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EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

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FROM THE EDITORS

Educational planning articles in this issue relate to educational planning problems in school improvement planning, distributed leadership planning, planning to meet with teacher attrition and school district financial planning.

In the first article of this issue, Thompson explored the attitudes and perspectives of school administrators and other stakeholders on the school improvement planning process. The findings of the study indicated that four principal factors, involvement, accountability, plan implementation and efficacy, defined the perspectives of the respondents. The factor 'involvement' accounted for 47.82% of the variation suggesting that the most critical issue affecting how the school improvement planning process is seen is the degree of stakeholder involvement.

Then, the article of McBrayer, Chance, Pannell and Wells reported on a mixed method case study analysis to examine a system-wide professional learning initiative developed based on distributed leadership by utilizing teacher leaders to facilitate system-wide professional learning. In addition, school personnel perceptions of their changes in professional practices as a result of this collaborative PLC work were explored to determine effectiveness of the professional learning communities. The outcome of this study resulted in the presentation of a replicable or modifiable plan that was formalized with evidence-based practices that could be disseminated to other districts and schools exploring similar professional learning opportunities.

Teacher attrition is becoming more and more of a problem with the instructional process of schools. Madumere-Obike, Ukala and Nwabueze examined the management of teacher attrition rate for quality education delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that there was no significant difference between the principals' and the teachers' perceptions on the causes of teacher attrition rate for quality educational delivery. The study concluded that better services and good welfare packages for teachers can reduce teacher attrition rate. Paying attention to teachers by giving them equal regards with other professions will increase teachers' retention.

In the last article of this issue, Chan and Morris examined the financial practices of the school districts in Metro-Atlanta area to understand how their systems were operated to meet with the critical financial challenges at difficult times. Personal interviews were held with financial officers of six participating school districts. Findings of the study indicated that school districts monitored their current budget carefully by working closely with state and local tax commissioners. Districts strictly controlled their expenditures and trimmed their current budget with priorities. Additionally, they worked with district and site administrators to ensure their full compliance of the financial procedures for audition.

Articles selected for publication in this issue have explored educational planning issues of P-12 schools and the district levels. They cover a wide area of interest from school improvement planning, distributed leadership planning, planning to meet with teacher attrition and school district financial planning. The major themes carried in these articles have had special implications for educational planning worldwide. Irrespective of cultural differences, educational planners all over the world have much to learn from one another.

Editor: Tak Cheung Chan
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November 2018

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`SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' AND STAKEHOLDERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD, AND PERSPECTIVES ON, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the attitudes and perspectives of school administrators and other stakeholders on the school improvement planning process. A convenience sampling technique was employed with a sample of 15 schools and 91 respondents. The findings of the study indicated four principal factors, involvement, accountability, plan implementation and efficacy, defined the perspectives of the respondents. These factors were also responsible for 68.83% of the variation in the data. The factor 'involvement' accounted for 47.82% of the variation and suggests that the most critical issue affecting how the school improvement planning process is seen is the degree of stakeholder involvement.

INTRODUCTION

Huber and Conway (2015) indicated that under the "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) Act of 2001, schools which had been assessed as not making adequate progress, particularly in relation to student achievement, were required to submit a school improvement plan (SIP) to the relevant State body. Huber and Conway cited White (2009) who also explained that SIPs were designed to close achievement gaps and raise levels of student achievement.

Huber and Conway (2015) called people's attention to the fact that school improvement efforts have been documented since the 1970s, but they lamented that despite over four decades of discussion and documentation there is still no clear agreement on exactly how to carry out the improvement efforts. They found the absence of a clear blue print for school improvement puzzling based on their review of the literature which shows that there are a number of key areas in which school improvement efforts must focus. These key areas include: frequent monitoring of student data, identification of persons responsible for implementation of each strategy, leadership strategies, and an evaluation of a school's readiness to change, among others (Beach & Lindahl, 2004).

The seeming puzzlement of how to act on school improvement is not only confined to the United States of America. Many countries around the world, including the United Kingdom, and those in the Caribbean, have been struggling with this issue. In the United Kingdom, the issue of school improvement planning is a termly priority and the importance of the contribution of all stakeholders is emphasized (Arnold, 2017). Jamaica and other Caribbean countries have been grappling with poor school performance for decades (Parry, 2004; Thwaites, 2015). This study examines the situation in Jamaica.

Following the re-organization of the Ministry of Education in the early 2000's, the National Education Inspectorate (NEI) was established and since 2010 it has conducted inspection of schools.

Every inspection has resulted in about 55% of schools found to be performing unsatisfactorily. The inspection of the 953 public secondary and primary schools was completed in 2015 and the findings produced by the NEI showed that 55% of schools were performing unsatisfactorily when measured against the eight (8) indicators used by the NEI.

The NEI has reported that one of the recurring features in its inspections is the absence of, or poorly written, School Improvement Plans. Given the unsatisfactory performance of most schools, on the one hand, and the reported weaknesses on the planning processes and products of many schools, this research seeks to ascertain the attitudes of school administrators in selected Jamaican schools, toward the school improvement planning process.

While the data on the attitudes of school administrators, used in this study, are from Jamaica, the findings resonate with some of the concerns of that have been documented from other jurisdictions including the United States. One of the key issues in the attitudes of school administrators in Jamaica to school improvement is accountability. This issue also appears to be central to that of both policy makers and administrators in the United States of America according to Phelps and Addonizio (2006), who contended that a central element in school improvement was accountability. They argued that the ultimate measure of a school's performance is its contribution to student learning. They further suggested that in assessing a school's performance one must account for the relative contributions of families, communities, peers, and the school's resources.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The value of planning as a path to improved educational outcomes remains undisputed yet there is no definitive evidence that school leaders across the Caribbean are generally committed to the task of rigorous school improvement planning. Baldacchino and Farrugia (2002) and Forde (2006) have both lamented on the state of educational planning in the Caribbean and suggested that unsatisfactory performance of the education sector is because of the absence of a culture of planning. An even greater concern is that many school leaders have had no formal training in planning and their attitudes to this important task remains somewhat a mystery.

There are emerging signs that schools and governments across the Caribbean Region are becoming more aware of the fact that educational planning is vital to transforming the quality of educational outcomes. However, there is yet no scientific evidence to confirm the degree to which planning recognition is translated to efforts of support. The provision of support for the planning process both politically and financially is vital to the realization of the planning outcomes. Additionally, no support is offered at the macro level. There are also no available data on the degree of moral and organizational support for institutional educational planning. This paper seeks to explore the attitudes of school administrators and teachers regarding the significant values of school improvement planning.

OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to ascertain the degree to which school administrators and other staff members show their concerns for educational planning. It also is designed to examine the extent to which school administrators and staff members are committed to, and capable of undertaking the task. The study therefore seeks to sketch a profile of the mindset of school leaders toward

educational planning, and thus will provide a framework within which the "educational planning establishment" can generate the appropriate strategies for supporting educational planning at the micro level.

This study is significant for at least three reasons. First, it provides a description of the perspectives and attitudes of school administrators and other stakeholders on the practice of school improvement planning. Second, it has implications for national educational policies in Jamaica as its findings inform the parameters, protocols, and requirements that the Ministry of Education may consider establishing for the school improvement planning process. Finally, the study provides a framework for undertaking similar studies in other countries of the Caribbean.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research seeks to answer four questions, as follows:

(1) How extensively are staff members in school and other stakeholders involved in the planning process?

(2) What are the factors associated with effective school improvement planning?

(3) How are the associated factors related to each other?

(4) Is there a relationship between perspectives of staff regarding the planning process and institution type (publicly or privately owned)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining School Improvement Planning

School improvement planning is a strategic planning process by which members of the school community conduct a thorough evaluation of their school's educational programme and performance in the previous school years and develop a written plan that establishes the starting point for ongoing evaluation of efforts to achieve improvements in student outcomes in succeeding years. In essence, a school improvement plan is a road map that sets out the changes a school needs to make to improve the level of student achievement.

Beach and Lindahl (2004) lamented the fact that with the removal of the planning from the training of principals and the repeated failures of planning initiatives, the importance of planning as a focal process in schools was lost traction. Many plans which required extensive effort to be developed are often left to gather dust; thus stakeholders are often led to doubt the value of the exercise. But the importance of planning as a part of the principal's work cannot be overemphasized as Beach and Lindahl (2000) have argued.

Judah and Paul (2014) argued that the process of (strategic) planning offers educational institutions the opportunity to identify how they would commit resources over the long term to support the accomplishment of the mission of the school. They built on this foundational observation by arguing that the focus of educational planning at the institutional level is the enrichment of learner experience and improvement in learner outcomes. Judah and Paul suggested that more broadly the institutional strategic planning process may be characterized as a change process which

is intended to transform the organization, build consensus and a common vision. This undertaking they contended must involve all stakeholders.

The Epistemology of School Improvement Planning

School improvement planning emerged as a phenomenon of the "effective school movement" of the 1980's has reflected a realization that school contexts and realities differ. System-wide planning predicated on a "one size fits all" philosophy was not only inadequate but irresponsible. A fundamental element of this shift, from what may be called mass planning to contextual and individualized planning, was collaboration among stakeholders. Barber (1984) contributed to the shift arguing that human beings are products of social interactions and as such how they interpret reality was a function of such interaction. Thus, the realities that informed their worldview had to be taken into account in any planning process. The importance of context as a shaper of collaboration is also argued by Brand and Gaffikin (2007) who contended that planning took place in a political context. According to Innes and Booher (2003), a social and political context produces a reality characterized by fragmentation, uncertainty and complexity. This reality drives the need for collaboration. This concept of collaboration is predicated on, among other things, the recognition that the school is like an organism, as Brand and Gaffikin (2007), Innes and Booher (1999) and Jacobs (1961) posited.

Using Berger and Luckman's (1967) frame of reference which posits that reality is socially constructed, Healey (1997) contended that effective planning required that planners stepped back from the seemingly obvious and the things that were taken for granted. They need to uncover the hidden and potent variables that can impact outcomes. Achieving this requires multiple players and multiple perspectives.

Litman (2013) identified seven principles of effective planning among which are inclusivity and transparency which supported a methodology that is comprehensive and takes account of a broad scope of relevant information. What this means is that school improvement planning must be structured in such a way as to tap into all sources of information and support while drawing on the input of everyone in making decisions about the future direction of the school. The Caribbean Centre for Educational Planning (CCEP), which, among other functions, assists educational institutions in developing strategic plans and takes a broad-stakeholder consultative approach to planning. This process involves students, ancillary and administrative staff, service providers such as vendors, taxi and bus drivers, and parents. In addition, members of the Board of Management of the school and members of the Parent Teachers' Association, and of course members of the academic staff play key roles in the approach to school improvement planning used by the CCEP. This breadth of stakeholder involvement and information gathering increases the probability that the plan will be embraced by all, according the Judah and Paul (2014).

The importance of broad stakeholder involvement in the planning process is also emphasized in a 2014 study on school improvement planning undertaken by Hanover. The Hanover research posits that comprehensive stakeholder involvement is the first fundamental of effective school improvement planning and that it is only through comprehensive stakeholder involvement that a school can undertake a responsive and context-sensitive prioritization of needs. Responsive and context-sensitive prioritization of needs is the second fundamental of effective school improvement planning.

The Ontology and Focus of School Improvement Planning

The whole purpose of school improvement planning is producing better student outcomes and thus closing the gap between high and low achieving schools and students. Carnoy and Rothstein (2013) lamented what they described as over-simplification in the analysis of test scores and called for a more thorough-going analysis of factors that perpetuate students' under-achievement. They noted that social class and social inequity were among the strongest contributors to student underachievement and suggested, therefore, that the purpose and focus of educational planning must be to overcome social inequities.

While not disputing the role and impact of social inequities, Darling-Hamond, Wei, and Andree (2010), citing a body of literature, suggested that effective school improvement planning required the recruitment of the right people to become teachers, developing them into effective instructors, and ensuring that the system was able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. These three elements involve paying attention to current state of play in many countries, including Jamaica, where the social inequities that result from, and in, the poor funding of some schools impact the quality of people who enter the teaching profession, for example. The upshot of this is that many who enter the teaching profession do so as because they have limited options. The further consequence of this is that development to recruit effective instructors is stymied due to inadequately resourced colleges and students with limited talents, in many cases. The ultimate downstream effect is that students in school are not exposed to the best possible instruction.

Does Planning Make a Difference?

Lockheed, Harris, and Jayasundera (2010) conducted a study on school improvement planning in Jamaica by examining a programme of support provided to poor-performing schools on the basis of needs identified in their school improvement plans. The programme was implemented in 72 government schools in Jamaica between 1998 and 2005. Using propensity score matching to create a control group of schools that were similar to program schools in the baseline year, they found, among other things, that program schools had received more inputs to improve literacy and numeracy than control schools, and that some inputs associated with the program were correlated with improvement school average achievement. However, the final results showed that schools with school improvement plans did not outperform comparable schools that did not have these plans. These findings superficially would tend to suggest that having a plan does not make a difference in the performance of the school.

Arnold (2017) describes what she regards as effective school improvement planning which brings results. Arnold, a school improvement adviser in the United Kingdom, has developed a framework for school improvement planning. This framework links the school self-evaluation process with the improvement targeting process as a first step and elaborates on the key steps and elements of an effective plan.

The 2015 National Education Inspectorate (Jamaica) report found that 55% of the 953 schools in Jamaica were performing unsatisfactorily. Of that number, the majority apparently had School Improvement Plans, as data provided by the Planning Division of the Ministry of Education in 2016 showed that only 152 schools or approximately 16% of all schools had not submitted School Improvement Plans to the Ministry. These facts would tend to corroborate the findings of Lockheed, Harris, and Jayasundera (2010). This corroboration raises a number of questions that

need to be answered, including whether the plans have been properly designed; the methodology used to develop these plans; the level of inclusivity of the process; and the attitudes of school administrators and staff to the process of implementation. Therefore, this research seeks to provide answers to some of these questions.

In addition to the data from the Ministry which suggest that 84% of schools had submitted School Improvement Plans, a google search on "School Improvement Planning in Jamaica" shows that there were several planning templates that the Ministry of Education had made available to schools and frequent reminders about the responsibility of school principals for implementation of plans. These findings suggest that while extensive focus is being given at the policy level to the need for planning and there is a high level of compliance by schools in the submission of plans, school performance remains at unacceptably low levels.

While Jamaica's experience appears to suggest that the practice of school improvement planning has not had system-wide impact, there are of course cases of spectacular turn around in the fortunes of some schools. Thompson, Burke, King and Wong (2017) found that two schools which had been found to be in need of support, when they were first inspected by the NEI in 2010 and 2012, and which had subsequently developed SIPs, experienced spectacular improvements in students' performance. Thompson et al. found, however, that it was the quality of leadership in these schools, particularly the principals' vision, tenacity and risk-taking which accounted for the turnaround.

