8-2021

Educator Perceptions of the Organizational Change Experienced in the Shift from Traditional Grading to a Standards-Based System

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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August 2021

Dr. Pamela Scott, Chair

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Keywords: Standards-Based Report Card, elementary education teacher, change process

ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine elementary education teacher perceptions of the change process that occurred in a public-school district during the four-year transition from a traditional grade reporting process to a standards-based system. The director of elementary education and a district leadership team provided oversight as the initial teacher cohort participated in a full school year of planning and designing the new standards-based report card for kindergarten and was executed the following school year. First-grade cohort teachers began their initial year of planning and design the same year kindergarten began implementation. The second-grade teacher cohort followed with the same progression.

This study was designed to collect qualitative data from district cohort teachers who participated in the shift to the standards-based report card. The evidence was used to determine the successes and challenges involved with the collaborative reform process between district leaders and grade level cohort members in designing, creating, and implementing the standards-based report card. The system-change that occurred was explored and compared to Fullan's (2016b) three dimensions of change model. The results of this study demonstrate a general interpretation of how cohort teachers perceived the relationships and interactions that influenced the leadership quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of change.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Roe, who keeps me anchored. His unwavering support calms my storm. To my children, Andrew and Amber, different in so many ways but both are givers and love to learn which makes me proud. To the memory of my father, Ben, his brightness and talents still shine through the many who were loved and mentored by him and in honor of my mother, Rita, the quiet foundation builder and spiritual stronghold of our family. My brothers, Jeff, Kevin, and I were the luckiest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful for the excellence and selflessness in others who have inspired and supported me through this journey:

- Committee Chair: Dr. Pamela Scott for her perseverance and patience with me as I transitioned to a principalship during of this process. Her calm responsiveness and resolve sustained me.
- Committee Member: Dr. William Flora for his intense dedication to making distance learning and this process meaningful and as close to “in person” as possible.
- Committee Member: Dr. Virginia Foley, known for her excellence in writing, for championing me in the later stages of my research.
- Principals and cohort teachers for trusting me and candidly sharing experiences enabling others may grow and learn.
- My school family of custodians, paraprofessionals, office staff, teachers, and assistant principals for supporting and embracing me on multiple levels and “cheering me on” with each milestone.
- District leaders for trusting me to conduct this research and partnering with me in a supportive manner along the way. They are also my friends.
- My husband for standing beside me in all things. You are my helpmate.
- My mother and father for grounding me in loving and serving others. You are my foundation.
- My son for keeping all things in repair at my home and school for me. You are my rock.
- My daughter, who is a teacher, for supporting me in editing, providing feedback, and engaging in educational discussions at any hour. You are my spirit.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The foundations of traditional academic grading are deeply entrenched in the history and culture of the American educational system. Since the Industrial Revolution, when a record number of children began filling the halls of schools across the country, earned marks and grades have represented student achievement as a primary indicator of their learning attainment level, from the lauded A to the dreaded F. Grades are a way to show parents how their children progress in school based on right and wrong answers, comparisons to classmates, learning behavior, and work product (Brookhart et al., 2016; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). The administration of grades communicates a professional judgement of performance over a specific period of time by applying a symbol or mark to define levels of student performance and achievement.

While a grade should impart a true measurement of individual achievement, the reliability of a letter or number marking that accurately represents a student's current level of performance ability is often invalidated by teachers factoring in nonacademic measures (Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Link, 2019; Marzano, 2010 & Swan et al., 2014).When a teacher includes various types of measures unrelated to learning targets in determining a student's grade, the reliability of the reporting process is compromised. Grades become a "construction of cognitive and noncognitive product" dependent on the type of learning outcomes and student work product the teacher values (Brookhart et al., 2016, p. 824).

Purpose and accountability in administering and reporting grades grounded in evidence of academic performance in our educational system is moving away from traditional approaches diluted with indicators unrelated to classroom instruction and is evolving toward a more standardized process. Policies and practice associated with the standards-based accountability movement in the U.S. undergird the drive for this change in grading practice based on a

foundational approach distinguished by establishing a "stated purpose" for the report of progress process that is grounded in "research-based evidence on effective practice" (Guskey, 2015, p. 5). The initiative for accountability for teaching and student learning in education through a system of common uniform learning expectations in our nation has incited a movement toward holding teachers responsible for accurately reporting their students' progress in alignment with mandated student learning standards and targets. The current role of an elementary education teacher is to deliver instruction based on a set of state adopted learning standards and outcomes established for their students. Learning expectations are more standardized and explicit today than any other time in U. S. History (Hamilton et al., 2018). Reporting of growth and achievement at the classroom level that is reflective of the anticipated learning outcomes is often subjective with varied perceptions of how mastery is demonstrated across individual teachers assessing the student (Wormeli, 2012). Brookhart (2011) affirms that a common indicator of grades that intentionally and specifically demonstrate student achievement is rooted in teachers creating a sense of purpose for grading reform that directly aligns with expected learning outcomes.

As our national, state, and district policies increase in mandates for implementing standards-based outcome driven educational procedures for grade reporting, the way teachers' measure and report growth, progress, and achievement of student learning is being reinvented (Guskey, 2015). The shift toward a grading system that accurately measures student mastery with focus on standards-based learning outcomes informative to instructional practice incites new challenges for educators and calls for school and district staff to develop a well-planned grade reporting system. The initial steps in reforming grading processes in education involves purposefully led transformation where "every classroom" and "every school" examines their shared beliefs to determine a clear purpose for grades (p.5). Driven by this collective process,

district grading procedures and policies should subsequently be realigned to reflect effective practice based on promising research and the mutually agreed upon reform objectives (Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Bailey, 2010). Current shifts in grading practice parallel our nation's standards-based accountability movement constructed on the use of student evidence of learning outcomes to reflect and report classroom achievement ultimately reinforced through a standardized assessment accountability measurement (Hamilton et al., 2018).

The institution of an effective change in educational practice, including the grading and reporting of student progress, must begin with a method that promotes human connectivity and engagement characterized by deep learning at all levels of the system and connects with the global movement of policies and processes that are the driving force for expected educational change. Teachers and leaders at the school and district level must collectively determine a moral purpose that guides their decision making through knowledgeable and meaningful relationships that foster a focused approach to professional growth and practice (Quinn & Fullan, 2017). A unified purpose filters the unintentional drivers that may trigger ineffective and misaligned change and encourages the creation and design of processes that cohere with the culture and present level of needs for the school organization (Wexler, 2019). Sustainable transformation specific to implementing a new practice in grading must engage all stakeholders in a process of mutually adapting to the change. Shared learning throughout the course of determining the purpose and design of the new practice and collectively changing behaviors involved in implementing the procedure with fidelity should result in a shift in mindsets and beliefs that perpetuate the change as it evolves (Fullan, 2016b; Fullan et al., 2017; Hargreave & Fullan, 2012).Educational leaders must effectively communicate the meaningful purpose of this transformation and ensure that everyone involved in the process embraces the change (Swan et

al., 2014).

