interviewed as part of this study. Certainly, a different perspective may have emerged had she been included in these interviews; however, this information is not known since these interviews did not occur. Furthermore, while individuals who left Henderson Unit School during her tenure were referenced in interviews, these individuals also were not included in the study. While their experiences could have been helpful to the understanding of the previous administration, they did not help answer the research questions about the assimilation of a new administration into the school and community.

Another limitation of this study surrounds how the participants were selected. In the original study plan, participants were going to be selected from a comprehensive list of faculty and staff to ensure that a balance between teachers who support Principal Montgomery and teachers with concerns were selected. However, through the partnership with the school,

participants were selected by the administrator. 14% of the teachers at the school participated in the interviews. Participant responses to the interview questions regarding culture, previous administration, and school change were consistent across the interviews, so no additional teachers were needed for interview at the time of the study. If additional studies take place, having autonomy in identifying participants and interviewing more members of the community will help solidify these results as there may have been teachers or staff with a different perspective surrounding the assimilation of the new administrator into the school, but these individuals were not identified as part of this interview process.

Finally, this study focused only on the assimilation of the new administration into the K-12-unit school. It did examine the impact of other forces on the school, such as changes mandated by the district and their impact on the school, curriculum change, or legislative changes affecting the school system.

Implications

In considering the K-12-unit school and the assimilation of new leadership into the culture and community of the school, there are implications for both practice and future research to be considered.

Implications for Practice. Administrators may not always enter a school following an administrator who is not beloved. However, in considering entry into a school, this study indicates that administrators should be slow, when possible, to make major changes to the structure, traditions, and norms of the school recognizing that changes for student safety or student learning would need immediate attention. New leaders should take time to know the staff, the school, and the community. New leaders should also make strong connections with

existing leadership in the building and build a bridge so that staff members have a person they already know and can trust in the interim. When new leaders do make changes in procedures in the building, those changes should be at the “first order level” so that they can be more readily accepted by both the school and its culture.

When entering a new school, it is also important for leaders to make connections with members of the school community. K-12-unit schools are often characterized by their strong community connections, so connecting with parents and community members is important to the assimilation into the building. When a new administrator comes from outside of the community, especially, visibility and connections at school events are one way to engender positive connections. The administrator also needs to consider community events to make community connections and consider attending those as well. Assimilation into a community takes time. New administrators entering a community need to be patient with that assimilation process as community members wait to see how things unfold for the school.

Implications for Policy. Based on the results and conclusions of this research study, district and community leaders may want to establish a policy that outlines how community partnerships in the way of formalized programming such as the Agriculture Board versus the Foundation Board are maintained. Before restructuring such organizations, a workflow may be established to help formalize the process to promote buy-in to separate leadership from process change. While Reeves (2009) notes that all change will have opposition in some form, he also notes that leadership can follow processes to plan for change and to then evaluate that change to determine if it is working. This ongoing evaluation of change is critical to ensuring the connection between the school and the community. Therefore, it would be prudent to consider that policy should be built around how the entities partner through change.

Implications for Future Research. While K-12-unit schools are not an abundant school format, this research sets up some future research that can be continued in the K-12-unit school environment, the K-8 school environment, or even in the traditional grade band environments that are held in small or rural communities. Potential research could be done around the assimilation of leadership into the culture and community of differing grade band schools.

Henderson Unit School welcomed a new administrator, in part, because the school was ready for this change. Future research could be done on the assimilation of a new leader into a school that was not ready for change, one wherein the administrator follows a beloved leader. Research could be done to see how new leaders assimilate into the culture and community of the school in this situation.

Principal Montgomery assimilated into the culture and community due to his leadership style. He was noted as a welcoming and open person visible in the school. Future research could be done to see if this leadership style is typically able to easily assimilate into the school culture and community or if other leadership styles are also able to successfully assimilate into the culture and community of a school.