Caputo and Rastelli (2014) found evidence which supports the findings of Thompson et al. (2017) that the quality of leadership a school receives makes a difference to the prospects of a SIP having an impact on the school's performance. In their examination of an in-service training program which targeted lower secondary school teachers in schools which had developed school SIPs, Caputo and Rastelli found, among other things, that (a) differences in planning strategies affected results, (b) school improvements were associated with the ability to carry out a careful analysis of context, and (c) the ability to prioritize elements in the diagnostic phase of the process were critical to the success of plans. These sentiments are echoed by Montanari (2018) who suggests that School Improvement Planning is not merely a plan but a framework for change, for which the plan, itself, is simply a map that identifies the school's intended destination. Montanari cites comments attributed to Sam Redding, Associate Director of the Center on School Turnaround at WestEd who contends that high-functioning schools continuously do the right things and always look for ways to improve. Schools that fail with comprehensive school reform do so not for lack of resources, other than time, but for solicitation of determination and internal discipline.

The question of how diligently schools undertake improvement planning has been examined by Mekango (2013) who conducted a study in the Metekel Zone. The study was designed to assess the practices and challenges of school improvement program implementation in secondary schools as well as to identify the major achievements and major problems associated with the implementation of school improvement program. Mekango found mixed results, namely that in most cases inadequate attention is given to planning and only in a few areas is high attention given. The study further found that creating awareness among stakeholders on the importance of planning as well as building capacity to develop and implement plans were critical interventions that needed to be made in order to achieve positive results from the implementation of school improvement plans.

Beach and Lindahl (2004), referred to the low levels of confidence that some stakeholders have in the planning process and suggested that this is due in large part to the non-implementation of plans and thus the absence of any real progress arising from the planning process. Thompson (2017) made a similar point based on his findings which showed that the degree to which faculty stakeholders placed value on the strategic planning process was dependent on how much they saw happen from the previous cycle's planning exercise.

Beach and Lindahl (2004) suggested that unless the planning framework of a school embraces the three phases of planning, implementation, and institutionalization the improvement thrust will not be realized. Beach and Lindahl reminded of the need to distinguish between change and improvement, arguing that in any given school that change is always occurring, whether it is a new teacher, a new cohort of students, or a new curriculum. But in order to promote improvement the leadership has to be systematic, organized and deliberate. This deliberate and deliberative process begins with the engagement of all stakeholders as Allison and Kaye (2005), Judah and Paul (2014), and others, posited. Thus, the critical question is not whether school principals have the skills and forbearance to engage in the planning exercise but whether there is the stakeholder support at all levels to make the planning process efficacious as Gosling and Mintzberg (2004) contended. It is for this reason that Cuban (2003) lamented the fact that despite several measures and policies, comprehensive school improvement remains elusive.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Four major works form the theoretical framework of this study. Thompson (2015) advanced the notion of Proposition CJC. Proposition CJC refers to what Thompson found to be the top three factors that explain the variation in the data in a study on teachers' expectations of the leadership behaviours of principals. CJC refer to capacity, justice, and care, and specifically the expectation of teachers that their principals would take account of their capacities to contribute meaningfully to the efforts of the school as it seeks to implement the plans and programmes designed to produce improvements in student performance and other quality of outputs of the school. The J in Proposition CJC refers to justice and points to the notion that exclusion of teachers from participation in both decision-making concerning the school plans and programmes is an act of injustice. The second C refers to care suggesting that caring leadership involves a commitment to inclusive decision-making and this act of caring / inclusion is most vividly expressed in listening. Thus, Proposition CJC's contribution to this theoretical framework is to be understood as demarcating that a certain approach to leadership is necessary in order for a school to successfully implement any course of school-wide action. This is particularly true for a critical undertaking such as a School Improvement Plan, which requires inclusivity as Lockheed, Harris, and Jayasundera (2010) posited.

The second theoretical framework of this study is found in the work of Hutton and Johnson (2017) who found that the personal philosophy of the school principal informed by a passion for excellence and a belief in the capacity of others, is critical to the success of the school. The work of Hutton and Johnson consisted of stories told by nineteen principals about their experiences in transforming their schools. The stories showed that among the key elements of the transforming experiences were attitudes and approaches such as the belief that students can excel, the reliance on data to drive decisions, a collective / inclusive approach to decision-making and holding staff strictly accountable for results.

Thompson (2017) found that the issue of accountability with respect to the successful implementation of the strategic plan was an overwhelmingly important element of success. Thompson came to this conclusion based on a study conducted among faculty members across four tertiary educational institutions. The study found that two factors accounted for 67% of the variation in the data. These two factors were '*use of insights from previous planning activities*' and '*holding faculty members accountable for deliverables*'. These factors contributed 45.8% and 21.3% respectively of the variation of school success. Thompson concluded that the findings of the study suggest that the extent to which leaders of educational institutions can persuade staff to participate in strategic planning activities is, in a large part, dependent on the degree to which they perceive that staff members can and will be held accountable for deliverables. Thompson's findings in relation to the importance of accountability, which is corroborated by the work of Hutton and Johnson (2017), form the third theoretical framework of this study.

The fourth element of the theoretical framework of this study is found in the works of Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004); Spillane and Camburn (2006); and Harris and Spillane (2008). Collectively these works speak to the notion that leadership exists at all levels of organization, a view that Thompson (2013) also articulates. That there are multiple leaders distributed across the school means that effective leadership requires that responsibilities will be distributed among these leaders. But effective leadership does not merely involve distributing tasks and duties, it also means that these leaders must all be brought into the decision-making process and in doing so the organization must take account of their varied interests and capacities of the leaders as well as the various ways in which to engage them, as Proposition CJC (Thompson, 2015), advances.

Thus, the theoretical framework of this study may be captured in CAID (Capacity, Accountability, Inclusivity, and Distributive Leadership) and expressed diagrammatically as shown in *Figure 1.*

Figure 1. The acronym CAID for **C**apacity, **A**ccountability, **I**nclusivity, and **D**istributive leadership.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research employs a quantitative exploratory design. While there have been a few studies on the use of School Improvement Plans in the education system in Jamaica, not much is known scientifically about the attitudes of school administrators towards this practice. Thus, this study is in effect venturing into a relatively new area of knowledge. According to Cuthill (2002) an exploratory design is used to conduct research about a problem when there are few or no earlier studies to refer, or rely upon, to predict an outcome. This study therefore is seeking to capture a sense of the mood and mindset of stakeholders with respect to this phenomenon. The insights from this study will be used to inform further interventions designed to investigate probable causes, in which contexts other research designs would be appropriate.

Sample

A convenience sampling technique was used to produce the sample for this study. Given that over 80% of schools in Jamaica have been involved in designing and implementing SIPs just about any school chosen would have had the level of exposure that would lead to school administrators and other members of staff developing a positive or negative outlook towards SIPs.

The convenience sampling technique was used based on factors related to cost and ease of access. The researcher did not have funds available to mount an operation across the entire country but had ease of access to a number of schools with close proximity to each team member's operating base and it was therefore convenient to engage those schools. Convenience sampling is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in the study. According to Creswell (2013), convenience sampling really means using what is available given what is relevant. A total of fifteen schools participated in the research covering both public and private schools at the Primary and Secondary levels, inclusive of schools for students with special needs. A total of ninety-one (91) school administrators and members of staff participated in the survey.

Data Collection Instrument, Reliability, and Validity

The instrument used to collect the data for this study was a self-designed thirty-item, five-point Likert-type survey questionnaire. The points on the scale covered "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". The instrument, which is included in this study as Appendix A, was pilot tested among a population of forty school administrators and staff members. The pilot instrument contained 34 items and after conducting test for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha with the number of items reduced to 30. The C-Alpha test produced a result of .714 confirming the instrument's internal consistency (Tavakol & Diamond, 2011). The reliability level of the actual survey was a C-Alpha of .947 with 24 items. With respect to the issue of validity, the instrument, which seeks to uncover attitudes and perceptions sought to gauge participants' feelings and expectations, both of which are predictors of attitudes. In this regard the instrument has used language from surveys that seek to measure attitudes.

In addition to the C-Alpha test of reliability, the KMO test was performed in order to determine the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The test returned a score of .818 which suggests that the sampling is adequate for factor analysis. According to Kaiser (1970) KMO values between 0.8 and 1 indicate the sampling is adequate.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Data were collected with the assistance of eight (8) research assistants who were conveniently located in close proximity to the schools selected or otherwise has easy access to those schools. The authorization to collect data from these schools was obtained from the Ministry of Education. The research assistants visited the schools, distributed the questionnaires and returned a few days later to retrieve the completed instruments. The data were analyzed using the software SPSS V 21. The analysis focused on descriptive statistics, analyses of variances, correlations, and rotated component matrix.

RESULTS

Answer to Question # 1: Extent of Involvement of Staff and other Stakeholders in the Planning Process

The data show that over one quarter (26.4%) of the respondents disagreed, strongly disagreed or were undecided about whether staff members participated in the school improvement planning process, whereas 73.6% either agreed or strongly agreed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Perceptions on *Most Members of Staff Participated in the School Improvement Planning Process*

Data		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	4.4	4.6	4.6
	Disagree	10	11.0	11.5	16.1
	Undecided	9	9.9	10.3	26.4
	Agree	40	44.0	46.0	72.4
	Strongly Agree	24	26.4	27.6	100.0
	Total	87	95.6	100.0	
Missing	System	4	4.4		
Total		91	100.0		

The study differentiated between academic and non-academic staff members in examining the question of participation in the school improvement planning process and found that whereas almost three-quarters of the respondents felt that staff members were involved. That number fell to about half (54%) when referenced to non-academic staff.

With respect to students, over half of the respondents (53.3%) strongly disagreed, disagreed, or were undecided concerning the question of whether students were invited to participate in planning activities. Of the 47.7% which agreed or strongly agreed, only 10% strongly agreed, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Perceptions on *Students are invited to participate in the planning activities*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	6	6.6	6.7	6.7
	Disagree	17	18.7	18.9	25.6
	Undecided	25	27.5	27.8	53.3
	Agree	33	36.3	36.7	90.0
	Strongly Agree	9	9.9	10.0	100.0
	Total	90	98.9	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.1		
Total		91	100.0		

The question of the degree of involvement is an important measure of participation, and one way of measuring perceptions of involvement is with respect to how suggestions for improvement are treated. The study found that a substantial number of staff members (just over 75%) stated that their suggestions were taken into account. Another approach to assessing perspectives on the planning process is to examine the degree to which all stakeholders are involved. The findings show that only about half (52%) of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that "all stakeholders" were involved, although as many as 23% were undecided.

Answer to Question # 2: Factors Associated with Effective School Improvement Planning

The study found that four key factors are associated with effective school improvement planning, namely: involvement, accountability, plan implementation, and efficacy. These four factors accounted for 68.83% of the variation in the data with *involvement* itself alone accounting for a total of 47.82%, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	11.475	47.815	47.815	11.475	47.815	47.815	5.319	22.163	22.163
2	1.904	7.932	55.746	1.904	7.932	55.746	4.188	17.451	39.614
3	1.616	6.732	62.479	1.616	6.732	62.479	4.067	16.947	56.561
4	1.523	6.346	68.825	1.523	6.346	68.825	2.943	12.264	68.825
5	1.057	4.406	73.231						
6	.908	3.782	77.012						
7	.843	3.514	80.526						
8	.789	3.289	83.815						
9	.562	2.342	86.157						
10	.519	2.163	88.320						
11	.480	1.999	90.319						
12	.368	1.534	91.853						
13	.333	1.389	93.241						
14	.312	1.299	94.540						
15	.240	1.001	95.542						
16	.227	.947	96.489						
17	.180	.749	97.239						
18	.159	.663	97.901						
19	.145	.606	98.507						
20	.114	.477	98.984						
21	.110	.460	99.444						
22	.059	.247	99.692						
23	.039	.163	99.855						
24	.035	.145	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Answer to Question # 3: Relationship among Factors

The factors showed moderate to strong positive relationship among themselves as shown in Table 4. The strongest correlations were between *involvement* and *accountability* and *accountability* and *plan implementation* which showed correlations of .685 and .673 respectively.

Table 4

Correlations among Key Factors

		Involvement	Accountability	Plan Implementation	Efficacy
Involvement	Pearson Correlation	1	.685**	.648**	.424**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	91	91	91	90
Accountability	Pearson Correlation	.685**	1	.673**	.526**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	91	91	91	90
Plan Implementation	Pearson Correlation	.648**	.673**	1	.496**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	91	91	91	90
Efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.424**	.526**	.496**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	90	90	90	90

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Answer to Question # 4: Relationship between Perspectives of Staff and Institution Type

The study found no relationship between the perspectives of staff and the type of school in which they worked (whether publicly or privately owned). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Relationship between Perspectives and Institution Type

	The institution is	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Involvement	publicly owned	84	28.6071	6.58223	.71818
	privately owned	2	33.0000	2.82843	2.00000
Accountability	publicly owned	84	26.7738	5.64694	.61613
	privately owned	2	29.5000	7.77817	5.50000
Plan Implementation	publicly owned	84	19.5119	3.92856	.42864
	privately owned	2	18.5000	7.77817	5.50000
Efficacy	publicly owned	83	6.8675	1.77222	.19453
	privately owned	2	9.5000	.70711	.50000
School Improvement Plan	publicly owned	84	86.3095	15.39596	1.67984
	privately owned	2	95.5000	19.09188	13.50000

Discussion

This study has unearthed four major findings and reinforced a number of others. It is to be noted that this is the first of its kind in the Caribbean and for that reason its findings are significant. The first major finding is the fact that different stakeholders have differing perspectives of the extent of their participation in the school improvement planning process. The study reveals that 73% of "Staff and other Stakeholders" either agree or strongly agree that they are involved in the school improvement planning process; but when the category non-academic staff is isolated the number falls to 54% and when students are isolated the number falls further to 47%. The differences in the perceived degree of involvement is critical as it has implications for how well stakeholders will collaborate and, by extension, how deeply they will commit to making the plan for school improvement work. Barber (1984) and more recently Brand and Gaffikin (2007), addressed this issue of the relationship between the capacity and willingness to collaborate and the perceived sense of involvement in a process. Barber (1984) suggested that human beings are products of social interactions and as such how they interpret reality is a function of such interaction. Thus, if stakeholders perceive, by virtue of the social interaction, in this case the degree to which they are consulted, that they are valued more or less, relative to their expectations, then their level of commitment will be affected by that sense of being valued. Brand and Gaffikin (2007) argued that context is a shaper of collaboration, and introduced the notion of politics, understood as power. They suggested that if the power dynamics in the context are not such that they nurture collaboration then it is less likely that people will commit to the larger ideals of the organization and, in the context of planning, this commitment is vital. The importance of the political context is reinforced by Innes and Booher (2003), who spoke of the social and political contexts, and highlighted the fact that these contexts can produce a reality characterized by fragmentation, uncertainty, and complexity, simply because stakeholders have different areas of interests and are focusing on different needs, and come from different perspectives and backgrounds. The success of any planning initiative is then dependent on the degree to which the planning process can create a sense of commonality among stakeholders to produce the collaboration necessary for success. Ensuring that all stakeholders feel that their inputs are equally valued and valid is critical to such an outcome. Thus, the finding that only 54% and 47% of respondents believe that non-academic staff and students, respectively, are involved in the planning process, (compared to 73% of "staff and other stakeholders" - a finding which appears to reflect a focus on academic staff) is an unfortunate depiction of the planning culture. Planning efforts must aim at broad-based inclusion. This finding is consistent with Quadrant 2 of the theoretical framework of this study.