Statement of the Problem

This phenomenological study examined elementary educator perceptions of the change process that occurred during the transition from traditional grade reporting to a standards-based system. The transition occurred with the discontinuation of the A-F grading scheme used in a public-school district for students in kindergarten through second-grade fully replaced with a standards-based report card designed and executed throughout the system. The standards-based report card was developed through a process of district leaders collaborating with grade level teacher cohorts comprised of representatives from each school per kindergarten through second-grade level. The principal at each school was provided the opportunity to select the teacher representatives from their school for each cohort based on their total school population. Teachers in each cohort were charged with training the remainder of the teachers in their grade level at their assigned school.

In this process of a systemwide actionable change in practice, the kindergarten teachers began using the district cohort designed report card during the 2017-2018 school year with first-grade fully implementing the following year. Second-grade teachers initiated the final stage of implementing the new practice of using a standards-based report card during the 2019-2020 school year. Each implementation year was preceded by a full year of design and planning per grade level cohort. This study investigated the cohort teacher perceptions of the change led by the district leadership staff. While all district teachers serving in kindergarten through second-grade were charged with the change, only the perceptions of those who participated on a district cohort were studied. School level activities and feedback occurring as an extension of the district planned measures that were executed were mentioned by cohort teachers but considered part of

attributes of the change process in this study.

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in research on educational change and practice associated with district and school level improvement. The thematic purpose for this study was established through the review of literature and foundational body of research involved with educational transformation and system change. The objective of this study was to:

1. Realize the successes and challenges involved with a collaborative reform process between district leaders, and teacher cohort members in designing, creating, and implementing a standards-based reporting system for elementary-age students (kindergarten through second-grade).

2. Understand the dimensions of the system-change that occurred with the implementation and application of a new process, the standards-based reporting system, that required a change in practice and actionable behavior supported by a mutually adaptive process.

3. Realize how district leaders can institute actionable improvement through the design, development, implementation, and sustainability of meaningful change that is grounded in the refining processes of collaborative learning, shared practice, and relationship building. From the district to the classroom level, promising improvement occurs when all change members mutually adapt to the transformation (Fullan, 2016b; Fullan et al., 2017; Quinn & Fullan, 2017).

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the existing knowledge base regarding organizational change in early elementary public education. It examined the lived experiences of kindergarten through second-grade teachers whose district leaders in the department of elementary education led them through the process of transitioning from a traditional A-F report card to a standards-based

grading system. The findings of this study may be used to support district leaders in their effort to induct new practice in schools as they gain insight on the dimensions of change that influence sustainable systems and processes (Fullan, 2016b). The study recognizes the role of external and internal drivers that effect change at the school and district specific level grading policy. A new process in teaching requires a shift in behavior that is sustained over time where teachers work together both in action and mindset (Fullan & Quinn, 2016b). These research findings may also be useful in helping teachers to gain insight on how to adapt to a new curricular practice through focused collaborative learning then engaging in actional behavior grounded in the new process. Teachers are the change agents who naturally work together to continuously observe, test, and revise their teaching strategies and practice (Hargreave & Fullan, 2012). Two important motivators for sustainable change emerged from this study: teacher expectations of leadership behaviors and attributes that elicit a sustainable shift in practice and teacher understanding of collegial relationships that improve student achievement through a process of engaging in shared learning and continuously refining their practice.

Research Questions

The primary question under investigation was: What are educator perceptions of the organizational change that occurred during the transition from the implementation of a traditional report card to a standards-based grading system? Additional guiding research questions included:

1. What leadership attributes influenced the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of the change?
2. In what ways did the change-system members contribute to the design and implementation of the change (new grade reporting system)?
3. What factors facilitated the change process?

4. What factors inhibited the change process?
5. What types of processes engaged the entire change-system members in deeper and wider professional learning?
6. How were mindsets and beliefs altered toward the commitment for growth and change?

Definition of Terms

1. Traditional Grading System: Norm-referenced grading systems based on a pre-established formula regarding a percentage or ratio compared to the class or criterion-referenced grading systems based on a fixed scale equated to a letter mark. Teachers assign letter grades based on the individual performance of each child (*Internal Affairs Office, U.S. Department of Education*, 2008).
2. Standards-based report card: Lists the most important skills students should learn in each subject at a particular grade level. Students receive codes or marks that show how well they have mastered the skills. The marks may correlate with a rubric that demonstrates the level of mastery (Miller, 2013).
3. Cohort: A group of district administrators and grade level teachers working together to engage in mutually adapting to a change in practice through collaboratively learning and making decisions over time to inform the new process (Fullan et al., 2017).
4. TNReady: Tennessee Academic Standards provide a common set of expectations for what students will know and be able to do at the end of a grade for each subject area (*TN Department of Education*, n.d.).

Delimitations and Limitations

In alignment with the purpose of this study, the teacher participants surveyed were

delimited to the grade levels of kindergarten through 2nd grade constricting the grade level range applied to this research. The study participant selection was further delimited by the choice of teachers assigned to the district level teacher cohort to plan, design, and implement a standards-based report card. Participating teachers were selected for the district level cohort by their supervising principal. The potential for bias in the selection process further minimizes the probability of a varied cross section of teachers represented in the sampling. An additional delimiting factor is that the study is isolated to a single public school district in the Eastern Region of Tennessee comprised of 12 elementary schools. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to all elementary schools.

Due to the research design and longevity of the change in practice studied, the following are identified limitations. First, the participants who were interviewed in this study experienced differentiated time gaps between the development and implementation stages of the standards-based report card in accordance with the succession of grade level cohort assignments. Kindergarten teachers experienced the change process being studied first and had more experience with implementation and school level changes. The time lapse between development and initial implementation of the new grading system was longest with kindergarten. Teacher participants in the earlier cohorts contributed emerging perspectives to the creation of the grading system, while later cohorts had less input in the design. Second, teachers may have failed to respond to the questions candidly apprehensive of portraying district leaders in a negative manner, though a heightened attempt at confidentiality was assured. The principal researcher is an elementary administrator in the district and served as a district level intervention facilitator while the change in practice in this study took place. She experiences familiarity with many of the elementary teachers who work in the district. A final limitation was withing the definitive

parameter of schools for the selection of research participants. Varied demographics in student population and socioeconomic factors existed across elementary schools. Districts with different resources and student profiles may have had a more varied experience given this study design.

Summary

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction, statement of the problem, significance of the study, research questions, definition of terms, and delimitations and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature to the study. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used to conduct this research. Chapter 4 contains the findings from the interviews with the participants. Chapter 5 incorporates the summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for this study and future research.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

Introduction

Success in schools has increasingly become focused on improving student achievement and standardizing learning through the lens of competitive international performance resulting in an emerging set of national education standards and a myriad of platforms and strategies designed to assess student learning. While standards-based reform has evolved over the years, the core foundations have not. The standards movement emphasizes the use of a common set of student learning expectations to promote challenging instruction placing high expectations for students in at-risk subgroups. Changes in polies and practice are perpetuated by the results of annual state and national summative assessments as a measurement of student learning outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2008; Wexler, 2019). American educators have been creating and developing ideas that have transformed into formal testing and written exams to assess student achievement since the mid-1800s. As schools shifted from private institutions to public schools responsible for educating the masses, the testing practices and methods for ensuring student achievement and preparedness for college and the workforce have continuously evolved (*History of Standardized Testing in the United States*, n.d.). External pressures at the greater societal and political level for international competitive student performance in the U.S. have standardized and made normal our overzealous modern attempts at reform (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014). Bridging the gap between the existing external forces that drive change exerted on schools to improve standardized test scores and the existence of an actual collective moral purpose among educators at the local level is more likely to be attained when leaders and educators at all levels of the system engage in a process deeper learning (Fullan, 2011b, 2017; Fullan et al., 2009, 2017).