Conclusion

This study started as a work to understand how an administrator could assimilate into the culture and community of the K-12-unit school. In seeking to understand the assimilation of the leader into the culture and the community of the K-12-unit school, it also had to explore characteristics of the K-12-unit school, leadership, community, culture, tradition, and hope. Leadership is complex and multifaceted in any school setting. Every school is unique. Every community is unique. A leader's ability to assimilate may have as much to do with the

circumstances in the school as in the leader's leadership approach. It was said repeatedly that the K-12-unit school is the heart of the community; similarly, the leadership of a school is the heart of the school. When looking at students, schools, and their success, the heart cannot be forgotten.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter:

Date: November 13, 2023

PI: Anne Trail

Department: Womack Educational Leadership

Re: Initial - IRB-FY2024-82

CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP IN THE K-12 UNIT SCHOOL: When Change Happens

The Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved by Expedited Review the above referenced research study. The approval is effective starting November 9, 2023.

Decision: Approved

Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Findings:

Research Notes:

The following apply to your approved study:

1. In accordance with 45 CFR 46.110 and the regulations for Expedited Review (Common Rule), this project does not expire and continuing review is not required by the IRB.
2. Any unanticipated harm to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance.
3. All modifications to the approved study must be submitted for review through Cayuse IRB for approval before their implementation. Adding new researchers constitutes a modification to the protocol. Per MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who handles the data or interacts with participants. Everyone meeting this definition for this project must have completed the required CITI training and received IRB approval prior to becoming actively involved in the project.
4. Closure of the study must be submitted within Cayuse when the study ends or when personal identifiers are removed from the data and all codes and keys are destroyed.

5. All research materials must be retained by the PI for at least three (3) years after study completion and then destroyed in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity.
6. All approval letters and study documents are located within Submission Details in Cayuse IRB.

Sincerely,

The Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board

Appendix B

Informed Consent document signed by participants:

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP IN THE K-12 UNIT SCHOOL: When Change Happens

Protocol Number: IRB-FY2024-82

Approval Date: October 12, 2023
Principal Investigator: Leslie Trail
Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

Name of participant: _____ Age: _____

You are being asked to participate in a research project. The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully. You will be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions will be answered. Also, you will be given a copy of this consent form.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty and no loss of benefits already earned. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to continue your participation.

1. Purpose of the study: Understanding how new leaders assimilate into the K-12-unit school with its close relationship to leadership and community gives a background on the operations of this subset of American education. Further, when looking at how new leadership assimilates into an existing culture, a better understanding of the K-12-unit school and how it connects to the community around it emerges.

2. Description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study: Interviews, Collection of Artifacts, Community Member Focus Group. Study to take place from November 2023-February 2024

3. Expected costs: NA

4. Description of the discomforts, inconveniences, and/or risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study: Measures will be taken to ensure the anonymity of all

participants in the study including giving a pseudonym to the school, describing the school in context of region rather than state, giving pseudonyms to all participants. The goal of this is to respond to any risks from participating in this study.

5. Compensation in case of study-related injury: NA

6. Anticipated benefits from this study:

a) The potential benefits to science and humankind that may result from this study include: One implication of this study is that readers will have a better understanding of how new leaders assimilate into this existing culture and the challenges they encounter through this assimilation. Other potential implications of this study are that the study will lead to an understanding of how the open system influences the community around a K-12-unit school impact how leadership influences the school. It may also show how leadership can impact the community around the school. Ultimately, the study may allow for a better understanding of the connectivity between a K-12-unit school and its surrounding community, and it may lead to further research on how schools impact communities and how communities impact schools. The study may lead to further research to examine how culture of a school is influenced by forces outside of the administration, teachers, and students.

b) The potential benefits to you from this study include:
This study is being completed in partial fulfillment of my Ed.D.

7. Alternative treatments available: NA

8. Compensation for participation: NA

9. Circumstances under which the Principal Investigator may withdraw you from study participation: NA

10. What happens if you choose to withdraw from study participation: If you choose to withdraw, you simply inform the Principal Investigator of your decision to withdraw from the study.

11. Contact Information: If you should have any questions about this research study or possible injury, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Leslie Trail

Contact Information: Leslie.trail@mtsu.edu/615-483-8193

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kevin Krahenbuhl

Contact Information: kevin.krahenbuhl@mtsu.edu

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at irb_information@mtsu.edu. (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

12. Confidentiality: All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private, but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with people at MTSU (such as the MTSU Institutional Review Board) or other agencies (such as the Federal Government Office for Human Research Protection) if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

13. STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me. I understand each part of the document, my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study.