The argument about the importance of collaboration is reinforced by the second major finding of this study, namely the top four factors which explain the variation in the data. These are *involvement, accountability, plan implementation, and efficacy,* which account for 68.83% of the variation. *Involvement* accounts for 47.82%, which suggests that the most critical issue that defines how stakeholders view the school improvement planning process is the degree of their involvement.

The overwhelming importance of involvement, as a key element of school improvement planning, is supported by Litman (2013) who listed seven principles of effective planning highlights inclusivity, and Judah and Paul (2014) who contended that the breadth of stakeholder involvement in the information gathering increased the probability of overall plan embracement. Beach and Lindahl (2004) suggested that the art of inclusive planning is not a natural skill which school administrators possess, and they lamented the fact that training in planning is not sufficiently emphasized in the preparation of school principals.

Another element of this second finding is the issue of accountability. This is the second of the top four factors which explain the variation in data and is identical to Quadrant 3 of the study. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of plans rests, to an important degree, on stakeholders being called upon to deliver on their commitments. These findings are aligned to Thompson (2017) who found that the issue of accountability was an overwhelmingly important element of success. In that study the variable *accountability* accounted for 21.3% of the variation in the data. In the current study *accountability* is closely related to *plan implementation* and *efficacy* with which it correlates as at a strength of positive .673 and .526, respectively. These correlations of relationship suggest that the efficacy of the implementation of the plan is dependent to a large degree on accountability, and this relationship constitutes the third major finding of the study.

The final finding of the study is that there is no difference between how administrators and other stakeholders in public institutions saw the school improvement planning process, compared to their counterparts in private institutions. This finding highlights the importance of planning for both privately and publicly owned and operated schools. This finding, when taken in the context of the previous findings, also suggests that there is consensus between administrators and stakeholders of both public and private schools on the key ingredients of effective school improvement planning, namely involvement and accountability.

CONCLUSION

School improvement planning is a practice that has been discussed and documented for over four decades. Despite the four decades-long practice, supported by the passing of legislation (as in the case of "No Child Left Behind") to mandate school improvement planning, the training of school leaders in school improvement planning, and the provision of resources to support the process, schools in many jurisdictions are still not experiencing desired levels of improvements. It is inarguable as Judah and Paul (2014), Brand and Gaffikin (2007), Phelps and Addonizio (2006), and Barber (1984) have found that stakeholder involvement is critical to the realization of improvement in student achievement. Also central to improvement is student achievement and the school's performance more broadly, which is predicated on planning, is the issue of accountability as Thompson (2017), and Phelps and Addonizio (2006) have posited.

The key finding of this study is that the single most critical variable in effective planning, planning which produces the desired outcomes, is the involvement of stakeholders. The factor *involvement* accounted for 47.82% of the variation in the data on which this study is based. The dominance of this variable suggests that the most critical issue affecting how the school improvement planning process is seen is the degree of stakeholder involvement.

The theoretical model espoused by this study identifies four elements, each of which is in some way connected to the concept and practice of involvement. The four elements are **C**apacity, **A**ccountability, **I**nclusivity, and **D**istributivity. The element 'capacity' suggests that planners take account of and give credence to the capacity of stakeholders to make a difference. This conclusion is supported by Thompson (2015). The element accountability means that those stakeholders who commit to be involved in the planning process must be held accountable (Thompson, 2017; Phelps and Addonizio, 2006). This is further supported by the findings of this study which show that accountability is the second of the top three factors which explain the variation in the data.

Involvement is not for cosmetic purposes, and has, at its core, the practices of inclusive and shared (distributive) leadership as Harris and Spillane (2008) and Barber (1984) argued. Ultimately, however, involvement must lead to the actual implementation of the school improvement plan, the efficacy of which will be seen in improved student achievement.

This unique contribution of this study, and its fundamental assertion, is that efficacious school improvement planning requires the involvement of all stakeholders and the process of involvement is to be pursued with the framework of CAID.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire

Attitudes of School Administrators and Staff towards School Improvement Planning

Please use the key below to answer the questions that follow

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; U = Undecided; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

	SA	A	U	D	SD
(1) You are involved in the school improvement planning activities					
(2) In your opinion school improvement planning is vital to the school's performance					
(3) The school improvement planning process is carefully and thoughtfully structured					
(4) Most members of staff participate in the school improvement planning process					
(5) The performance of most students has improved since the school began to undertake school improvement planning					
(6) The overall performance of the school has improved since the school began to undertake school improvement planning					
(7) Suggestions made by staff members about the areas for improvement are taken into account in deciding on the priorities of the school					
(8) Students are invited to participate in the planning activities					
(9) Non-academic members of staff participate in the planning activities					
(10) All stakeholders are represented in the planning process					
(11) The process implementing the initiatives of plan is fulfilling					

(12) The School Improvement Plan (SIP) plan prepared by my school reflects an understanding of the internal challenges facing the institution						
(13) The SIP prepared by my school takes account of the external realities facing the school						
(14) The plan is flexible and responsive to the changing needs of the school						
(15) You are proud to be associated with the SIP of your school						
(16) Your school can count on its stakeholders to provide the required support to ensure the effective implementation of the SIP						
(17) Each staff member has definitive responsibilities and duties in the plan						
(18) You are assigned a share of the responsibilities and duties in the plan						
(19) Staff members are held accountable for the execution of their responsibilities under the plan						
(20) The principal provides leadership in the planning process						
(21) The principal shares responsibilities for the attainment of the objectives of the plan						
(22) The plan inspires confidence in the future of the school						
(23) The principal provides leadership in the pursuit of the objectives of the plan						

Please Answer the Following Questions

(24) Your school has an School Improvement Plan

(a) Yes

(b) No

(c) Not sure

(25) Your age group is:

(a) 20 – 30 [ ]

(b) 31 – 40 [ ]

(c) 41 – 50 [ ]

(d) 51 – 60 [ ]

(e) 60+ [ ]

(26) You have been working in the education system for:

(a) 5 years or less [ ]

(b) 6 – 10 years [ ]

(c) 11 – 15 years [ ]

(d) 16 – 20 years [ ]

(e) Over 20 years [ ]

(27) You have been working at your current school for:

(a) 5 years or less [ ]

(b) 6 – 10 years [ ]

(c) 11 – 15 years [ ]

(d) 16 – 20 years [ ]

(e) Over 20 years [ ]

(28) You are:

(a) Male [ ]

(b) Female [ ]

(29) The institution is:

(a) Publicly owned [ ]

(b) Privately owned [ ]

(30) Your position is classified as:

(a) Non-management [ ]

(b) Lower Management [ ]

(c) Middle Management [ ]

(d) Senior Management [ ]

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A SYSTEM-WIDE, COLLABORATIVE, PURPOSEFUL, AND SUSTAINABLE DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP PLAN UTILIZING TEACHER LEADERS TO FACILITATE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Through collaboration between one rural southeastern university and a local rural school system of high-poverty in southeast Georgia (a pseudonym, Justice County School System [JCSS]), a mixed method case study analysis was conducted to examine a system-wide professional learning initiative. The goal of this initiative was to provide professional learning that was collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable. The professional learning initiative is a semi-structured plan developed based on distributed leadership to share the responsibilities of administration by utilizing teacher leaders to facilitate system-wide professional learning. In addition, school personnel perceptions of their changes in professional practices as a result of this collaborative PLC work were explored to determine effectiveness of the professional learning communities. The outcome of this study resulted in the presentation of a replicable or modifiable plan that was formalized with evidence-based practices that could be disseminated to other districts and schools exploring similar professional learning opportunities. Georgia certification mandates require that districts and schools possess accountability measures that ensure the professional growth of all school personnel through PLCs. The mode in which JCSS approached professional learning could advance other professional learning initiatives or in many cases launch these initiatives. JCSS should serve as a model system with a proven record of using an innovative professional learning approach that distributed the responsibilities among both administrators and staff, specifically teacher leaders to effectively improve teachers' classroom practices. Institutions of higher education and local school systems need to implement collaborative, purposeful and sustainable professional learning with fidelity by distributing leadership efforts.

INTRODUCTION

School leaders are continually charged with adhering to federal and state mandates to lead district and school improvement initiatives in an effort to improve teaching and learning. For reasons related to school improvement, school leaders are working diligently to identify sound professional learning to keep pace with these mandates. Embracing school improvement to achieve organizational change is a constant challenge for school leaders. These professional learning demands add to the current pressures of school leaders' responsibilities when challenged with the overwhelming tasks required to maintain daily operations. As Walker

(2009) stated, "the increase in the principal's responsibilities and the incongruence between what instructional leaders want to do and have time to do create serious consequences for school leaders and their work in making a difference in schools" (p. 214). In addition, with the current fiscal state of public education at the state and national levels, making the most of already available resources is the number one priority for most school districts (for the purposes of this study, system will be used interchangeably with district), as school leaders are tasked with addressing professional learning needs with limited resources. Now more than ever, these dwindling resources require professional learning efforts to be collaborative and strategically designed.

Professional learning in Georgia and many other states have required educators to attend workshops and conferences with the goal of returning to the classroom to implement and disseminate what was learned to improve teaching and learning (Georgia Professional Standards Commission [GaPSC], 2018). These tactics as an improvement strategy resulted in a focus on seat-time rather than authentic opportunities for educators to engage in individualized experiences that would best fit their professional learning needs. As schools noted these growing concerns, the GaPSC answered their call and shifted the focus to standard-based, job-embedded professional learning conducted on a continuous and collaborative basis within a professional learning community (PLC) at the school or district-level. Thus, the new requirements in Georgia for teacher re-certification moved away from gaining Professional Learning Units (PLUs) via seat-time to the implementation of professional learning goals or plans designed specifically around the professional growth needs of individual educators. To meet these professional growth expectations, districts are required to derive an accountability plan that includes collaborative, job-embedded professional learning. Schools and districts have been tasked with implementing PLCs as the mode in which to deliver this type of professional learning. The challenge, however, is to develop effective PLCs and not just collaborative time to vent. For the purpose of this study, PLCs are defined as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many & Mattos, 2016, p.16).

Without the provision of adequate cost-effective training and resources, to be able to do this effectively, districts need to be not only collaborative, but also innovative. The added responsibilities of implementing PLCs with fidelity are even more pronounced within high poverty districts that are operating with very limited resources including financial and human. While the research on PLCs is not new, system and school improvement strategies designed around collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable system-wide professional learning is an innovative approach to meet these new professional learning mandates in Georgia. Thus, this study sought to examine a pilot of a semi-structured system-wide professional learning initiative in a rural, high-poverty district in southeast Georgia that developed and implemented a formalized plan with limited resources. The outcome included sharing this formalized plan in an effort to help other districts who are struggling with these new required professional learning mandates to provide sound professional learning in their own districts.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Distributed Leadership

The job of the school leader is daunting and school leaders struggle to complete all of the administrative work needed on a daily basis. Distributing leadership not only builds

capacity and supports change, it expands the degree of change possible in leading educational reform efforts (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Distributed leadership needs to be meaningfully connected with the experiences and aspirations of those who are practitioners and should place an emphasis on interactions rather than actions of school leaders (Harris, 2013). School leaders need to understand their practice and leadership role as one actively brokering, facilitating, and supporting the leadership of others (Harris, 2013). As the sharing of leadership responsibilities develops among organizational members, an appreciation develops of interdependence and how one's behavior impacts the organization as a whole through increased participation in decision-making, which may result in a greater commitment to organizational goals (Fullan, 2001). Distributed leadership is critical in developing effective leaders who are able to understand their own learning and how their learning impacts the learning of others (Elmore, 2002). Distributed leadership has the potential to increase on-the-job leadership development experiences and redistribute the workload for those in administrative roles (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008).

Distributing responsibility helps balance an administrator's workload by sharing duties to afford the school leader the opportunity to do a better job on the most pertinent demands of the school. As school leaders desire to have more time for their instructional leadership role, they often fail to spend an appropriate amount of time in this role due to the management tasks that are needed (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). A recent study showed that administrators' self-efficacy increased by .36 of a standard deviation for every unit increase in amount of time spent on instructional leadership and decreased by -.09 of a standard deviation for every unit increase in amount of time spent on school management tasks (McBrayer, Jackson, Pannell, Sorgen, Gutierrez, & Melton, 2018). The support of different persons leading various aspects of leadership allows school leaders to be more productive in completing all of the tasks they are challenged with daily as the responsibilities are shared.

Distributed leadership closely resembles the transformational leadership style, which transforms both leaders and members to accomplish more than what is usually expected and raises motivation. Inspiring intrinsic motivation is a key to the development and sustainment of organizational change, and in their landmark study, Kouzes and Posner (2007) described the transformational leader as one who manifests the five practices of an exemplary leader by inspiring a shared vision, modeling the way, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. To fully transform and enact change, it takes distributing responsibility, adding effective leadership, building capacity, and providing support. In transformative leadership, leaders transform the school environment to create collaboration, trust, and support for individuals to bring about change, and this involves all stakeholders in the decision-making process as leaders influence change initiatives and challenge others to embrace change within their school (Bradley-Levine, 2016).

Moving forward with a distributed leadership plan to implement a professional learning initiative is a challenge. Even effective school leaders have met their match when assigned the responsibility to change the mission, culture, and/or operations of an ongoing organization. A clear purpose for organizational change can help everyone understand what needs to be accomplished and why. School leaders must solve problems and implement change through mutually beneficial relationships (Fullan, 2001). To ensure long-term improvement, behaviors must become rooted in an organization's norms and values with specific changes linked to performance improvements and not to charismatic individuals (Kotter, 1996). With trust built into these relationships, transformational leaders can freely discuss the need for change and

convey a collaborative understanding as to what changes are needed and discover why these changes are important. Thus, distributing effective leadership becomes integral in impacting and sustaining long-term organizational change (Fullan, 2001).

Teacher Leadership

For distributed leadership to be effective, the district and school administrators must support the notion of collaboration and shared roles and responsibilities. Progressive planning must be happening within the district with school leaders understanding the importance of building a collaborative network and not being challenged by sharing power with other people. Teacher leadership is an integral part of school improvement and an essential component of distributed leadership. Teacher leadership, referred to as the means by which teachers influence school-wide instruction or policy, has become an increasingly recognized lever for reform (Cambum, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003; Stein, Macaluso, & Nevins, 2016). Efforts to increase and enhance the role of teacher leaders in guiding instructional change have become widespread (Berg, Carver, & Mangin, 2014). In a recent study centered on transformative leadership, the participants all agreed that critical leaders are not only administrators but also teacher leaders (Bradley-Levine, 2016). It is pertinent to recognize the value of teacher leaders in that their leadership positively impacts schools (Stein et al., 2016). Teacher leadership creates new roles and responsibilities that are critical for both elevating the profession of teaching and advancing educational reform.