Engaging people's [educators] moral purpose: The first overriding principle is

> knowledge about the why of change; namely moral purpose. Moral purpose in educational change is about improving society through improving educational systems and thus the learning of all citizens. (Fullan et al., 2009, p. 54)

Improving practice dedicated to realizing a moral purpose and shared learning at all levels requires commitment and planning. When district kindergarten teachers experienced a rigorous state-mandated portfolio process that was misaligned with their grade reporting practice and students in third-grade demonstrated less than promising performance results on the state accountability assessment for reading in early grades, the development of a quality system of measuring and reporting student learning in non-tested early grades merged with the district leaders' decision and commitment to change. District leaders actualized the planning of teacher leadership cohorts to champion the development of a precision instrument for grading practice that led to a yearlong process of design and creation followed by a year of implementation for each grade level. Through shared learning and socially meaningful transformation, mutual adaptation to a new grading practice was prioritized then actualized (Fullan, 2016b). Standards-based grading emphasizes the reporting of student progress relevant to grade-level expected learning outcomes through an aligned and paced series of formative assessments. Assessment-informed grading practice connected to educational standards demonstrate a stronger correlation between grades and standardized test scores when compared to traditional grading (O'Conner, 2018).

The shift from a traditional grading process meant moving away from a multidimensional measure where factors such as classroom behavior, homework completion, class participation, attendance, and work habits influence a final grade to a standards-based approach where grades inform academic performance (Guskey & Link, 2019). A purer measurement of cognitive ability

and achievement level was pursued (Brookhart et al., 2016). Initiating and sustaining a reporting scale that correlates with expected learning outcomes and accurately measures learning over time is important in creating a valid learning-centered report of student progress that prevents bias in marking (Guskey, 2015; Marzano, 2010; O'Connor, 2012). District-led transformational processes that challenged teachers during the shift were crucial to success (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). The district's work toward orchestrating collaborative school and system-level refinement and improvement merit further study.

Conceptual Framework:

This research review will establish a foundation to support the reader in understanding the relevance of the theoretical framework and purpose of this study. The central concept of this work is aligned with the foundational platform for change and systemwide improvement established by Fullan and Quinn (2016). Their change model encourages a culture of collaboration for sustainable infrastructures and processes for learning, improvement, and continued growth exemplified by teachers and leaders working cohesively to experience deep learning modeled and supported throughout the process. Relevant research in this chapter presents within the framework of the dimensions of change stages conceptualized in Fullan's (2016b) work outlined below:

Initiation Stage I: Initiation of the new resource in the form of a standards-based report card displacing the traditional grade card.

Implementation Stage 2: Actional behavior and change in practice in the use of the standards-based reporting system.

Institutionalization Stage 3: Change of mindset and beliefs of teachers and leaders through "shared learning, deep understanding, and mutual adaptation" as teachers

faithfully practiced using the standards-based report card. (p. 28)

Peripheral to these essential foundational stages of transformation that embody the relationships and behaviors of educators at the school and district level are the external and internal accountability forces kindling the reform. Forces acting upon the district and schools in this study, antecedent to district leaders realizing the need for actionable change, were both internally and externally fueled by the standards-based accountability movement. According to Fullan (2011), the extant policies and movements coercing changes in school organizations can be characterized by the moral nature of their purpose as "right or wrong drivers" (Fullan, 2011. pg. 2). "They [right drivers] are effective because they work directly on changing culture" (Fullan, 2011, p.4). A wrong driver is a "deliberate policy force that has little chance of achieving the desired result" (Fullan, 2011, p.4). Research in this chapter is partially dedicated to imparting the effects of grading in education and the standards movement as drivers for the educational change that occurred.

Research to support the reader in understanding the study will begin with a depiction of the external drivers and internal drivers that directly influenced the change that occurred in this study. The external drivers included federal and state policies and mandates that stimulated the modern standards movement. Internal drivers were centralized on district and school-level accountability in measuring student academic performance through state testing results and developing local assessments that align with state and national accountability expectations. Research associated with the change that occurred within the school system causal to the planning and development of the processes that analyze and report student progress in the form of a common grade card were shared.

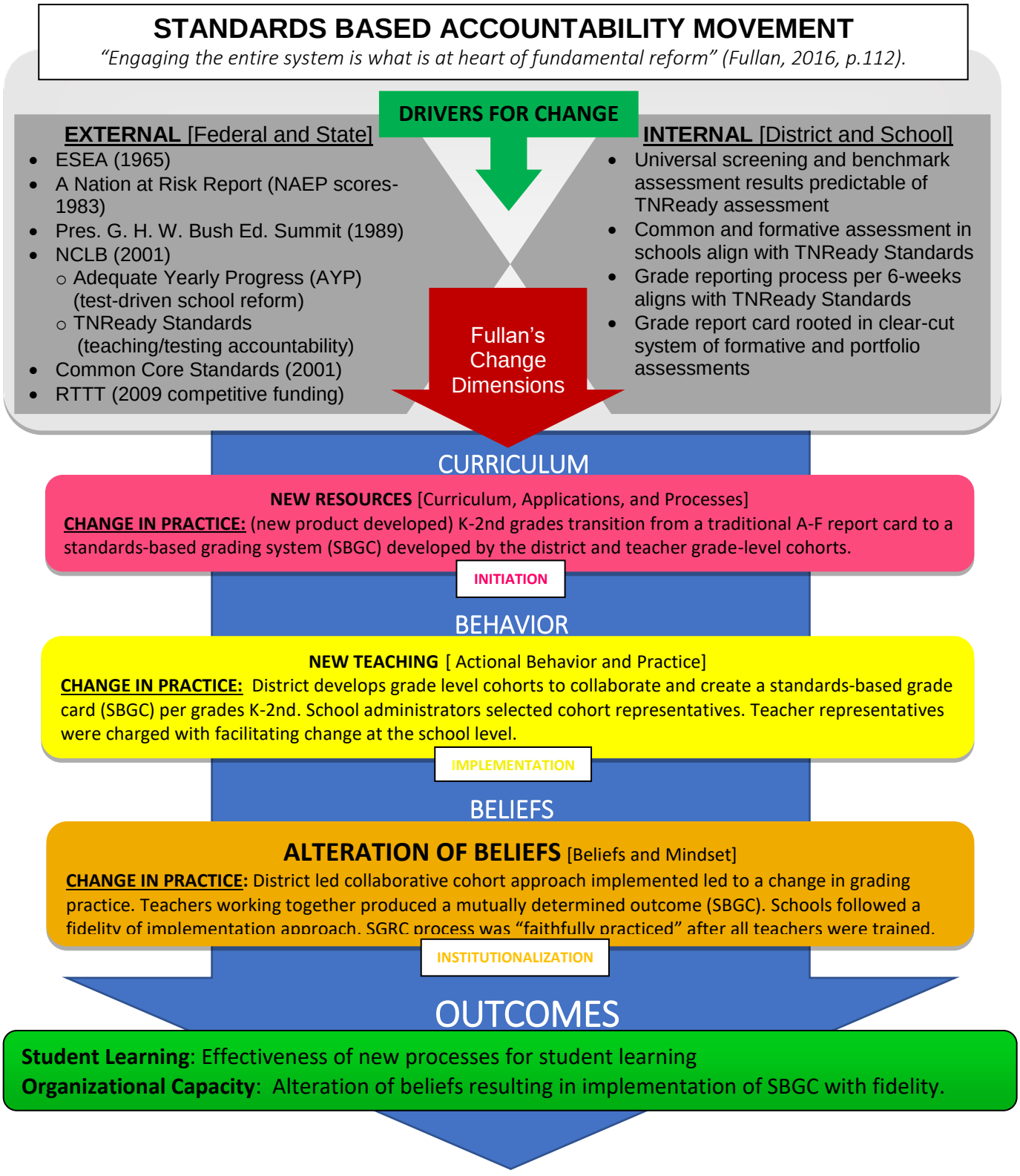
Practice that focuses on assessments that align with standards-based instruction that