Date

Signature of participant

Consent obtained by:

Date

Signature

Printed name and title

Appendix C

Administrator Interview Protocol

1. Prior role(s) in school leadership
2. General philosophy of what it means to be a school leader
3. Can you describe your experience in meeting the faculty and staff at this school. (probe: what did you do individually, as a group).
4. What did you recognize as the existing culture of the school?
5. Tell me about your experience in being involved with community members when you started at the school? (probe: how did you know who were strong community supports? How did you identify parents that you needed to make connections with as a new admin?)
6. Can you describe things that you knew about the school before you started?
7. What were some goals that you had for the school before joining as administrator?
8. Once you started as an administrator, what things did you realize you wanted to change.
9. What are some new initiatives that you introduced or want to introduce to the school?
10. What is the current status of those initiatives?
11. Can you identify some successes that you are having or have had as the administrator at this school?
12. Describe some challenges that you have had as administrator at this school? (probe for connection to initiatives)
13. What expectations do you have for faculty/staff and how do you communicate those expectations?
14. How are these expectations similar to what you know they did prior to your becoming administrator?
15. How has the faculty/staff responded to the implementation of those expectations? (probe for discord)
16. How have teachers supported you in the work at the school?
17. How have teachers hindered initiatives you have at the school?
18. How have community members/students supported you in the work at the school?
19. How have community members/students hindered initiatives you have at the school?

Appendix D

Teacher Interview Protocol

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe how you first met your new administrator. (probe for first impressions) 2. Tell me about any discussion you heard about this administrator before your first meeting. 3. Describe your experience with leadership at the school prior to this administrator. (probe for specific interactions) 4. Now, let's think about culture and what has changed about culture. Tell me your experiences with leadership (being administration, coach, team leaders, etc) prior to this administration. 5. How has it changed with this new administration.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Describe how previous leadership impacted the things you like about the school. 7. Are there any moments you can think of when you felt pride about being part of this school....that moment that says "this is why I am here." (probe for how leadership impacted this).
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Describe any concerns you have as a teacher in this school about the school's culture or leadership. 9. Tell me about what you have experienced in regards to teacher networks/supports at this school? 10. Share a moment when something was changing in the school.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Tell me about any new job expectations, written or assumed, that you have received in working with your new administrator.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Tell me about some times when your new administrator has supported you in work at the school.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. How long have you been a teacher at this school? 14. How many administrators have you experienced at this school? Overall? 15. Have you experienced administration change before at this school? If so, what was that like? 16. How have you seen the school change in your time as a teacher at the school?

Appendix E

Community Member Focus Group Protocol

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How long have you been a member of this community? 2. Do you have children who attend the school? What has their involvement in school life been like while there? 3. Describe your involvement at the school in this year and in previous years.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. How were you introduced to the new administration? (Probe: if not introduced, what would you have like to have seen occur to introduce you to the new administration?) 5. What expectations do you have of the administration (principals and assistant principals) at the school? The teachers? The students? 6. How comfortable do you feel to approach a member of the administration (principal or assistant principal) with a question or concern? Probe: What has made you feel this way?
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. What roles does the school play in the community? 8. Describe one event you attended at the school to show your experience at that event – the first thing that comes to your mind.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Describe some things that you think are special/good about the school. 10. Describe some concerns that you have as a community member in relationship to the school. (probe: are these new concerns or have they existed in prior administrations; are you seeing impacts being made to those concerns; what would you like to see). 11. Describe an interaction that you have had with the new administrator. 12. Describe something you are excited about in regards to new things you see happening at the school.

Appendix F

Copy of Email sent to all participants along with their section from the dissertation:

Good morning! I want to confirm with you that the information that is represented in my results section accurately reflects what you shared. You were giving the pseudonym of Principal Montgomery throughout the dissertation.

Please review the below document and respond to the following questions:

- 1 - Is what is shared herein an accurate representation of your perception?
- 2 - Is there anything missing you would like to reiterate so that I can consider its inclusion?
- 3 - Is there anything that directly misrepresents your perspective, and if so, what?

I look forward to your response!