Recognizing teachers as agents of change creates a culture that continues to support the notion of collaboration, and school leaders are discovering the wealth of expertise within classrooms and among their diverse staff of teachers. The pathway for both generating and sharing teacher expertise is empowering both school leaders and teachers to build mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships. Teacher engagement in this process builds ownership, which leads to commitment. The concept and practice of distributed leadership stems from recognition that leadership is present throughout schools on all levels and with distributed responsibility comes distributed accountability. A clear delineation of the structures and expectations enables the distribution of responsibility to become the collaborative norm, as collaboration shapes the attainment of a positive school climate (Wahlstrom & York-Barr, 2011). Shared leadership also contributes to a positive district culture by valuing and respecting teachers with a public acknowledgment of their leadership skills through their designation as a teacher leader and through support such as supplemental pay for this work. Teacher leadership holds great promise for schools focused on closing the achievement gap if school leaders provide teacher leaders with the capacity to lead the school by means of increasing teacher collaboration, disseminating best practices, offering support for differentiation, and focusing on content-specific issues (Muijs & Harris, 2006).

The traditional idea of teachers as education givers could only permit them to practice leadership at the expense of being administrators. Teachers can be looked upon as leaders in their school without having to be in an administrative role by providing them the ability to take on leadership roles consistently throughout the school-year (Warren, 2011). In addition, teachers can be leaders without being formal administrators because of the autonomy the teachers have in implementing leadership duties and responsibilities with their peers. Teachers should be respected as autonomous leaders with the ability to enforce responsibility independently, as well as display initiative. There is a need to shift toward teacher leadership being a viable option to distribute administrative duties, as effective teaching demands the presence

of leadership skills to enforce the duties in their daily work (Warren, 2011). The notion of teachers fully carrying out leadership roles and administrative duties are often overlooked, and as a result, teachers' leadership abilities are often underutilized. The teacher as a reflection of the school leader is the primary reason to support teachers being viewed as leaders without having to become formal administrators (Warren, 2011).

Collaborative, Purposeful, and Sustainable Professional Learning

Purposeful professional learning has been defined as "continuous, job-embedded professional learning that is designed to meet a specific need identified within an annual process of a systematic comprehensive needs assessment" (Chance, 2018 unpublished manuscript). Although progress has been made in this area, school schedules and calendars traditionally do not allow adequate time for job-embedded professional learning and collaboration among teachers. This makes it difficult for teachers to discuss planning, instruction, and assessment. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin explained that teacher development must deepen their understanding of the teaching and learning processes, assist with their understanding of their students, and help in dealing with the uncertainties of their roles as both teachers and learners. With great relevance to our current educational status, these findings identified a number of characteristics common to effective professional development including the engagement of teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development; grounded inquiry, reflection, and experimentation that is participant-driven; collaboration, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators and a focus on teachers' communities of practice rather than on individual teachers; connected to teachers' work with their students; sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and the collective solving of specific problems of practice; and connected to other aspects of school change. These characteristics remain relevant today as school systems continue to be challenged with the question of how to develop purposeful and sustainable professional learning plans that are meaningful, relevant, and collaborative in nature.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

In a seminal study, Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) provided important information about district-level support for school-level PLCs. Their work verified the importance of consistently designating job-embedded support and building time for collaborative learning within system-wide planning. A PLC is comprised of teams whose members work collectively to achieve a common goal linked to the purpose of teaching and learning; the purpose of the PLC is to improve student learning through collaborative inquiry and action research (DuFour et al., 2016). As teachers gather to examine student work and build shared knowledge, their professional capacity begins to grow, and through the analysis of student work, PLC members develop reflective qualities, which allow them to challenge their assumptions and grow as educators (Brodie, 2014). By enhancing teacher capacity through collaboration, schools not only improve student achievement, but also support affective, social, and cognitive aspects of teacher growth (Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter, 2016). Such collaboration also promotes teacher motivation and welfare, which can aid in the prevention of teacher burnout (Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hamalainen & Poikonen, 2009).

Sigurðardóttir (2010) established a strong relationship between school effectiveness and teacher perceptions of PLCs. The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a system or a school functions as a PLC,

educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibilities of those who work within it (DuFour et al., 2016). DeMatthews (2014) noted that PLCs through shared leadership is integral in providing a forum for teachers to come together to solve issues they face on a daily basis and in doing so improve student achievement. With the potential to serve as a catalyst for improving student achievement, increasing professional capacity, supporting affective aspects of professional growth, and improving overall teacher motivation, it is imperative that schools not only implement PLCs, but implement them effectively. Hipp and Huffman (2010) conceptualized dimensions of effective PLCs and these dimensions were shaped around shared and supportive leadership, as well as involving school leaders and supporting leadership efforts among staff members. School leaders must provide guidance in the PLC process, but autonomy is a key element that energizes staff and contributes to collaboration (Linder, Post & Calabrese, 2012). While much of the professional learning can and should be owned at the grassroots level, school leaders must ensure that resources are in place to support these efforts (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010).

Without shared leadership, cultures of compliance can be created in which teachers struggle to find meaning in the work of the PLC (Wilson, 2016). Shared values and vision may result in teachers having more confidence in their principals' abilities to implement PLCs if a strong vision was identified, as a strong vision can address the roadblock of isolation that often hinders effective PLCs (Lujan & Day, 2009). Once PLC members have ownership of the work guided by shared values and vision, they must engage in collective learning and application (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). Through shared personal practice, collaboration results in mutual accountability and support, as collegial trust is established. This collegial trust coupled with academic emphasis within PLCs is essential, as one cannot exist without the other (Gray, Kruse, & Tarter, 2016). Trust is a primary factor in determining the effectiveness of PLCs as correlations between levels of trust and levels of collaborative inquiry have been noted (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). PLCs when implemented effectively provide a structure for teacher collaboration that often results in pedagogical shifts intended to have positive effects on student learning (Sinnema, Sewell, & Milligan, 2011).

Despite recent mandates in Georgia to implement PLCs, many schools are not implementing effective PLCs, or for that matter implementing PLCs at all. PLCs have become synonymous with individuals who just share a common interest in education (DuFour et al., 2016), but without action these interests cannot translate into accountable outcomes. For school leaders, it is not enough to simply provide professional learning and label them PLCs, as there are critical components that must be in place to ensure that such work results in collaborative, purposeful, and sustained efforts to achieve school improvement. This is why utilizing teacher leaders as the backbone of a purposeful and sustainable professional learning program is a definitive educational plan to distribute leadership and supports the need for collaborative efforts. In addition, the combination of utilizing teacher leaders to facilitate purposeful and sustainable professional learning becomes the catalyst that supports effective collaborative learning and positive change within the organization. The culmination of this type of progressive organizational change can be further demonstrated when a school system not only relies on teacher leaders to facilitate professional learning, but involves them collectively in the development of a comprehensive, system-wide professional development initiative that utilizes PLCs as one of its most important professional learning components.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The researchers engaged in discussions with numerous districts and schools to better understand the professional learning work going on across Georgia, specifically with PLCs. These collaborative conversations led the researchers to determine that implementing purposeful and sustainable professional learning, in particular implementing PLCs with fidelity, was a challenge across Georgia. During these conversations, many challenges were noted within the PLC work with the most prominent being that much of this work was not happening in any formalized manner nor was it a collaborative effort. However, one school system emerged as a district that had a PLC initiative that was being piloted as a semi-structured approach that resulted in a formalized comprehensive and collective plan of action after implementation throughout the school-year. This formalized plan included a system-wide initiative focused on distributed leadership and teacher leadership to provide collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable professional learning by having teacher leaders support administration by facilitating some of the PLC work. Thus, a collaboration between a university and a local school district ensued, and a long-term goal was established to aid the work of professional learning in the southeast region of Georgia by providing exemplars from districts and schools who were effectively implementing PLCs. The idea was that if educators in Georgia needed help in implementing PLCs to meet state mandates, they needed evidence-based practices and a plan that could potentially serve as a replicable or modifiable framework for designing their own professional learning initiatives. Thus, the intentions of both the university and local school system were to provide a formalized plan of action for sound professional learning that could translate into the field by working closely with their neighboring practitioners.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How was a professional learning initiative based on distributed leadership utilized to implement collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable professional learning via professional learning communities (PLCs)? 2. Based on the system-wide professional learning initiative, how did teachers' instructional and/or professional practices change as a result of their system-wide professional learning communities (PLCs) involvement? 3. How do educators rate their level of performance in terms of professional learning community (PLC) participation in applying the knowledge and skills learned in classroom practice?

PROCEDURES

Research Design

The researchers collaborated with JCSS to conduct a mixed method case study analysis to examine a system-wide professional learning initiative, specifically focusing on PLCs. According to Yin (2003) the need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena, such as organizational processes, as case studies are often the preferred strategy when answering *how* or *why* questions. This study sought to examine how a professional learning initiative based on distributed leadership was utilized to implement collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable professional learning. This initiative included teacher leaders to share in the administrative responsibilities of providing system-wide professional learning. JCSS gathered artifacts and support resources used to develop, implement, and assess their professional learning work. In addition, JCSS collected narrative and quantitative data to ascertain the perceptions of school personnel engaged in the professional learning to determine if the PLCs being implemented were effective in changing teachers' professional practices.

JCSS shared the data collected with the researchers in an effort to develop a formalized professional learning plan and provide support for the plans' effectiveness. The researchers were provided de-identified archival data from the 2016-2017 schoolyear from JCSS and thus, all participants remained anonymous.

Participants

The participants in this study were the certified teachers at JCSS during the 2016-2017 schoolyear, and included 93 participants (certified teachers involved in the state evaluation process). These participants collaborated as a system and generated numerous artifacts and support resources to develop, implement, and assess their overall professional learning initiative.

Setting

The setting for this study was Justice County School System (JCSS), a pseudonym. JCSS is a southeastern rural school district in Georgia identified as high poverty. For the 2016-2017 schoolyear, JCSS employed 9 administrators, 102 teachers, and 26 paraprofessionals. In addition, the school district served 1,150 students in pre-kindergarten through Grade 12. The district was comprised of two schools: Justice Elementary School (pre-kindergarten through grades 5) and Justice Middle and High School (grades 6 through 12). Demographics of the student population for race indicated: 604 Black; 435 White; 66 Hispanic; 39 Multi-Racial; 5 Asian / Pacific Islander; and 1 American Indian / Alaskan Native; gender indicated 585 males and 565 females; the grade span enrollment was 609 in the elementary school and 541 collectively in the middle and high school setting. The mission of the school district is aimed at educating all students for college and careers and the core beliefs and values are to provide a well-rounded, quality education so that all students are prepared for college and careers; maintain a safe and student-centered learning environment; develop and maintain highly-effective and diverse employees; optimize stakeholder involvement including parents, colleges, community partners, and local businesses and industry; and be good stewards of district resources.

One of the district's major barriers for academic achievement is its high poverty percentage, which in 2016-2017 was at 64.52% system-wide. Within this small rural community, JCSS continues to deal with the aftereffects of the last nationwide recession and ongoing funding cuts from local, state and federal sources. High poverty percentages, low economic status, and a nearly non-existent local tax base are just a few of the factors that impact the well-being of the students in the JCSS. Like many neighboring districts, JCSS suffered through the continued austerity cuts and student academic achievement was suffering. With funds continuing to be cut at the federal, state, and local levels, professional learning and support resources began to be depleted. Students were unmotivated, teachers were discouraged, and parents were discontent. A solution had to be found and soon before students were left without adequate preparation for their lives after graduating from high school or worse before they dropped out of school.

Data Collection

Varied sets of data were collected to better understand the inner workings of the semi-structured professional learning initiative (considered by JCSS as a pilot), as well as the evidence-based practices that shaped the PLC work. A letter of cooperation with the JCSS Su-

perintendent was attained by the researchers to analyze de-identified archival data collected during the 2016-2017 schoolyear. These data sets were collected over the course of the 2016-2017 schoolyear, as well as upon completion of the PLC yearly cycle and included a JCSS System Level PLC Structure (Appendix A), the JCSS professional learning plan, the Teacher Leader Responsibilities Chart, examples of PLC work plans, a collective document for school meeting agenda, notes, and minutes (these were collected by teacher leaders), informal observations, informal dialogue with administration and staff, staff narrative data (open-ended questions), and quantitative data (self-reported performance measurement utilizing a Likert-scale item) from a questionnaire. At the conclusion of the schoolyear, the questionnaire was distributed to 93 participants via hard copy and collected and analyzed by the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (tasked with coordination and supervision of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; coordination of accreditation; and facilitation of system improvement activities; coordination all testing activities) and the Director of Federal Programs (tasked with supporting the Superintendent through organization, operations, and supervision of statewide programs, staff, and resources, including assessing all professional learning work to meet certification mandates). The questionnaire was utilized to ascertain the impact that the PLC work had on classroom practices. Because the questionnaire was distributed at the year-end PLC via hard copy to all certified staff, JCSS was able to attain a 100% response rate. The Director of Federal Programs provided the questionnaire data to the researchers in a de-identified format to maintain all participants' confidentiality. Because the participants were anonymous, no personal demographic data were shared. The questionnaire titled JCSS Professional Learning Goal/Plan Component Rating was comprised of four open-ended questions to ascertain information about the employing school, list the names of the two PLCs each participant attended, identify the teachers' professional learning goal or plan, and determine how as an educator their instructional and/or professional practices changed as a result of their system-wide PLC involvement. Additionally, there was a final question for participants to self-rate their level of PLC performance in applying the knowledge and skills learned in classroom practice using a Likert-scale and these performance levels included level 4=exemplary, level 3=proficient, level 2=needs development, and level 1=ineffective. So in total the questionnaire had five questions requiring 10 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed and presented to provide insight into the potential benefits of utilizing this professional learning initiative to conduct purposeful and sustainable professional learning through the use of collaborative PLCs facilitated by teacher leaders to support the distribution of leadership. To answer Research Question 1, all artifacts provided were examined in an effort to develop a formalized professional learning plan unique to JCSS. For Research Question 2, the qualitative questionnaire data were analyzed and themes and patterns in the findings were noted. From these themes and patterns, codes were created to examine the data in an organizational manner aligned to the research question. For research question 3, the quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive measures. Overall, the outcomes resulted in the presentation of a formalized professional learning plan, supported with narrative and numerical data to ascertain the effectiveness of the PLC work from the perceptions of those leading and those engaging in the PLC work.

FINDINGS

Because the state of Georgia mandated an internal district accountability plan that required school leaders to provide adequate, job-embedded professional learning to all school personnel, JCSS developed a system-wide professional learning plan considered at launch to be a semi-structured pilot plan. This mandated accountability plan included measuring demonstrated professional growth of all school personnel. To be in compliance with this new mandate, JCSS was intentional about this process and created an initial plan of evidence-based practices and accountability measures. The results of this study allowed the researchers to present a finalized and formalized professional learning plan with findings to support the effectiveness of this initiative in positively shaping the professional growth of school personnel at JCSS.

To answer the first question about the system level structure of a system-wide collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable professional learning initiative that utilized distributed and teacher leadership to implement PLCs, the researchers first looked to the JCSS System Level PLC Structure chart (Appendix A) to understand the organization of leadership distribution. Under the guidance of the Superintendent, deemed by her staff as a transformational school leader, full support was provided to initiate a distributed leadership approach via the implementation of a system-wide professional learning initiative to develop a formalized professional learning plan. With the involvement of the Director of Federal Programs, who oversaw the development of this collaborative work, JCSS developed what the researchers coined the JCSS Purposeful Professional Learning Plan. The outcome of this exploration was the development, implementation, and continual assessment of a system-wide professional learning plan that became formalized over the course of the schoolyear and was based on distributed and teacher leadership. The researchers worked collaboratively to review all artifacts and support resources used to create this formalized professional learning plan. The details of this professional learning plan are presented below.