regularly and systematically use feedback to inform teaching is key in designing a quality reporting process (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). The universal screening of all students through benchmark, common, and formative assessment to predict student TNReady ("TN Department of Education," n.d.) scores unfolded across the district in this study as a response to the ever-increasing accountability in state testing. The alignment of these internal district level assessments to standard-based expectations as compared to the current traditional grade card played a role in the quest for a reporting system rooted in a clear system of formative assessments (Buckmiller et al., 2017). A comparison of traditional grading and effective standards-based reporting presented in this examination of research represents the knowledge base and required learning that grounds district leaders and teachers as they engage in planning a shift in grading practice.

This review of literature will culminate in a presentation of effective organizational capacity building represented in current works that are symbolic of the change being studied. The projected outcome of transformational processes in education is ultimately to experience a sustainable improvement in the targeted area that benefits the entire system. Improved teaching and learning hinges on the relationship between school-level educationists and district leaders (Meredith I. Honig et al., 2017). Building a bridge between both through cultivating a culture of communicating, learning, planning, and working together is key in enabling organizations to strengthen capacity toward continuous growth and educational improvement focused on students (Cox et al., 2018; Hargreave & Fullan, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2015). "Engaging the entire system is at the heart of fundamental reform" (Fullan, 2016b. p. 112).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



External Drivers

The leadership challenge in improving the educational system is defining direction amid multiple systems of national, state, district, school, and classroom structures. Each system is an organization housing a unique set of complexities. The separate entities that comprise this political hierarchy of accountability within the intertwining systems of control can be depicted with a full range of descriptors from forces that conflict with moral purpose to those that are meaningful and forthright. All parts share the ultimate goal of improving student performance (Hamilton et al., 2018).

> Around the world, there is a preoccupation with improving the performance of schools and school systems. The minds of policy-makers and politicians alike are sharply focused on finding effective ways of scaling the international performance ladder and moving ever closer to the elusive top. (Harris, 2019)

Legislators at the federal and state level, with the intent of igniting change forces over districts and schools, have been emergent throughout history (Cusick, 2014). Leadership learning focused on developing a receptive collaborative culture and a more continuous process for improving ceaselessly responds to change through a process of reinventing, redesigning, refining, and reinforcing the practice. Political reform acts do not guarantee transformation (Futrell, 2010). Meaningful change occurs when leaders recognize the right drivers for educational reform and act. In response, leaders construct a community of participants who, building on prior learning, cohesively develop relevant new knowledge. They invent change that connects to reality and produces positive outcomes for students (Fullan et al., 2017).

Federal power came into force over state educational systems upon the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA],

1965) which proposed to balance differences among districts, schools, teachers, and students during the war on poverty. Major reform of federal education policy and funding to K-12 education was enforced. The governmental policies and legislations that followed have shaped and continuously redesigned the face of the US educational system and leveled the playing field for diverse students. “Since the 1960s, it is fortunately no longer socially or politically acceptable to openly use our educational system to perpetuate inequality” (Wexler, 2019, p.141). The list of federal policies that have driven and formed the modern standards movement throughout the history of education in the U.S. is extensive. The most prominent enactments that relate to this research are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

External Drivers [Federal and State]

- ESEA (1965)
- History: A Nation at Risk Report (NAEP scores-1983)
- Pres. G. H. W. Bush Ed. Summit, Charleston, VA (1989)
- NCLB (2002)
    - Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals (test-driven school reform)
    - TNReady Standards (teaching and testing accountability)
- Common Core Standards (2001)
- RTTT (2009 competitive funding)
- ESSA (2015)

While the impact on schools and education remains a work in progress, the shift to a national set of expected learning outcomes for all students has stimulated the push for the establishment of a common set of standards and aligned assessments designed to evaluate how

schools, districts, states, and the nation measure up comparatively (Armstrong, 2018). Standards-based reform has extensive meaning and perspectives are varied across context. The desired outcome of creating "educational systems suited to increasing economic productivity" is a common denominator across educational systems internationally (Peters et al., 2017; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Smith & Kovacs, 2011, p. 203).

History of the Standards Movement

Origins of the modern standards movement can be traced back to the publication of A Nation at Risk (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), a landmark U. S. Department of Education report demonstrating that our nation's students were performing well below expectations. The findings made public the deficiencies in our national education system as reported by The National Commission on Excellence in Education research and reporting team (Denning, 1983). Reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated that reading scores revealed that 13 percent of 17-year-old students were functionally illiterate, SAT scores were falling, and students enrolling in college required an increased number of remedial courses (Berger, 2000). Widespread concern for the direction of our perceived "world class educational system" ensued as test results did not demonstrate achievement and progress comparatively to other nations (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

In September of 1989, President George H.W. Bush held a two-day educational summit in Charleston, Virginia, hosting chief executives from all states and 49 of our nation's governors to begin work in setting the national education goals that have accelerated the movement for standards-based educational reform for more than 20 years (Klein, 2014). Claims that school districts and states working alone could not meet the challenges outlined in the results and recommendations of A Nation at Risk (1983) were a central theme (Hill & Campbell,

1983).Goals for the nation set at the summit acknowledged that "50 states and thousands of districts could not meet the numerous expectations" outlined in the landmark report (p. 19).The Charlottesville summit is often credited for being pivotal in opening the door to direct federal involvement in K-12 education and opened the pathway for the standards initiative and a long-term fundamental change process in the system (Gamson et al., 2015).

The No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) called for even more rigorous standards for improving student achievement. The sanctions deployed pressure on teachers and administrators to improve student assessment scores or be at risk of losing their jobs. The federal government necessitated accountability through assessment and mandated school improvement measures. Schools failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals were labeled and placed on target lists for improvement. Schools not meeting AYP after 4 years were forced to choose among options of employing experts for advice, replacing staff, providing more instructional time per day or year, or restructuring their internal organization (p. 203).

Standardized Testing

The Nation's Report Card: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is designed to measure the general state of education. Results reflect the state of our educational system across multiple domains producing data to inform comparisons across schools, districts, states, and nations. Disaggregated results inform performance and progress of groups of students by gender, race, and ethnicity. Standardized testing, influenced by the No Child Left Behind (2002) and the NAEP mandates testing in all 50 states. Smith (1991) cites two important changes that increased the influence of the NAEP results on standards adoption and testing programs at the state level:

1. NAEP's developers have broadly publicized – and thus opened wide to public scrutiny –

the content frameworks and proficiency standards on which the assessment is based. These frameworks could be viewed as the beginnings of national curriculum frameworks, for they set out the academic and intellectual substance of the only national educational assessment we have.

2. NAEP is now moving to report its findings for each interested state, not just for the nation. (pp. 75-76)

As a result, most states have performance standards descriptors similar the NAEP and carry the designated names associated with the four reporting categories aligned with the test results grouping areas of below, basic, proficient, and advanced (Desimone, 2013).

Critics of our current model of education contend that that it continues to adhere to an outdated model and that current school reform should align with the 21st century through a transformational change to improve learning for children (Hamilton et al., 2018). Arne Duncan (2010), former United States Secretary of Education, charged that schools must prepare all students for college and careers and that the next quiet revolution may be, "dramatically improving education productivity" (Duncan, 2010, p. 1). Arguments for standards suggest they improve achievement by clearly defining performance expectations, generating equity in opportunity, and redesigning resources with focused efforts on student learning. Common state standards accompanied with aligned assessments targeted at international benchmark expectations allow for a more comparable measures in accountability (Hamilton et al., 2008). Disagreeing opinions include the assumption that top-down mandates are furthest away from student learning and are ineffective in inciting true lasting change. The increased expectations for rigor at the classroom level to meet the surmounting pressure of the standards-based accountability movement has forced teachers to modify their instructional practice to costly

common-core aligned curriculum materials and students in early grades to adapt to the demands of higher level of expected development and thinking skills (Meador, 2019). A deeper curricular challenge lies in the major focus on English-language arts and mathematics standards, which has moved teaching away from a content specific "knowledge-focused" approach to instruction, therefore, students experience gaps in the foundational knowledge that undergirds and inspires learning (Wexler, 2019. p. 95). Regardless of opinions, the results of A Nation at Risk (1983) alarmed the nation and gave rise to a call for school improvement and reformation. With NCLB (2002) on its heels eight years later, a more prescriptive approach to raising student achievement was enforced (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Common Core Standards

Standards-based reform has extensive meaning and perspectives are varied across context. A common international goal for educational reform is to increase productivity and economic power (Smith & Kovacs, 2011). At the heart of the movement is states adoption or development of a set of state standards that align with federal expectations. While a core learning-progression is evident throughout the standards, there are no mandates in standards that decree specific instructional materials or curriculum. They are learning goals that apply at age-related grade levels and signify what students should know or be able to perform (*ASCD*, n.d.; *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, n.d.).

Common Core Standards are outcome-based internationally benchmarked learning outcomes and were designed to apply rigor to instructional practice and prepare students for college readiness and the ability to compete in a global workforce. Promoting higher thinking skills, students must be able to solve assessment questions containing multiple embedded skills generating better problem-solving skills (*Common Core State Standards Initiative*, n.d.). In

response to the demand for high educational standards along with substantial financial incentives that the federal government embedded in its Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) initiative, many states have adopted the Common Core State Standards CCSS and others have designed and developed their own standards and benchmarks or contracted professional societies to create them. In an effort to develop a set of learning expectations consistent across states, CCSS were a culmination of the work of governors (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and state education chiefs (Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)) representing 48 states. The English language arts, literature, and math standards have been adopted by 41 states and the District of Columbia.

Internal Drivers

For purposes of this study, internal drivers are defined as district and school level transformations in practice that advance the development of new materials and the design of new processes creating a change to improve student learning influenced by the external factors that force reform from a higher policy driven level (Fullan, 2017). Accountability policies associated with standardized achievement testing and a common set of outcome-based teaching standards across states place the expectation for redesigning instructional delivery and assessment practices at the local level. It is possible for mandated change to be directed in meaningful ways that inspire teachers instead of overwhelming them with unrealistic expectations. In the classroom, teachers' emotional reaction to compulsory change are negatively influenced when leadership management is not school oriented with purposeful goals (Clement, 2014; Fullan, 2017).Inward change must reflect and satisfy expected outcomes but district leaders, school administrators, and teachers must work together to support teaching and learning, which may require the reorganization of the traditional roles of central office staff, redefining capacity to align with the

same type of teaching and learning expected in the classroom (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Internal drivers for district change relative to this study are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Internal Drivers [District and School]

- Universal screening and benchmark assessment results predictable of TNReady assessment
- Common and formative assessment in schools align with TNReady Standards
- Grade reporting process per 6-weeks aligns with TNReady Standards
- Grade report card rooted in clear-cut system of formative assessments

A systems-level approach to standards-based grading begins with building a sustainable assessment culture with a reporting system that is supported by a framework of formative assessments designed to maintain comparability to student achievement (Colbert et al., 2012). The influence of standards-based accountability draws schools and districts away from a traditional grading system to a platform that requires teachers to work together, attending to a shared assessment practice, providing quality grading that guides student achievement and learning goals (O'Connor, 2017). As organizations work inwardly toward the redesign of their assessment and grade reporting processes to define a more aligned and equitable system, it is the opinion of the researcher that the dynamics of change are key to all phases of planning and implementation. The sustainability and continuous improvement of the transformation requires a focus on capacity building. Developing a specific body of knowledge and skills-base across district and school level leaders and educators promotes a change in practice through the realization of new resources, alteration of instructional behaviors, and transformation of mindset

and beliefs (Fullan, 2016b; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Quinn & Fullan, 2017).

Traditional Grading

The impact of traditional grades as an effective tool to report student academic performance level is a sensitive topic in education that is becoming increasingly more controversial as states adopt more rigorous standards and teachers are held accountable for student learning evidenced by high stakes assessment results (Anderson, 2018; Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). While grading and processes for the reporting of student learning have varied widely throughout the years, the face of the grade-card has evolved from a communication system shaped by educators' intrinsic desire to create communication that promotes learning to a system-built instrument motivated by an external drive to enable a massive educational system to function uniformly (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Origins of our current model for grading in the United States began with a ranking system in universities that imitated European schools with "fixed-titles" much like those bestowed on modern college graduates for earning honorable grades such as magna cum laude and summa cum laude. Early American educators were agreeable to the European intent of motivating students through a ranking system however the notion of "titles" did not appeal to their democratic political beliefs. The ranking system was replaced with a "system of honors," out of which, the 4.0 grading scale was born. This system was soon fractionalized to include more values (p.4).