JCSS Purposeful Professional Learning Plan

The semi-structured, professional learning initiative was developed based on the work of DuFour et al., (2010), as JCSS supported their work to embed adequate preparation time for teachers to discuss, plan, and reflect together within their PLC work. Based on the definition "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour, et al., 2016, p. 11), the researchers presented their definition of a collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable PLC as "A collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable PLC is an ongoing process in which educators learn and work for the collective good of the district and schools to identify evidence-based practices for all school personnel to achieve better results for the students they serve" (McBrayer, Pannell, & Chance, as written in The utilization of a Teacher Leader Network (TLN) to facilitate professional learning communities through distributed leadership, unpublished manuscript). Based on the organizational structure created, PLCs were designed to be led by identified teacher experts and the PLCs operated under the assumption that the "key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators" (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 11). A system-wide initiative was selected because JCSS believed system-level support to be the key component of effective PLCs and much more important than sending educators to a one-time workshop or offering in-house professional learning that was offered in silos at their specified schools. To develop, implement, and con-

tinually assess the initiative, JCSS gathered artifacts and support resources via a system-based Google Site that included a JCSS System Level PLC Structure, a semi-structured, professional learning plan that upon completion of the school-year was coined by the researchers, the JCSS Professional Learning Plan, and the JCSS Teacher Leader Roles and Responsibilities, as well as other resources and assessments utilized throughout the school-year.

According to the structure, the JCSS Superintendent compiled a system-wide structure of distributed leadership. To ensure distributed leadership, expertise and input were ascertained from all levels including administrators (senior and mid-level), teachers, teacher leaders, and paraprofessionals. This structure started with the System Improvement Team (SYIT) comprised of district and school-level leaders and teacher leaders. The SYIT met three times in the schoolyear (fall, spring, summer) on three formal and scheduled professional learning days at the beginning of the schoolyear, mid-point, and at the end of the schoolyear. The next level of the structure was the Leadership Support Level, which included School Improvement Teams (SIT), a Principals PLC, a Leadership Support PLC, and a System Leadership PLC, also comprised of district and school-level leaders and teacher leaders. The Leadership PLCs supported school and district instructional leaders in development and implementation of a distributed leadership framework for school and district improvement strategies, which included professional learning activities, processes and procedures, instruction and assessment, and program monitoring and evaluation. In addition, the System Leadership PLC was directly responsible for outlining the school-year calendar for professional learning and multigrade organizational activities for staff.

The next level of structure encompassed what is known as the Teacher Leader Network, which is a network of teacher leaders serving as facilitators for the system-wide PLCs. The Teacher Leader Network (TLN) was comprised of teacher leaders and assistant teacher leaders working under the guidance of the Director of Federal Programs. The TLN was designed to transform teachers into leaders and change the climate of their organization into one where motivated, hard-working people were rewarded for their willingness to become a part of the system's comprehensive school improvement process. The JCSS TLN was intended to validate the roles of the teacher leaders within the system. Validation was done by developing written roles and responsibilities for the teacher leaders, but allowing these roles and responsibilities to be flexible, based on the changing needs of the system. As part of the process to develop the capacity to build and sustain purposeful professional learning, the TLN incorporated teachers with the skills to adopt a mindset of looking at issues from a system-wide view and not just from the classroom or school level. The notion of focusing on teacher leaders was a sound use of the skills possessed by expert teachers who desired to remain in the classroom while having a more active role in the administrative process and thus, the solution in this case created a culture of professional learning that was collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable and facilitated by teacher leaders and supported by administration. In addition, these efforts utilized federal and state funds to provide payment of stipends to staff who were participating in professional learning outside of their contract time, as well as payment for these supplemental services provided by the teacher leaders based on the deliverables described in the JCSS Teacher Leader Roles and Responsibilities. The JCSS System Level PLC Structure was intended to be non-hierarchical in nature and have the distribution of work flow within all levels, as well as between all levels.

According to the initial JCSS professional learning semi-structured plan, the goal of the professional learning initiative was for all certified personnel to complete job-embed-

ded professional learning that enhanced their skills as an educator. In addition, the system was tasked with providing job-embedded opportunities for personnel to meet a Professional Learning Goal (PLG) or Professional Learning Plan (PLP) to maintain their certification credentials per state licensure mandates designated by the GaPSC requirements. Certified staff were required to have either a PLG for teachers and leaders who were proficient or above in their annual performance evaluations (i.e., Teacher Keys Effectiveness System [TKES]) or a PLP for teachers and leaders who are new to the profession, new to their current assignments, or not proficient on their annual performance evaluations.

The PLGs and PLPs for all school personnel were designed based on the system PLCs which were purposefully planned via alignment with the system's identified instructional needs and designed to meet the professional growth needs of all certified staff. Developed with the guidance of the Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment and the Director of Federal Programs, these administrators worked collaboratively to create a PLC rubric and a tracking process for the documentation of individual goals. They worked with the teacher leaders, discussed current research of best practices, reviewed current school and district plans, and identified evidence-based practices that were most cost-efficient while being supported by data. This work included assessing student data to determine what areas and topics the PLCs needed to address; identifying system and school improvement expectations and communicating these expectations to all stakeholders; implementing the system and school improvement plans; monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness by reviewing completion of tasks; and aligning district and school work with proposed outcomes.

The initiative called for all certified teachers and paraprofessionals to participate in two separate PLCs during the three scheduled professional learning days, which were embedded in advance in the school-year calendar. One of the two required PLCs was the Innovative Teacher Technology Project (ITTP), which was an instructional technology-based PLC as JCSS has a strong focus on the integration of instructional technology throughout their districts' curriculum and formative assessment process. All certified teachers and paraprofessionals participated in the second PLC by choosing from the following: ENGAGE PLC (parent and family engagement), Induction PLC (teachers with 0–3 years of experience with induction certificates or new to JCSS), FIP PLC (Formative Instructional Practices), Literacy PLC (standards-based literacy strategies), and Mathematics PLC (standards-based math strategies). The one exception for choosing a second PLC was applied to teachers new or new to JCSS who were required to attend the Induction PLC.

The ENGAGE PLC planned and implemented evidence-based strategies for improving parent and family engagement and assisted in helping parents build capacity to support their child's learning. The Induction PLC utilized ongoing support for new teachers in the areas of instructional technology integration, classroom management, time management, data disaggregation and planning, differentiation planning and instruction, formative instructional practices, and family engagement. The FIP PLC assisted educators in integrating formative instructional practices and formative assessments in order to improve teaching and student learning. A key expectation of FIP is that teachers will learn to guide students in taking ownership of their own learning and to monitor their academic progress. The Literacy PLC supported educators in the use of online tools and resources that facilitate collaboration, content development, and vertical alignment of instruction in all content areas other than math. The Mathematics PLC supported educators in the use of online tools and resources that facilitate collaboration, content development, and vertical alignment of instruction based on mathe-

matics standards. The ITTP PLC was focused on integrating instructional technology into daily classroom practices to increase student engagement and achievement.

PLCs were shaped around areas focused on learning, results, and celebrations, as well as building a collaborative culture. Thus, the JCSS Purposeful Professional Learning Plan was comprised of norms for the PLCs and included the acronym SPEAK, Speak, Professionally, Encouragingly, Appropriately, and Kindly. PLCs included the discussion of student performance data, both in the aggregate (district) and individual student data (grade or content level) depending upon the PLC. An important part of building a professional culture within JCSS was establishing an environment conducive to sharing confidential student information in a safe space. Artifacts and support resources were collected electronically via the Google Site area assigned to each PLC. Required artifacts included agendas, minutes, sign in sheets, handouts, and other resources distributed during the PLC session. PLC teacher leaders with support from the Director of Federal Programs were responsible for uploading these artifacts within five working days of the professional learning session. All professional learning sessions were mandatory and held at scheduled times throughout the school-year during the job-embedded, system professional learning days. Additional job-embedded professional learning opportunities were also provided throughout the school-year and included additional monthly PLC meetings, online training modules such as FIP, Google Certified Educator training, ongoing instructional technology sessions as needed, edCamp, which is peer-led, participant-driven professional learning opportunities among surrounding counties, and online annual required staff training.

The PLC work was framed around these guiding questions based on the work of Eaker, DuFour and DuFour (2002):1) What do we want students to learn? What should each student know and be able to do as a result of each unit, grade level, and/or course? 2) How will we know if they have learned? Are we monitoring each student's learning on a timely basis? 3) What will we do if they don't learn? What system process is in place to provide additional time and support for students who are experiencing difficulty? 4) What will we do if they already know it? What will we offer for acceleration?

In summary, JCSS expects all staff members to continuously expand their professional knowledge by participating in ongoing professional learning. A system-wide professional learning initiative was intentional in ensuring collaborative professional learning and a structured PLC process. JCSS supports PLCs as an ongoing process in which educators learn and work to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, et al., 2016). PLCs operate under the assumptions of DuFour et al. (2016) in that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators. JCSS has embraced many challenges in order to improve instruction and increase learning and this professional learning initiative was no different. Thus, the launch of this pilot initiative, which intended to serve the entire district, required careful consideration before being implemented and before formalizing the plan. Although deemed a high poverty rural district that continuously dealt with the lack of needed resources, JCSS was committed to a collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable professional learning initiative that produced positive outcomes. Thus, the formalized JCSS Purposeful Professional Learning Plan was deemed effective with outcomes that included improving the culture of the system, increasing the commitment of staff, obtaining overall stakeholder buy-in of a common mission, and supporting a grassroots effort to grow their own future leaders. For JCSS, the initiative provided vital professional learning components such as additional leadership personnel to expand professional learning opportunities, supported new teacher

induction, implemented continuous parent and family engagement, and integrated instructional technology strategies.

Again, of importance to note was that this professional learning initiative was one truly of shared leadership in which the JCSS System Level PLC Structure (Appendix A) flows at all levels and is not one of hierarchy with top-down distribution of administration, but rather non-hierarchical with the distribution of work flowing within and between levels. The SYIT provided the foundation on which to build upon the professional learning work and the TLN was monitored through SYIT and the Leadership Support PLCs to ensure the professional learning initiative was implemented with fidelity. As part of the work of the SYIT, the TLN expanded transformative practices within the district via ongoing assessment and accountability processes that are revisited annually. Findings from these ongoing assessments are utilized for continuous professional learning improvement designed to encourage teacher leaders to model the adoption of new, evidence-based practices to increase student engagement and improve student achievement; to recognize and reward teacher leaders and other instructional staff for making change happen; to identify people who are resisting the change and garner support from teacher leaders on how to help them embrace the organization's mission and vision and to remain vigilant in identifying barriers and addressing them as soon as they are recognized. By establishing teacher leaders as the facilitators for the system's professional learning work, the teacher leaders become a vital part of the system's ongoing improvement work. Sustaining work that supports academic improvement is a reflective consideration for all school systems and thus, vital for JCSS to continue valuing teacher leaders and assigning training and work opportunities specific to their roles within the system. This structure, created and implemented by JCSS, ensured that effective organizational change was collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable so this work will continue and evolve in an effort to meet the needs of the district, the schools, and the individual educators.

Teachers' Instructional/Professional Practices

The second research question explored how teachers' instructional and/or professional practices changed as a result of their system-wide PLC involvement. The findings from the participant's self-reflection provided rich narrative information about what the participants of the PLCs gained during the process. The questionnaire captured 93 responses from certified teachers and included questions to determine where they were employed, which PLCs they attended, their identified PLC goal/plan, PLC narrative feedback about how the PLC work impacted their classroom practices, and a self-reported performance level score measured by the JCSS Professional Learning Rubric 2016-2017. Of these, 31% reported being at the high school level, 16% at the middle school level, 44% at the elementary level, 7% other, and 2% did not report. Of these participants, 23% reported attending the ITTP/ENGAGE PLCs with a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in instructional technology integration and family engagement. The ITTP/FIP PLCs was attended by 22% of the participants and had a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in instructional technology integration and formative instructional practices. The ITTC/Literacy PLC was attended by 19% of the participants and had a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in instructional technology integration, literacy assessment methods, and content literacy standards. The ITTP/Leadership PLCs was attended by 14% of the participants and had a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in instructional technology integration and PLC facilitation to explore leadership. The ITTP/Induction PLCs was attended by

6% of the participants and had a goal/plan included increasing professional knowledge and skills in instructional technology integration research-based teaching and learning instructional strategies. The Mathematics/Leadership PLC was attended by 4% and had a goal/plan included increasing professional knowledge and skills in mathematics instructional practices and PLC facilitation to explore leadership. The ITTP/Mathematics PLCs was attended by 4% with a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in instructional technology integration and mathematics instructional practices. The Literature/Leadership PLCs was attended by 3% of the participants with a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in literacy assessment methods, content literacy standards, and PLC facilitation. The Engage/Leadership PLCs was attended by 3% of the participants and had a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in family engagement practices and PLC facilitation. The Induction/Leadership PLC was attended by 3% of the participants and had a goal/plan of increasing professional knowledge and skills in teaching and learning strategies and PLC facilitation. The FIP/Leadership PLCs was attended by 2% and had a goal/plan included increasing professional knowledge and skills in formative instructional practices and PLC facilitation.

PLC participants were asked how their instructional and/or professional practices changed as a result of their system-wide PLC involvement. From the data, patterns, and trends were identified and the narrative outcomes are best explained in Figure 1 below.

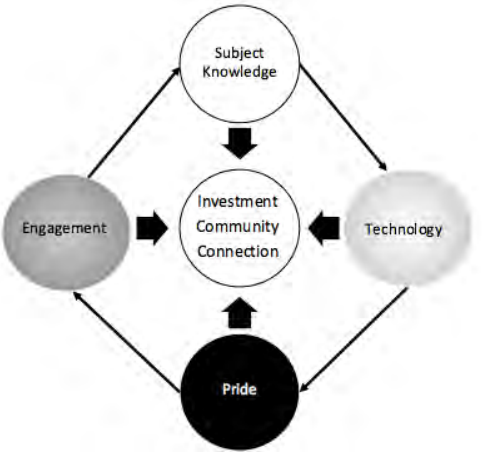

***Figure 1*: Justice County School System teachers' PLC narrative outcomes**

The center circle - the core - represents the three emergent themes (investment, community, and connection) and aspirational aspects of the PLCs. The light gray (right) circle represents technology, or the additional information participants deemed important, and the deep cognitive work members of the PLC engaged in during the PLC process. The filled (bottom) circle represents pride, which participants imbued in their PLC work, classroom, and school community. The dark gray (left) circle represents engagement of participants in their PLCs, in their school, and in their greater community. The unfilled (top) circle represents the subject knowledge, which participants gained in the PLCs, as well as the delight in learning additional subject knowledge. All of these circles are inter-connected by arrows because the individual participants might vary in the impact of each, but all found the four traits in the outer circles to be important in the PLC work in which they engaged and the overall outcomes participants

noted from the PLCS work is represented in the core circle. Each circle is discreet and yet connected. These connections not only show the emphasis made by individual participants, but also the connections to the major identified themes. These themes highlight the importance of the PLC work, in which they engaged and the overall outcomes participants noted from the PLCS work are represented in the core circle.