Schools in the rural United States prior to the mid-19th century experienced no formal grading process or record keeping procedures. Most schools consisted of students of all ages and abilities in a one-room schoolhouse under the sole responsibility of one teacher who orally reported student learning progress through home visits. (Brookhart et al., 2016; Hochbein & Pollio, 2016). During this time period, Horace Mann and his contemporaries, following the lead

of Prussian schools, reorganized schools to group students and curriculum in vertical groups of learning. Each learning progression group worked at their own pace to move to the next level (Kaestle, 1983, as cited in Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Mann (1846, as cited in Schneider & Hutt, 2014) initiated some of the beginning phases in standardizing grading for our nation in the monthly report cards established to correlate with learning levels in the new system. Common Schools educators implemented grade reporting to keep students motivated, decrease competition, and promote learning (p. 6).

From the Common Schools era until the mid-20th Century, prior to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), a series of internally and externally driven events forged our modern grading system in the United States. Post-Civil War, periodical or year-end grade reports were administered with little reliability across teachers and grades in the form of an A-F, numerical 4.0, or percentages/100-point scale. Teachers used their own discretion in factoring in non-academic behaviors. Enrollment increased three-fold in schools due to the enactment of compulsory attendance mandates and child labor laws. Tracking for the horizontal movement between schools and vertical promotion to next grade levels and college was put in place. The unfair practice of colleges accrediting high school curricula and professors administering individualized entrance exams to prospective students in the selection process was standardized with the establishment of the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB). Grades became a measure of progress evidenced through concise reports on achievement and aptitude per the textbooks completed, exams passed, promotions gained, credits earned, and predicted future career. By the early 1900s schools increased rigor in reporting through normalized grading around a central group in a movement to align practice with the mental IQ testing model associated with a normal bell curve. Standardization of grading continued with shared models of

practice. New grading mechanisms and systems aligned information across schools, districts and states (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Hochbein & Pollio, 2016; Schneider & Hutt, 2014).

Traditional grading has been an established practice for so long that it is acknowledged and accepted by societies around the world. In its simplest form, traditional grading emphasizes an A-F, 4.0, or 100-point percentage base scale (Brookhart et al., 2016). O'Conner (2018) suggests that traditional grading is unforgiving and does not holistically take into consideration learning that occurs after grades are recorded, focusing on the product instead of the child's present ability and level of performance. A grading system that places as much emphasis on beginning grades as those that occur at the end of the grading period gives the learner little incentive to revisit the skill after the opportunity to demonstrate evidence of learning has passed. The earlier score remains a part of the grade even if the student becomes proficient over time resulting in invalid representation of the child's performance level. A student may eventually learn the standard after the original failure. With no recovery or do-overs, the grade is finite and cannot be recovered unless the teacher concedes thus presenting a grading practice that is designed to be unfair (Dodd et al., 2017).

The field of student assessment is changing and dramatically affecting the work of educationists. Documenting student learning and progress through grade reporting has become a complex process of assessment, measurement, and reporting that requires teachers to provide clear, high-quality information about student learning. Standards-based assessment is constructed on the expectation that every child can learn provided the appropriate instruction and opportunity. Student assessments have consistently been a part of the culture of the classroom. Evaluating students is commonplace to teachers. Student achievement of learning targets and

benchmarks can be clearly and accurately measured when the assessment tool is directly aligned with the core standards being taught (Marzano, 2010).

Generally, two types of grading formats have been implemented at the elementary level, criterion-based and norm-referenced. Test items are not an indicator of the type of test. The formulation for scoring the test makes it criterion or norm referenced. Criterion-referenced test begins with a predetermined skill or standard that can be measured against an expected developmental or performance level which is ideal to be used along with a standards-based grading card and rubric (Krahenbuhl et al., 2018). Each test taker's performance is comparted directly to the predetermined expectation as measured by a cut score, standard, or other criterion. Norm-referenced assessments compare a test taker's skills or knowledge to the norm group. Norm-referenced tests can also be disaggregated to compare students to other sub-groups such as age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic range, disability, and English Language Learner (ELL). Criterion referenced assessment relates directly to a standards-based assessment approach while norm-referenced tests are more closely aligned with testing for traditional grading (Anderson, 2018).

Grades should have meaning and qualitative substantiation. Transforming to a standards-based grading system implies moving away from the traditional A-F grade reporting process, steeped in tradition, that has been in practice for over 100 years. The implementation of any new practice in education brings about change that requires new learning and acclimation. Students and parents might find the new system confusing at first, as teachers and school leaders learn to problem solve through technical difficulties that may arise, but will ultimately realize that this reporting process is more helpful in assessing their child's academic progress and growth in school (Schimmer, 2016). Some schools have chosen to maintain the traditional A-F report card

and provide an additional standards-based reporting measure to inform parents of how their children are learning in relation to standardized expectations adopted by their state. Kentucky educators championed statewide reform with the implementation of a standards-based reporting card under the leadership of expert researchers. Following a three-day summer workshop on standards-based report cards to include district, school, and teacher leaders representing each district, teachers at each school piloted the new report card by distributing both the newly developed standards-based report card and the traditional grade card used previous years for the first two grading periods. A survey distributed to parents prior to the 3rd grading period revealed that teachers unanimously agreed that the standards-based report, while more time consuming to complete, provided more clear and better information. They agreed that the extra time and effort devoted is worthwhile. Parents were in agreement with teachers and, by a wide measure, favored the standards-based report over the traditional (Guskey et al., 2011).

Grading reform can be perilous and potentially incite a less than positive response from students and parents. Prescriptions for best grading practices remain a controversial topic. A grading system that is fair and accurately depicts student's quality of work should parallel with the letter grade if both standards-based and traditional grading are used. The A-F grading system is subjective to the discretion of an individual teacher as an appraiser with little interrater reliability across grade, teacher, grade levels, and the entire school. Implementing a quality standards-aligned grading system that is fair and accurately depicts and reports learning can be a "launchpad" for other reforms (Vasseur & Scriffiny, 2008).

When grade reporting is specifically aligned to and exclusively measures explicit standards, learning targets are clearer and teachers can work together in consensus in moving students forward with learning. The resulting grading is valid and reliable and points to future

learning at all levels. Parents experience information about their child's performance level specific to what they should be learning as related to distinct goals thus revealing achievement gaps for intervention, levels of mastery for maintenance, and performance beyond expectations for enrichment. Over time, students begin to develop a sense of control over grading outcomes. The dread or anxiety experienced prior to receiving a potentially failing letter grade will be transformed. The limitations of students submitting personal work product as evidence of learning that is often a single opportunity in time with no chance of a redo. A more personal journey where reteaching and revisions are the norm and evidence of learning is authentic and grounded in the natural learning process associated with human behavioral, emotional, and cognitive development is realized (Guskey, 2015; Marzano, 2010; O'Conner, 2018; Tucker, 2018).

Formative Assessment

Assessment and testing, with the purest intent in teaching and learning, would be more appropriately termed feedback for guided learning. Teachers monitor how their students learn and follow through by adjusting and differentiating instructional delivery to ensure learning is inherent to the provision of quality educational services. Due to our nation's long-lived efforts to improve the educational system through an intricately involved results-driven assessment model, political decision-makers have polluted the intent of this natural process with rigorous detached annual tests far removed from the very roots of learning in the classroom. Forces emerging from the accountability movement in education, contingent on summative high stakes testing, have resulted in increased rigor in both state teaching and learning standards and summative accountability test measures (Hamilton et al., 2018).

Assessment data that is used to inform instruction and support teachers in modifying their

instructional practice promotes reflective teaching that enhances student learning through a cyclical process of planning instruction, deliberately eliciting evidence of learning, evaluating resulting data, and intentionally modifying instruction to meet students continuously evolving learning needs (Curry et al., 2016). Definitions of formative assessment vary slightly across educationists but are grounded in a reciprocal process of teaching, learning, assessing, and reshaping instruction to ensure student learning. Finding that their original definition lacked emphasis on current research, theory, and practice, The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2018) provide an updated definition of formative assessment:

> Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by all students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit and use evidence of student learning to improve student understanding of intended disciplinary learning outcomes and support students to become self-directed learners. (Wright & Miller, 2018, p.2)

Predicting individual student achievement on high stakes standardized achievement tests begins with classroom assessments that focus on student learning (Reeves, 2001). Formative assessments come in many varieties but all are created to evaluate student learning needs and assist teachers in identifying and understanding the individual learning processes of cognition and comprehension. Teachers also use their understanding of assessment and diagnostics to identify possible struggles in accessing learning (*The Glossary of Educational Reform*, n.d.). Based on a foundation of definitive learning goals associated with a more comprehensive learning progression, teachers stimulate and assess evidence of student knowledge and thinking using the results to perpetuate learning in a forward direction through adjusting or modifying teaching, planning, goals, strategies, or subsequent instructional measures. Teachers use the

results of formative assessments to form and shape their practice to meet the needs of the learner.

Teaching to a set of standards or targeted learning outcomes should focus on multiple assessments avoiding a single measure for determining learning. Multiple sources of classroom-based formative assessments are nearest to the daily instruction encountered by students (Wright & Miller, 2018). When the myriad of effective formative assessments grounded in the frontline of classroom instruction are properly used by teachers, the gap between the data accessed between quarterly benchmark assessments and common assessment and the yearly high-stakes summative achievement measures becomes narrower. The strategic alignment of expected learning outcomes, formative assessments, predictive benchmarks, and summative data creates a reliable process that is informative to the instructor's need to alter, intensify, or improve instruction (Curry et al., 2016).

Teachers at Southport Middle School, Port St. Luci FL, worked towards teaching the state standards unsure if their classroom assessments were a match. Determined for change, the administration, instructional coach, and teachers championed the creation of common assessments to align with state standards in each subject area. After staff developed training that focused on creating authentic assessments that focused on the standards, they found that, due to the time and intensity involved in analyzing resulting performance data experienced throughout the instructional year, the data were not being processed, analyzed, and used to inform instruction by the teachers. During the second year of progress, the district program manager overseeing formative instruction supported the school by suggesting and securing the use of an electronic assessment platform, unify (*Performance Matters*, n.d.), to organize and apply the common assessments. Based on teacher need, staff also conducted differentiated training and support for each department. The third year of implementation brought about observable

improvement as teachers began using the platform of aligned assessments that they had built. The workload and time in producing their own assessments reduced and teachers focused on developing action plans to formatively adapt their instruction to student needs. Though they ultimately used an electronic platform to apply common assessments, the collaborative process they engaged with in the beginning of their journey deeply rooted them in the processes of formative assessment and increased their knowledge and understanding. The systems state performance level increased from a C to a B as a result of their work (Manchester & Sexton, 2018).

The focus of teaching academic standards should hinge on quality classroom assessments that shape and define instruction. Formative assessment collects specific information that can improve teaching and student learning in the moment. In research conducted by Braund and DeLuca (2018), formative assessment was observed by teachers as a way to improve their support of students' metacognitive development through the provision of mutual feedback. Students are made aware of what they should know and be able to do at the onset of instruction. Clarity in expectations encourages dialogue among students and teachers become centered on learning. Teachers and students sharing in interpreting and using assessment expectations and result perpetuate a cycle of practice, learning, and feedback.

As schools and districts strive to meet the expectations of high stakes summative testing, collecting and interpreting student assessment data for instructional decision making has become a dominating presence. The gap between assessment that meaningfully informs daily classroom instruction and policy-driven high stakes summative assessment is vast. State-level tests are linearly too far removed from classroom instruction on the assessment calendar to adequately inform instruction (O'Conner, 2018). Teachers may not have access to the resulting data from

standardized testing until the following school year when most students in primary levels have been promoted to the next grade level and on to a new teacher. Standardized test results do not provide the current and specific instructional data needed to drive or alter daily instruction where the learning is ongoing and currently taking place (Curry et al., 2016).

A school culture that integrates formative assessment as a process to inform and craft instruction improves student learning. Students learn to accept feedback and teachers can impact learning through shaping and refining teaching to meet student needs based on targeted assessments and responses bridging the gap between their present and desired level of academic performance (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). Learning becomes personal. Teachers are explicitly conducting the groundwork for implementing the essential ongoing assessments. A professional teacher is responsible for gaining a deep understanding of standardized learning expectations and, through interpretation, planning, and instruction, produce specific learning for students. The challenge of shifting some of the ongoing classroom assessment to a district mandated benchmarking and common assessment platform that is synchronously applied across classrooms and schools requires planning and support from all levels of the educational system. To improve pedagogical practice, the full range of district and state leaders must demonstrate an ethic care and respect for teachers facing this challenge and step forward with the same inertia that is expected from teachers to support and cultivate a culture of meaningful assessment practice (Sach, 2013).

Responding to the emphasis on accountability in high-stakes testing, district leaders in a Midwest suburban public-school district made the effort to positively influence district instructional practice. Structural supports from district leaders such as common assessment frameworks across schools and grade levels, consistent data analysis approaches for resulting

data, and staffing to accommodate common collaborative planning were paramount in actualizing an approach to formative assessment implementation and decision-making that is deep in professional learning and seamless in delivery. Teachers become more reflective of their instructional practice and use of data to inform their teaching (Curry et al., 2016). Research concluded that self-determination increased as teachers established collegial relationships and a collective sense of competence and confidence prevailed from the effects of overcoming the challenges together. A sense of community developed through the collaborative use of data to include teachers, school leaders, students, and parents. "[Teachers] felt freedom to express concerns, and they worked collaboratively to creatively and effectively address student progress toward learning goals" (p. 97).

A systematic process of formative assessment is the foundation for quality grade reporting that emphasizes making grades equitable across students and provides teachers with an ethical approach to consider and inspect how they grade (Feldman, 2019). Formative measures to support standards-based grading accurately reflect a student's current ability in a continuous manner that promotes incentive to produce quality work product converse to traditional grade reporting that is finite and rewards quantity and completion of work (Tucker, 2018). A standards-based reporting system is driven by a series of specific formative assessments to address student progress and achievement on the learning targets to be communicated to students and parents in the grade card. Students are marked based on their ability to demonstrate learning capacity and depth of knowledge on the specific outcomes with clear age and grade level expectations (Cizek et al., 2019). "Standards based grading is the product of good formative assessment" (Heflebower & Marzano, n.d.).