Professional Learning Performance

The third and final research question examined how educators rated their level of PLC performance in alignment with their performance evaluation and in applying the knowledge and skills learned in classroom practice. The participants in the PLCs self-reported their performance scores at either exemplary, proficient, needs development, and ineffective. Level 4, exemplary was noted as the teacher leader actively and consistently leads others in PLCs and consistently applies the knowledge/skills of the PLC(s) into his/her classroom; the teacher leader has made progress toward or has met his/her professional learning goal/plan. The assumption with the exemplary level was that this rating would be reserved for teacher leaders only. Level 3, proficient was noted as the teacher is consistently and actively engaged in PLCs and applies the knowledge/skills learned in his/her classroom; the teacher is making progress toward or has met his/her professional learning goal/plan. Level 2, needs development was noted as the teacher has consistently participated in PLCs and is beginning to apply the knowledge/skills learned in his/her classroom; the teacher is making progress toward his/her professional learning goal/plan. Level 1, ineffective was noted as the teacher has inconsistently attended and/or participated in PLCs and/or has not made progress in reaching his/her professional learning goal/plan. Of the 93 PLC participants 14% self-reported their performance level at exemplary, 76% self-reported at proficient, 3% self-reported at needs development, and 0% reported at ineffective (1). Overall the mean performance level for the PLC participants was 3.12/4.0.

DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that JCSS was able to develop, implement, and assess a professional learning plan as a collective group by focusing on a system-wide approach that at the conclusion of the school-year led to a formalized plan of action. The outcomes demonstrated that the JCSS Purposeful Professional Learning Plan was effective in positively changing the professional and classroom practices of school personnel and as such was considered collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable in nature. Assessment for continual school improvement and accountability was maintained. Administrators and staff shared the leadership by discussing current research on evidence-based practices and the diligence in reviewing current school and district plans, which drove this professional learning initiative. JCSS was able to adopt evidence-based practices that were supported by data to enhance the school improvement and professional learning process through PLCs via a distributed teacher leadership mode, and this in turn resulted in JCSS being in compliance with state professional learning and certification mandates. Through collaboration, JCSS administrators communicated expectations to all stakeholders and carried out school improvement plans by sharing the leadership roles and responsibilities. The notion of school leaders truly, sharing leadership and entrusting in staff to be part of the change process, proved to be an effective manner in which to gain buy-in and have all school personnel have ownership in the school improvement process in an effort to implement professional learning that is collective, purposeful, and sustainable.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Overall, the larger scope of this study was to present a replicable or modifiable plan that other districts and schools could use as the framework when developing, implementing, and assessing their own professional learning initiatives. Georgia mandates require all districts and schools to possess accountability measures that ensure the professional growth of all school personnel and this must be done through job-embedded professional learning, specifically PLCs. The mode in which JCSS delivered this professional learning initiative that later became a formalized professional learning plan of action could serve as the blueprint for many districts needing to advance professional learning efforts or in many cases launch these initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The researchers intend to continue to collaborate with JCSS and learn how the JCSS Professional Learning Plan evolves over time based on feedback provided throughout the process. JCSS plans to modify their 2017-2018 plan to have PLCs be more content-specific and use some of the areas of focus from the 2016-2017 PLCs that were proven to be highly effective and revise all PLCs to be more interdisciplinary in nature. JCSS intends to collect data in the 2017-2018 school-year at specified check points to ensure the professional learning via PLCs continues to be collective, purposeful, and sustainable and to determine through assessments that the feedback had documentable impact. Through continued collaborative efforts, the researchers plan to have conversations with other districts and schools in hopes that we can work with them to disseminate the work of JCSS in an effort to help them shape their own professional learning work. The greater outlook of this study is to help districts and schools individualize and formalize their own professional learning plans in an effort to not only meet the professional mandates of accountability planning, but to provide a professional learning plan that is collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable. JCSS should serve as a model school with a proven record of using an innovative professional learning initiative that distributes responsibilities among both administrators and staff, specifically, teacher leaders to be effective in changing teachers' classroom practices. If schools in Georgia and beyond are challenged with providing professional learning, institutions of higher education and local school systems should make every effort for all systems and schools in Georgia, as well as nationwide, to be implementing professional learning with fidelity.

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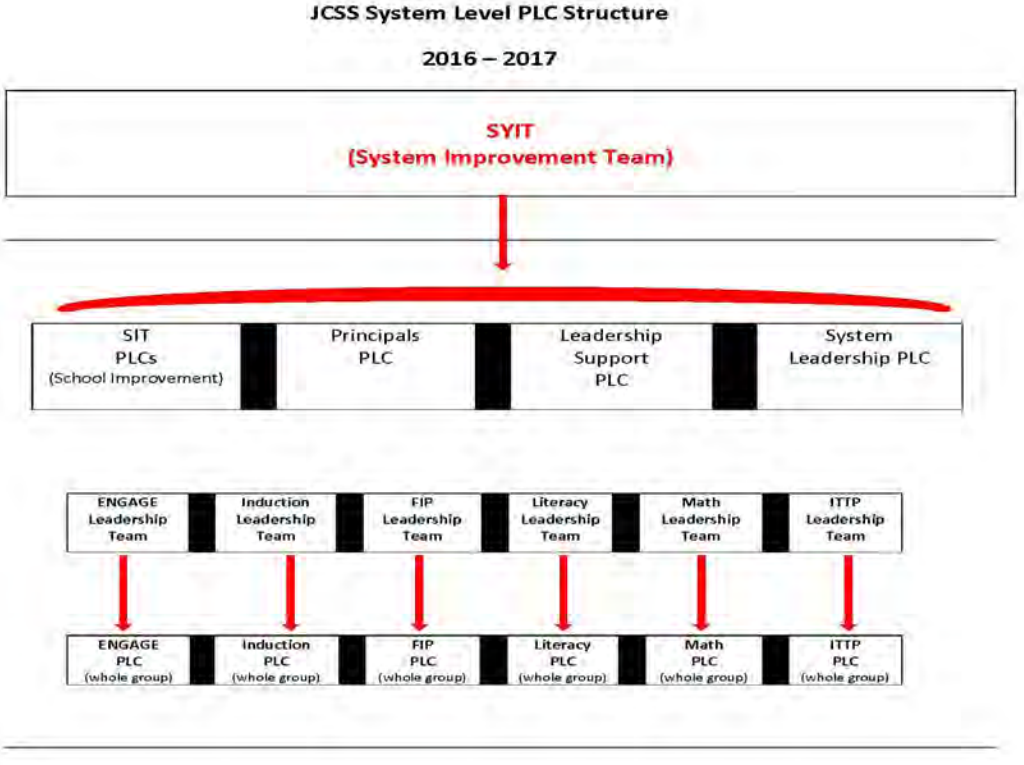
APPENDIX A



**Note:* This structure is non-hierarchical in nature and the distribution or professional learning work flows at all levels and between all levels.

MANAGING TEACHER ATTRITION RATE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION IN PUBLIC SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the management of teacher attrition rate for quality education delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. Three research questions and two hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. Analytical survey design was adopted. Population of the study consisted of two hundred and forty-seven (247) public secondary schools with 247 male and female principals and 7,713 teachers in Rivers State. The sample size consisted of 1,104 respondents (both Principals and Teachers) of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State representing 14% of the study population. A self-constructed instrument questionnaire tagged "Managing Teacher Attrition Rate for Quality Education Delivery Questionnaire" (MTARQEDQ) was used for data collection. The instrument was validated and its reliability co-efficient was established at 0.83. The mean and standard deviation were used in answering the research questions while z-test statistical tool were used in testing the hypotheses at a .05 level of significance. The findings revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the causes of teacher attrition rate for quality educational delivery in Rivers State public senior secondary schools. Also there was a significant difference between the mean score of principals and teachers on the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate. Significant difference also exists in between the mean scores of male and female teachers on the ways effective management of teacher attrition rate can enhance quality teaching. The study concluded that better services and good welfare packages for teachers can reduce teacher attrition rate. Paying attention to teachers by giving them equal regards with other professions will increase teachers' retention.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are the key inputs in educational production process. Their source and stability in the system are the most important keys to improving learning outcome. Teachers are in a service organization that is geared towards human development and character molding. That is why the National Policy on Education declared that, no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The success of any educational organization depends on the teaching staff since the teacher is central to the learning process; hence, the teacher's position is sacred in relation to the students and the society. However, over the years, the teaching profession has been relegated to the background as a result of the so-called 'greener pastures'. This is the clamour for oil companies and other occupation that offer higher pay and greater prestige. Thus, the teaching force began to lose its best workforce. The qualified teachers are constantly lost to other

institutions such as: custom service, banks, oil companies and other federal government parastatals. It, therefore, followed that only those who could not get better job stayed on while new entrants to the profession use it as a stepping stone to get better jobs.

According to the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary (2015), attrition is a reduction in number of employees as a result of resignation, retirement or death. Borman and Dowling (2014) defined teacher attrition as the process of leaving the teaching profession for other career endeavour. From the following definitions, the researchers consider teacher attrition as the loss of teachers from the teaching profession. Teachers' attrition in Rivers State, Nigeria, manifests in different forms such as retirement, resignation, transfer, acquisition of higher certificate, dismissal and death. From year to year, teachers have retired without replacement. Some leave the profession entirely as they acquire higher certificate, while some of them resign for reason best known to them. Others are sometimes transferred from the class to become administrative staff in the ministry of education or the school board. All these reasons will definitely hamper the quality of school output. Successful management of teacher attrition is therefore, necessary and essential because it will attract new teachers into the educational system as well as increase the retention rate of teachers. Thus, teachers' retention enhances quality education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical Framework of this study was based on the human capital theory of occupational choice propounded by Kuby and Grissimerin (1993). This theory posits that individuals make systematic assessment of the net monetary and non-monetary benefit from occupations and make systematic decisions on how to enter careers, stay or leave an occupation.

Teacher Attrition Rate

Teacher attrition rate is the percentage of teachers exiting the educational profession in a given school year. In calculating this, the number of leavers is estimated by subtracting the number of teachers in year t from those in year t-1 and adding the number of new entrants to the teaching force in year t. Attrition rate is the number of leavers expressed as percentage of the total number of teachers in year t. According to Schreiner (2017):

> No matter how one makes his workers happy, from time to time employees will leave, be it to retire, resign, death, re-locate or just in response to changing circumstances in their lives. Sometimes, they leave as a result of attraction of new job or the prospect of a period outside the work force which 'pulls' them. On other occasions they are "pushed' (due to dissatisfaction in their present jobs) to seek attractive employment. Hence it can be as a result of the combination of pull and push factors (p.4).

A high value indicates high levels of teacher turnover which can be disruptive for learning among students (Oragwu & Nwabueze, 2017). Oragwu and Nwabueze (2017) were of the opinion that, where teachers teach for 30-40 years, the attrition rate will be below 5%; attrition rate above 10% indicate that the average teaching career lasts only 10 years. When it comes to turning over employees, the fewer you lose the better as each new hire presents associated challenges for the company. Teachers' shortage is a significant contributing factor that widens equity gaps in education access and learning. Assessing and monitoring teacher attrition is essential to a sufficient supply of qualified and we]l-trained teachers as well as to their effective development, support and management (UNESCO report, 2012).

Concept of Educational Quality Service Delivery

Service is a product or activity that meets the needs of a user or can be applied by a user. Service delivery is a continuous cyclic process for developing and delivering user-focused services. Quality service delivery is about providing efficient and effective products and services that bring utility to users and customers. The effectiveness of education is contingent on what happens in classrooms (Enebeli, 2016).

Quality service delivery is focused on issues of standards and quality assurance. It is the degree of the effectiveness of the product with a view to increase productivity. This emphasizes the need for the attainment of excellence in educational activities. Igwe (2012) identified some major constraints to quality of teachers' service delivery as lack of retention among teachers, inadequate teaching facilities/aids and, most importantly, teachers' general condition of service.

UNESCO (2012) report as cited in Agih (2015) highlighted the indices of quality education to include but not limited to:

i. **Quality learners:** Are learners healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, supported in learning by their families and communities?
ii. **Quality learning environment:** Is the environment healthy and safe, protective and gender sensitive and provides adequate resources and facilities?
iii. **Quality content:** Is the content reflected in the relevant curriculum and materials for the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge?
iv. **Quality process:** The processes through which trained teachers use child-centered teaching approaches in well managed classrooms and schools and skill assessment to facilitate learning,
v. Q**uality outcome:** The outcome that encompasses knowledge, skills and attitudes and is linked to national goals for education.

Causes of Teacher Attrition

The attrition of teachers is a challenge for schools and school administrators in both developed and developing countries like Nigeria. Research findings in the area revealed that several factors cause teachers attrition. These include inadequate salary, poor condition of service, low prestige, low social status, poor work environment, lack of job satisfaction, standard of human capital accumulated, and leadership style among others (Fati, 2010; Ojong, 2009).

Strategies for Managing Attrition in Public Senior Secondary Schools

In order to entice exceptional individuals into the teaching profession and to retain these gifted teaching staff to accord their loss into other profession, the following measures among others have to be put in place (Babalola & Ayeni, 2015; Pistoe, 2013).

- Teachers' salary should be increased to be comparable to the national average and should be paid when due.
- The government should make favourable condition of working environment and facilities that will make teachers' function effective and efficient.
- Teaching should be accorded its social recognition and prestige. There should be propagation of teachers' importance through TV, radio, newspapers and other appropriate media for moral encouragement because teachers are likely to stay if they receive gratitude and respect from students, parents and general public.
- Mentoring as a strategy that improves teachers' retention and enhances teaching quality.

Managing Teacher Attrition Rate for Quality Education Delivery

Managing teacher attrition rate involves using management principles to reduce the rate at which teachers leave the school system for other lucrative jobs. Uwaifo (2010) saw managing teacher attrition or teachers' retention therefore as the process of ensuring that teachers are kept in jobs for stability and long term use through proper maintenance. In agreement with this definition, Steffet et al as cited in Duze and Ogbah, (2013) maintained that, teachers' retention initiatives are often based on the recognition of certain needs to keep in classrooms those teachers who are qualified and utilize effective teaching strategies demonstrated to increase students' achievement.

Challenges of Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition has been associated with different negative impact in the education sector. The attrition of teachers is wastage because the secondary education system is losing employees whose performance, skills and qualifications are valuable resources, hence attrition causes drainage to school and the whole education system. It reduces the quality of teachers since the most competent teachers are most likely to leave. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) reported that, high teacher attrition rates have negative effects on students' achievement. It further stated that, a major challenge of teacher attrition is that students are taught by less experienced, less qualified teachers who do not stay long enough to become experts.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The teaching profession in secondary school seems to envisage the highest form of attrition compared to any other profession. This could be attributed to the lack of satisfaction inherent in the public secondary school system of Nigeria. Teacher attrition brings about shortage of teachers in most subject areas which in turn hampers the improvement of quality education. Presently, teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State is not easily noticed because of lack of accurate data. Teachers seem to be retired without immediate replacement and some who left the job for other jobs were still on the payroll receiving monthly salary if not for the help of the biometrics conducted recently to fish them out. This exodus of teachers has left some schools without teachers in some core subjects leading to severe disruptions to learning process. It therefore becomes necessary to map out ways to managing teacher attrition rate so as to enable teachers to settle down for better job performance and productivity. Although theoretical study of teacher attrition in Rivers State secondary school is viewed by some writers, yet no empirical study has been carried out on how to manage teacher attrition rate for quality education delivery in the State. Hence, the researcher deemed it fit to cover this gap. Thus the problem of this study is how to manage teacher attrition rate for quality education delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to investigate the management of teacher attrition rate for quality education delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Specifically the objectives of the study were:

1. To find out the causes of teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State;
2, To determine the strategies for managing teacher attrition rate for quality teaching delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State;
3. To investigate the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were raised to guide this study:

1. What are the causes of teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
2. What are the strategies for managing teacher attrition rate for quality teaching delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
3. What are the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were used to guide the study:

HO_1: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of principal and teachers on their perceptions of causes of teacher attrition rate in Rivers State Public senior secondary schools.

HO_2: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on their perceptions of the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an analytical survey design with a population of two hundred and forty-seven (247) public senior secondary schools with 247 male and 7,713 female teachers in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The sample size consisted of 1,104 respondents (Principals and Teachers) of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State representing 14% of the study population. A self-constructed instrument questionnaire tagged "Managing Teacher Attrition Rate for Quality Education Delivery Questionnaire (MTARQEDQ" was used for the data collection. The instrument was validated and its reliability co-efficient was established at 0.83. The mean scores and standard deviations were used in answering the research questions while z-test statistical tool was used in testing the hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: what are the causes of teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

Data on Table 1 (See Appendices) showed that, all the items (1-10) had weighted mean scores above the mean criterion of 2.50 and were determined to be the causes of teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. In summary, with an aggregate weighted mean of 2.96 which is above the criterion mean of 2.50, the respondents agreed that the tested variables are the causes of teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Therefore, the causes of teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State include: inadequate teaching salary, delays in career structure and promotion, inadequate instructional materials in school, poor classroom conditions, lack of better physical facilities in school, low level of recognition for secondary school teachers by government officials/parents/students, low socio-economic status compared to other non-teaching employees with similar qualification, insufficient support of teachers by school management, students' disciplinary problems frustrating teachers in school, and lack of provision for teachers' professional development.

Research Question 2: What are the strategies for managing teacher attrition rate for quality teaching delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

Data on Table 2 (See Appendices) showed that, all the items (1-15) had weighted mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50 and were determined to be the strategies for managing teacher attrition for quality teaching delivery in public secondary School in Rivers State. In sum-

mary, with an aggregate weighted mean of 2.97which is above the criterion mean of 2.50, the respondents agreed that strategies for managing teacher attrition for quality teaching delivery based on the tested variables include: implementation of new salary structure for teachers, maintaining well-furnished and attractive offices and classroom in schools, regular promotion of teachers when due, adequate remuneration such as car loans/housing loans/ health loans, enlistment of teachers for staff professional development programmes such as in-service trainings/study leave, social recognition/prestige accorded to teaching, recruitment of the best brains and those who love teaching, modernizing schools to meet the 21st century standard, saving money to support teachers, granting favourable retirement/pension policy, establishing Special ways for honoring and awarding teachers to appreciate teachers' effort, protection of teachers against hazards in the school (i.e. insult from students and protection from kidnappers), granting special allowances to rural teachers, providing staff with ICT skills for quality service delivery, and mentoring of teachers to retain and enhance their teaching quality.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

Data on Table 3 (See Appendices) showed that, all the items (1-10) had weighted mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50 and were determined to be the challenges posed by teacher attrition in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. In summary, with an aggregate weighted mean of 2.94 which is above the criterion mean of 2.50, the respondents agreed that all the variables tested are the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Therefore, the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State include: laissez-faire attitude among students, student lack of discipline, lack of commitment by students, lack of full coverage of school work, too much workload for the remaining teachers, low morale among the remaining teachers, employment of unqualified teachers, disorderliness in school leading to low productivity, poor school environment, and lack of government attention to the affairs of the school.

Hypotheses Testing

Ho_1: There is no significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the causes of teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools.

Table 4: Summary of z-test Analysis on the mean scores of principals and teachers on the causes of teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools.

Respondents	N	Mean	St.D	Level of Sig.	df	z-calculated	z-critical	Decision
Principals	98	3.07	0.73	0.05	1076	0.98	±1.961	Not significant (accept HO_1)
Teachers	980	2.82	0.48					

Data on Table 4 revealed the summaries of subject, mean, standard deviation and z-test of difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the causes of teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools. The calculated z-test value used in testing hypothesis stood at 0.98, while z-critical value stood at ±1.961 using 1076 degree of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. At 0.05 level of

significance and 1076 degrees of freedom, the calculated z-value of 0.98 is less than the z-critical value of ±1.961. Hence there is no significant difference between the responses of the two groups of respondents. Consequently, the researchers accepted the null hypothesis, and concluded that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the causes of teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools.

HO_2: There were no significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools.

Table 5: Summary of z-test Analysis on the mean scores of principals and teachers on the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools.

Respondents	N	Mean	St.D	Level of Sig.	df	z-calculated	z-critical	Decision
Principals	98	3.09	0.72	0.05	1076	2.20	±1.961	Significant (Reject HO_2)
Teachers	980	2.80	0.49					

Data on Table 5 revealed the summaries of subject, mean, standard deviation and z-test of difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools. The calculated z-test value used in testing hypothesis stood at 2.20, while z-critical value stood at ±1.96 using 1076 degree of freedom at 0.05 level of significance. At 0.05 level of significance and 1076 degrees of freedom, the calculated z-value of 2.20 is greater than the z-critical value of ±1.96, Hence there is a significant difference between the responses of the two groups of respondents. Consequently, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis, and concluded that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Causes of Teacher Attrition in Public Senior Secondary Schools

From the study, the respondents agreed that inadequate salary, delays in career structure and promotion, inadequate instructional materials in school, poor classroom conditions, lack of better physical facilities in school, low level of recognition for secondary school teachers by government officials, parents and student, low socio-economic status of secondary school teachers compared to other non-teaching employees with similar qualification, insufficient support of teachers by school management, frustration of teachers in school as a result of students disciplinary problems and no provision for teachers' professional development are the causes of teacher attrition in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The test of Hypothesis One showed that, there is no significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the causes of teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools. In line with the findings, Fati (2010) revealed that, the several factors which cause teacher attrition include inadequate salary, poor condition of service, low prestige, low social status, poor work environment, lack of job satisfaction, poor standard of human capital, and bad leadership styles.

Strategies for Managing Teacher Attrition for Quality Teaching Delivery

The finding also, revealed that, the strategies for managing teacher attrition for quality teaching delivery in public secondary School in Rivers State include: implementation of new salary structure for teachers, maintaining well-furnished and attractive offices and classroom in schools, regular promotion of teachers as at when due, adequate remuneration such as car loans/housing loans/ health loans, enlistment of teachers for staff professional development programmes such as in-service trainings/study leave, social recognition/prestige accorded to teaching, recruitment of the best brains and those who love teaching, modernizing schools to meet the 21st century standard, saving money to support teachers, granting favourable retirement/pension policy, establishing Special ways for honoring and awarding teachers to appreciate teachers' effort, protection of teachers against hazards in the school (i.e. insult from students and protection from kidnappers), granting special allowances to rural teachers, providing staff with ICT skills for quality service delivery, and mentoring of teachers to retain and enhance their teaching quality. This finding agrees with that of Duze and Ogbah, (2013) who maintained that teachers' retention initiatives are often based on the recognition of certain needs to keep in classrooms those teachers who are qualified and utilize effective teaching strategies demonstrated to increase students' achievement.

Challenges Posed by Teacher Attrition in Public Senior Secondary Schools

From this study, the respondents agreed that, the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State include: laissez-faire attitude among students, student lack of discipline, lack of commitment by students, lack of full coverage of school work, too much workload for the remaining teachers, low morale among the remaining teachers, employment of unqualified teachers, disorderliness in school leading to low productivity, porous school environment, and lack of government attention to the affairs of the school. The test of hypothesis two showed that, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of principals and teachers on the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in Rivers State public senior secondary schools. According to Gordon (2014), teacher attrition rate has led to increased operational costs broadly categorized as training and recruitment. He asserted that attrition rate has threatened the objectives of education as stipulated in vision 2030 and thwarted the Education for All *(*EFA*)* initiative due to its ripple effect on student's enrolment.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that, better services and good welfare packages for teachers can reduce teacher attrition rate. Paying attention to teachers by giving them equal regards like other professions would increase their retention. Continuous increase in teacher attrition rate brings about a collapse in secondary education. This is evidenced by the fact that the available teachers in public schools may not have the needed experience and skills to handle students. Furthermore, when teachers' needs are met, as well as motivated, they will always want to retain their jobs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the researchers also recommended that among others that social recognition/prestige should be accorded to teaching, as this will give teachers a sense of dignity, thereby making them feel as important as other profession and qualified and dedicated teachers should be employed to handle different subject areas in order to reduce work load on them. This will encourage them to remain as well as enhance quality delivery in schools.

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APPENDICES

Table 1: Mean ($\bar{\bar{X}}$) and standard deviation (SD) on the responses of Principals and Teachers on the causes of teacher attrition rate In public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

S/N	Items	Principals		Teachers		Mean Set	Remark
		$\bar{\bar{X}}$	SD	$\bar{\bar{X}}$	SD		
1	Inadequate teaching salary.	3.12	1.28	2.73	1.14	2.93	Agreed
2	Delays in career structure and promotion	2.98	1.22	2.80	1.16	2.89	Agreed
3	Inadequate instructional materials in school	3.04	1.24	2.89	1.18	2.97	Agreed
4	Poor classroom conditions	3.08	1.26	2.88	1.18	2.98	Agreed
5	Lack of better physical facilities in school	3.13	1.28	2.79	1.16	2.96	Agreed
6	There is low level of recognition for secondary school teachers by government officials, parents and student	3.12	1.28	2.71	1.14	2.92	Agreed
7	Secondary school teachers have low socio-economic status compared to other non-teaching employees with similar qualification	2.98	1.22	2.86	1.17	2.92	Agreed
8	Insufficient support of teachers by school management	3.04	1.24	2.80	1.16	2.92	Agreed
9	Students' disciplinary problems frustrate teachers in school	2.08	1.26	2.89	1.18	2.99	Agreed
10	There is no provision for teachers' professional development	3.13	1.28	2.88	1.18	3.01	Agreed
	Average	**3.07**	**1.26**	**2.82**	**1.17**	**2.96**	**Agreed**

Table 2: mean ($\bar{X}$) and standard deviation (SD), on the responses of Principals and Teachers on the strategies for managing teacher attrition rate for quality teaching delivery in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

S/N	Items	Principals		Teachers		Mean Set	Remark
		$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
1	Implementation of new salary structure for teachers.	3.13	1.28	2.79	1.16	2.96	Agreed
2	Maintaining well-furnished and attractive offices and classroom in schools.	3.12	1.28	2.71	1.14	2.92	Agreed
3	Regular promotion of teachers as at when due.	3.09	1.26	2.86	1.17	2.98	Agreed
4	Adequate remuneration such as car loans; housing loans and health	3.04	1.24	2.80	1.16	2.92	Agreed
5	Enlistment of teachers for staff professional development programmes such as in-service trainings, study leave etc	3.08	1.26	2.80	1.16	2.94	Agreed
6	Social recognition/prestige accorded to teaching	3.12	1.28	2.86	1.17	2.99	Agreed
7	Recruitment of the best brains and those who love teaching.	2.98	1.22	2.88	1.18	2.91	Agreed
8	Schools should be modernize to meet the 21st century standard	3.04	1.24	2.79	1.16	2.92	Agreed
9	School management should save money to invest in the long run to support teachers	3.08	1.26	2.71	1.14	2.90	Agreed
10	Grant of favourable retirement/pension policy	2.92	1.19	3.04	1.24	2.98	Agreed
11	Special ways for honoring and awarding teachers should be given to appreciate teachers' effort	2.97	1.21	3.04	1.24	3.01	Agreed
12	Protection of teachers against hazards in the school i.e. insult from students and protection from kidnappers	2.97	1.21	3.13	1.28	3.05	Agreed
13	Grant of special allowances to rural teachers	3.04	1.24	3.04	1.24	3.04	Agreed
14	Provide staff with ICT skills for quality service delivery	3.14	1.29	3.03	1.24	3.09	Agreed
15	Mentoring of teachers to retain and enhance their teaching quality.	3.06	1.25	2.71	1.14	2.89	Agreed
	Average	**3.05**	**1.25**	**2.88**	**1.19**	**2.97**	**Agreed**

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation (SO), on the Responses of Principals and Teachers on the challenges posed by teacher attrition rate in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

S/N	Items	Principals		Teachers		Mean Set	Remark
		$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
1	Laissez-faire attitude among students	3.18	1.31	2.71	1.14	2.95	Agreed
2	Student lack of discipline	2.96	1.21	2.75	1.15	2.86	Agreed
3	Lack of commitment by students	3.04	1.24	2.89	1.18	2.97	Agreed
4	Lack of full coverage of school work	3.08	1.26	2.70	1.14	2.89	Agreed
5	Too much workload for the remaining teachers	3.13	1.28	2.79	1.16	2.96	Agreed
6	Low morale among the remaining teachers	3.12	1.28	2.71	1.14	2.92	Agreed
7	Employment of unqualified teachers	3.09	1.26	2.86	1.17	2.98	Agreed
8	Disorderliness in school leading to low productivity	3.04	1.24	2.80	1.16	2.92	Agreed
9	Porous school environment	3 .08	1.26	2.86	1.17	2.97	Agreed
10	Lack of government attention to the affairs of the school	3.13	1.28	2.88	1.18	3.01	Agreed
	Average	**3.09**	**1.26**	**2.80**	**1.16**	**2.94**	**Agreed**

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES: HOW METRO-ATLANTA SCHOOL DISTRICTS ACT

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ABSTRACT

School districts of the United States have to address their financial problems when economy is in difficulty. This study examines the financial practices of the school districts in metro-Atlanta area to understand how they operate their systems to meet with the challenges. Personal interviews were held with financial officers of six participating school districts. A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to solicit data in four areas of school finance: budgeting, cash management, auditing and financial forecast. Findings of the study indicate that school districts monitor their current budget carefully by working closely with state and local tax commissioners. Districts strictly control their expenditures and trim their current budget with priorities. Additionally, they work with site administrators to ensure their full compliance of the financial procedures.

INTRODUCTION

Public school districts in the United States have been prepared for economically bad times and are cautious in watching for their financial status in their daily operation (Owings & Kaplan, 2013). When public education revenues shrink, many school districts automatically respond by reducing expenses in every possible ways to save. What hits the school districts the hardest is that the state government makes announcement to cut education budget by diminishing the commitment of appropriated allotments (Alexander & Salmon, 1995). School districts in Atlanta area, Georgia, are examples of many other districts nationwide that suffered under scenarios of similar financial crisis. This study is aimed at surveying school districts of Atlanta area to seek a better understanding of how school district finance officers managed to live through these hard times to safeguard the best interest of their districts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Over 80% of public school revenues in the U.S. are generated from state income and sales taxes and local property taxes. In economically difficult times, diminished tax revenue devastatingly brings about negative impact on the budget of a school district (Odden & Picus, 2013; Vermont School Boards Association, 2012). Many school districts respond promptly by trimming all possible unspent budget items (Ginn, 2014). Some districts take priorities and choose to protect their teachers and educational programs by simply looking at other areas for budget cuts. Unfortunately, school maintenance and capital outlay programs are always the first ones to be cut (McCuen, 2014). To prepare for possible budget cuts, some school districts initially place a cushion on the annual budget to prepare for possible bad times (New York State Office of the State Comptroller, 2014a). Some districts have a strict policy in screening all district purchase items to ensure that only critically needed items are approved (Hanushek, 2013; Thompson & Wood, 2001). In cash management, many school districts work with state, county and city tax commissioners to arrange speedy trans-

fers of tax dollars to the school district accounts (Alford, 2013; Brimley & Garfield 2004). On the other hand, school districts are very careful in investing their not-yet-used dollars only in safe funds (Combs, 2014). At the same time, school districts have been tightening their regulations on auditing procedures to ensure that district financial policies are strictly followed (New York State Office of the State Comptroller, 2014b). In financial forecasting, school finance officers can identify factors that contribute to forecasting upcoming economic movements (McCuen, 2014). Community growth and population shift data are good indicators for economic forecasting. Frequent communication with federal, state and local tax commissioners will secure information to update school districts' data files (Baker, Green & Richards, 2007).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In financially difficult times, some school districts survive by using available reserve funds in their budgets. However, districts with no reserve funds will have to start their serious cuts on current budgets to keep their revenues and expenditures balanced. The purpose of this study is to review the financial practices of some major school districts in Metro-Atlanta Area to understand the fiscal problems they face and what strategies they employ to address these tight financial situations. The painful experiences these school districts had during difficult times are worthy of sharing. Other school districts can learn how they tackled the financial crisis to survive.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What budget management practices do school districts in Atlanta area exercise in keeping a balanced budget?
2. How is system cash management handled by school districts in Atlanta area?
3. How do school district finance officers prepare for the annual financial auditing?
4. What factors do school district finance officers use to forecast the upcoming economic condition of the state?

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study takes the format of a qualitative interview design. As explained by Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2012):

> In a personal interview, the researcher conducts a face-to-face interview with the respondent. As a result, this method has many advantages. It is probably the most effective survey method for enlisting the cooperation of the respondents. Rapport can be established, questions can be clarified, unclear or incomplete answers can be followed up, and so on. Face-to-face interviewing also places less of a burden on the reading and writing skills of the respondents and, when necessary, permits spending more time with respondents." (p. 397-398)

Direct conversations between the school district financial officers and the researchers were open and straight forward. The reliability of the data adds much merit to the significance of the study.

Research Participants

Six out of nine school districts in the Metro-Atlanta area participated in the study. The unit of research in this study is school district each represented by a chief financial officer. As a result, two assistant superintendents and four finance directors in the six school districts met with the researchers for face-to-face interviews.

Data Collection Instrument

The researchers developed a standardized questionnaire with reference to current literature on school finance to solicit ways school district officers employed to manage their financial situations in economically tight years. The questionnaire consists of 14 items soliciting information about how school districts handle budgeting, cash management, auditing and financial forecasting. All the questions are designed to be open-ended and are intended to provide opportunities for the respondents to freely express themselves with no limitation. An initial draft of the questionnaire was presented to the financial officers of the six school districts to check for validity in contents, language and format. Minor revisions were made to the instrument as a result of general consensus. The questionnaire also includes a section on demographic data of a school district to provide the background information of the school district for the readers' interest.

Data Collection

The researchers obtained permission of the school districts to interview identified school district officers. Copies of the developed questionnaire were mailed to the interviewees before the scheduled interviews to give them time to prepare for the requested data. During the interviews, besides the items on the questionnaire, many additional related questions were followed up. The conversations during the interview were focused on discussing school district financial management strategies in budgeting, cash management, auditing and financial forecasting. Responses of school district officers were audio recorded, transcribed and dated for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews with six school district officers were systematically analyzed by categorizing them by the contents as labelled by each of the research questions. Relevant terms were coded and tallied by frequency of their occurrence. Emerging themes and patterns of responses were noted and carefully examined by referencing the strategies employed in budgeting, cash management, auditing and financial forecasting. Comparison of financial strategies was made among the six school districts. The findings of this study were also referenced with those of previous studies in current literature.

FINDINGS

The demographic data of the six participating districts are displayed in the following:

School District Demographic Information

School District	Pupil Population	Number of Schools			% of Pupil Receiving Free Or Reduced Price Lunch	% of Pupil by Ethnicity			Last Annual District Budget in million $
		E	M	H		W	B	O	
District 1	112,000	67	25	16	44.4	38.1	31.2	30.7	986
District 2	97,000	59	19	18	47.5	31.0	43.5	25.5	910
District 3	41,000	24	7	6	56.2	46.2	30.5	23.3	359
District 4	28,000	19	8	5	42.8	50.5	31.5	18.0	253

District 5	23,600	20	8	4	40.5	40.5	35.0	24.5	204
District 6	13,600	9	4	2	38.2	59.6	12.8	27.6	130

Note: School Level: E = Elementary schools; M = Middle schools; H = High schools
Pupil Ethnicity: W = White; B = Black; O = Others

The six school districts also indicated that, on average, their sources of revenues included approximately 8.5% from the federal government, 38.6% from the State of Georgia, 42.2% from local property taxes and 10.7% from the Special Purpose Local Optional Sales Tax (SPLOST). The financial officers identified instructional expenditures (teachers' salaries and instructional materials) being the highest (67 to 74%) on the expenditure list. Other high expenditure items included school maintenance and operations (9 to 10%), administrative expenses (5 to 6%), pupil transportation (5 to 7%), pupil services (5 to 6 %) and support services (3 to 4%).

The major findings of this study are displayed by research question as follows:

Budgeting

To prevent an unbalanced budget, school districts have built in a contingency fund in budget planning from 5% to 15%. As one finance director said, "It is not uncommon to reserve an amount equal to one month of the annual budget." Another finance director also added, "About ten percentage of the budget is reserved under the Superintendent's Discretion Fund to meet with contingency needs." When the loss of revenue is more than the reserved fund, a mid-term budget cut may be necessary to keep the budget balanced. An assistant superintendent confirmed that "a proportional cut district wide is necessary to reduce all the previous appropriations in different accounts." A finance director simply stated, "The Superintendent with the School Board would need to come up with a priority list for budget cutting." Another finance director indicated, "My district decides to cut teachers and instructional programs last." Additionally, some districts put a stringent screening on all the purchase orders. As one finance director said, "We simply freeze all school purchases for the rest of the school year." Another finance director echoed, "Yes, we basically ban all the purchases. Special requests to purchase will need to be approved by the Superintendent's Office."

Cash Management

To safeguard the sources of revenues, school districts work with the state and local tax commissioners to make arrangements for speedy transfers of federal grants, state appropriations and local property taxes into the school district accounts. One finance director said, "All the federal grants are actually transferred to the Georgia State Department of Education to be distributed to the school districts. All the dollar transfers from account to account have to go through designated procedures and could take time." Another district finance officer also said, "Quick transfer of tax dollars to the school district account not only helps district cash flow but also determination of investment opportunities." Every school district has a cash manager to monitor the discrepancy between the estimated budget dollars and the actual tax dollars received. "Most of the time, the budget estimates and the actual tax dollars come pretty close." said a finance director. An assistant superintendent uttered, "Previously developed budgets may need to be revised according to the real revenue situation." School district officers have been very careful in investing tax dollars in the money market. They prefer investment in low risk low interest foundations to high interest risky funds. As one of

the finance directors stated, "The State of Georgia has established guidelines for school districts to invest their education dollars. Our school board has also outlined safe investment procedures."

Auditing

School boards in the study require annual internal and external audits of the school districts. A district finance officer stated, "The finance audits of the school district are performed annually for public accountability as well as for policy compliance." Another finance director also expressed, "The internal audit is conducted to correct all the possible mistakes at district and school levels before external audit." A district finance director added, "Auditing is more than checking numbers. It is also checking for procedure compliance." A district finance director also confirmed, "Our district conducts audit workshops with all the school district administrators to stress the importance of following procedures and what and how to follow procedures." "Focus is on how to prepare and organize documents in support of their finance actions."

Financial Forecasting

A finance director said, "Government finance officials at the state and local levels have first-hand information about finance activities in the near future. With the most updated information they provide, we at the school district perform a trend analysis of data to generate an economic forecast of the region." Data school districts used for financial forecast include records of property sales, house forecloses, residential and commercial developments, unemployment rate and student enrollment growth. One school district is very detailed about financial forecasting. Its financial director said, "We do a month by month forecast of the state and county finance with foci on the actual revenues received including tax collection, investment earnings and cost of living index." Another finance officer added, "Our district has accumulated data of recent years to perform a long- range forecast. Learning the economic cycle of the state or region, we are better prepared to face the anticipated challenges to come."

DISCUSSION

It is evident that the school districts in this study have experienced a steady to rapid increase in the Hispanic pupil population. It has obviously placed burden on the pupil expenditure budget, particularly on teacher allotment, instructional programs, facility utilization, food services and transportation. Special language programs may be needed to help with the Hispanic children.

The size of the school district does not seem to have much effect on the procedures of addressing school finance issues. School districts, regardless of their sizes, are unwilling to miss any major steps to secure a sound school district financial system. Some larger school districts, because of their availability of fiscal resources, are able to manage their financial business more sophisticatedly than smaller districts, such as close monitor of financial forecast.

With reference to per pupil expenditure, the amounts of the six school districts are very close. Since a substantial portion (approximately 40%) of the district budget dollars are actually state allotments, every school district receives the same amount per pupil based on adjusted school attendance. The difference in school district wealth is really showing the difference in the millage raised on property taxes in each district.

The percentage of pupils receiving free or reduced price lunch in the district does not seem to impact the school district annual budget. The amount to subsidize pupils receiving free and reduced price lunch is actually reimbursed by the federal government by actual count on per meal per pupil. After all, a portion of the cost per meal is paid by some affordable parents.

The district sources of revenues in the study are in agreement with the school district revenue proportions as shown in the literature (Odden & Picus, 2013; Vermont School Boards Association, 2012). The only noticeable difference in revenues of the six school districts is in the amount generated by SPLOST. School districts with more major highways have more commercial areas that are able to generate more tax dollars through SPLOST.

All the school districts in this study place high priority of their annual expenditures in classroom instruction including salaries and benefits of teachers and purchase of instructional materials. Other priority expenditures also include school maintenance and operations, pupil transportation and food services. It is noticeable that the central office and school administrative expenses have been kept to the minimum (5-6%).

Discussion on Budget

The finding that school district officers reserve dollars in the budget for contingency is in agreement with the findings of current literature (New York State Office of the State Comptroller, 2014a). However, wealthier school districts of Metro-Atlanta can afford to reserve more contingency dollars than poor school districts. School district finance officers have indicated that, during budget cut, they would freeze unspent budget items and strictly screen on special requests of purchases. Current literature on budget constraint also supports these stringent measures on protecting the school district budget (Ginn, 2014; Hanushek, 2013). The school districts take it a first priority to protect the pupil instructional programs during budget cut. This finding is also reflecting the current position of Ginn (2014) and McCuen (2014). Additionally, McCuen (2014) also indicates that school maintenance budget is always the first to be cut. However, the school district finance officers in this study indicated that school maintenance and operations is one of the top items of expenditures in their budgets.

Discussion on Cash Management

In cash management, the findings of this study concur with Alford (2013), and Brimley and Garfield (2004) who indicated that many school districts worked with state, county and city tax officials to have tax dollars quickly transferred to the school district accounts. On the other hand, Combs (2014) found that school districts have been very careful in their cash investment in safe foundation funds. The district finance officers in this study also stated that they were in full compliance with state and district investment guidelines.

Discussion on Auditing

Current literature has shown that school districts have been tightening up their policies on auditing finance procedures (New York State Office of the State Comptroller, 2014b). The findings of this study are in agreement with the New York State Office of the State Comptroller. School districts in this study have even gone further by conducting workshops to prepare district and local administrators for documentation so they can fulfill the accountability requirements and be ready for the audits.

Discussion on Financial Forecasting

In financial forecasting, McGuen (2014) has pointed out that experienced school finance officers can identify factors that contribute to forecasting economic conditions. Metro-Atlanta school finance officers have used demographic data of community growth and population shifts

for economic forecasting. Some large districts have also reported conducting monthly economic forecasts. Findings in this study have also shown that district finance officers have made frequent communication with state and local tax commissioners to update the school districts' data files. This is reflecting the same financial practice as recommended by Baker, Green and Richards (2007).

IMPLICATIONS

The financial practices of the six Metro-Atlanta school districts have more in common than difference in budgeting, cash management, auditing and financial forecasting. The school district financial officers of the Metro-Atlanta area school districts meet on a frequent basis to share their experiences in financial management. They learn from one another new knowledge and techniques that could possibly apply to their own school district. Georgia State Department of Finance also calls up state meetings to share the latest fiscal information.

The finance officers of the six school districts in this study have placed great emphasis in preparing themselves to meet with future challenges of school finance issues. They have taken cautious steps like many school districts nationwide to safeguard their school districts' education dollars. Additionally, they conducted many workshops with district and local school administrators to make sure that all the administrators fully understand the significance and the process of auditing. This is an important step in establishing professional ethical standards and to mandate their full policy compliance. In financial forecasting, some Metro-Atlanta school districts have set good examples for other districts to learn by demonstrating their serious forecasting effort. The school districts are fully prepared for meeting any challenges of upcoming fiscal hard times.

CONCLUSION

This study is designed to examine the financial management practices of major school districts in Metro-Atlanta area. The process of the study includes reviewing the financial management practices commonly conducted by school districts nationwide. Through examining the data collected in this study, the researchers found that school district finance officers in Metro-Atlanta area have performed an excellent job in managing their school districts' finance. Not only their financial practices are in alignment with commonly agreed national standards, but also they have exerted great effort in preparing themselves to meet with future financial challenges. The findings of this study contribute to affirming the common financial practices exercised by school districts nationwide. It also has highlighted some unique financial management initiatives practiced by Metro-Atlanta school districts. School districts worldwide can learn from the successful experiences of Metro-Atlanta districts in implementing sound financial management practices.

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PURPOSE

The International Society for Educational Planning was established to foster the professional knowledge sand interests of educational planners. Through conferences and publications, the society promotes the interchange of ideas within the planning community. The membership includes persons from the ranks of governmental agencies, school-based practitioners, and higher education.

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