While grading is the focal point of the standards-based report card, implementation

affects several dimensions of school reform and multiple layers of stakeholders (Knight & Cooper, 2019). A quality standards-based reporting system at the school level vertically aligns with student learning expectations of the district and state based on a set of common standards. Whether a state has adopted the Common Core Standards (Center, n.d.) or developed their own set of outcome-based standards, all are created and grounded in the expectations set forth through federal accountability with origins in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965). When the gap between the successive annual state accountability testing at the conclusion of each grade level is purposefully filled with intermittent benchmark and common assessments that are less formal and paced with the district's core learning progression, teachers can more readily apply the resulting data to a more formative practice. Effective testing platforms for benchmark and common assessments allow teachers to build assessments with as few as one to three questions that can be used as a bell-ringer, discussion starter, or simply a quick assessment to determine the individual level of learning in that moment per child. Standards-based grading creates a timeline of authentic reporting em embedded with meaningful assessment measures that follow and inform a student's learning along the pathway to grade level achievement (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Guskey, 2015; Marzano, 2010).

Standards-Based Report Card

At the core of all reform movements in education is the goal to improve student learning in the classroom. Clearly designed standards-based performance goals are the foundation that specifically define the learning expectations. Standards-based grading is a report card designed to amplify and support standards-based instruction and assessment with a more valid approach to conveying grade level learning expectations to parents. Letter grades that substantiate a cross selection of behavior, homework, quizzes, tests, and extra credit are replaced with descriptive

feedback that directly represents the student's present grade level mastery (Grindberg, n.d.). Current state standards for learning target rigorous goals and outcomes that prepare students for college and careers. Learning expectations increase in skill level, content knowledge, problems solving, and comprehension from entry into kindergarten through high school graduation (Guskey, 2015). Understanding the measure of student progress toward achievement of educational standards and learning targets demand an effective and informative assessment procedure that predicts and informs learning. While assessment provides feedback on learning to both help the teacher strengthen practice and the student to reflect on and improve learning (Hattie & Clarke, 2019), systematically communicating learning and performance evidence and reporting progress to students and parents in a non-traditional format that reliably communicates student achievement is a consideration that has been neglected by reformers throughout the years (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). The traditional grade reporting of individual student progress in light of the standards movement is in grave need of repair. Grading should be purposeful and provide valid and reliable information depicting present level of achievement and performance accountable directly to the expected standardized learning outcomes (Marzano, 2010).

The focus of grading should be to give clear feedback and support students in taking ownership of learning. A grading system that is personalized and learning expectations are outcomes-based provides students with feedback that inspires learning rather than a letter grade that elicits a finite mindset (Gates, n.d.). Standards-based report cards address the most important grade-level skills that students should learn providing specific information about what students have learned and where they need to improve. The basic difference in standards-based and traditional grading systems is that one measures what is learned and the other of what is earned which often causes students to prioritize grades over learning (Beatty, 2008). A student who

turns all assignments in a timely manner might pass the class yet not be able to demonstrate mastery of the standards. Where traditional grades provide an image of what a student has done in the past, standards-based grades offer evidence of current performance and ability. Meaningful feedback is presented to students enabling them to reflect and refine then move forward in learning (Hattie & Clarke, 2019).

Brookhart (Brookhart et al., 2016) reviewed research regarding teachers' perceptions about grading with 19 empirical studies that took place in the 1980s. When investigations into teachers grading practices and beliefs began to materialize, themes emerged from the comparisons. Teachers interpreted good grades as a reward for accomplished work. Many teachers use their perception of student circumstances and instructional experience in combination with their beliefs about accuracy to make professional judgments outside of relying on a grading calculation. Most teacher preparation programs have not provided adequate training in reliable and valid methods of assessment causing teachers to rely on how they were graded in school as a model resulting in unreliable grades (Peters et al., 2017).

Research conducted by Guskey et al. (2014) concluded that precision in grading is a challenge for teachers. Grading practices vary among teachers largely due to the lack of sufficient training in developing valid and reliable assessments. Wormeli (2015) contends that if it is essential that we grade students' work product, then standards-based grading is better than traditional grading as it is evidence-driven. To increase reliability in grading, he suggests that a robust well-designed rubric for scoring is mandatory to ensure an objective unbiased assessment. It must be undergirded by the teacher's intimacy with the subject. Teacher collaboration in aligning their assessments to a common scoring rubric will also ensure reliability across teachers.

If we must grade students' work, standards-based grading is better than traditional

> grading. To use rubrics and grading scales in an evidence-driven way, however, teachers must negotiate with each other about what evidence they will tolerate at each level of performance. (p.41)

Reeves (2001) maintains that the focus of academic standards should concentrate on classroom assessment instead of high-stakes summative assessments and that the impact of standards-based assessment for instruction has powerful influence in increasing student thinking, communication, and reasoning skills improving the likelihood of success on high-stakes tests. In their early work in defining purpose for what information should be communicated in a report card, Guskey and Bailey (2010) contend that teachers must not focus on the report card alone but must conceptualize what will be communicated in the report card by "determining the primary audience the information is intended for" and how the information will be used (p. 38).

Standards-based assessments measure student proficiency or mastery as it pertains directly to the standard. A clear understanding of each expected learning outcome supports the design and use of formative assessments. They are intentional and align directly with academic goals eliminating unnecessary instruction. When students engage in learning and instructional practice one way in the classroom and are tested in a dissimilar way in other environments, the measurement is invalid. Clear goals in the classroom focus on evidence to support student mastery of skills and standards, not points or percentages, which allows teachers to teach with precision and students to anticipate learning expectations and take ownership of personal achievement through specific feedback (Wormeli, 2012).

Hochbein and Pollio (2016) experienced unexpected results after making the transition to a standards-based reporting process. Conversations with parents about grades began to shift from assignment deadlines and extra credit to meaningful dialogue about student learning. The

authentic reporting of actual learning focused the parents on marks that inform learning and academic performance and away from the important but divergent behavioral competencies that are more reflective of their child's work habits, attentiveness, effort, and participation. Parents and students experience a reporting system that is not finite. Additional learning opportunities and reassessments are common in the standards-based grading process. Testing that is formative in nature guides the teacher's instructional planning. Results from standards-based grading, likewise, forces the instructor to analyze curriculum materials to ensure that activities, projects, and assessment are purposeful resulting in a comprehensive grading system that reliably measures learning outcomes and a valid defendable report card (Brookhart et al., 2016).

Standards-based grading supports focus on the learning goals of the class enabling teachers to design instruction with specificity through a cycle of instruction, assessment, monitoring, and planning. "When applied thoughtfully standard work can improve outcomes while creating freedom to meet individual needs when those needs vary from the majority" (Lemahieu, 2011, p. 2). With the focus on the content, skills, and standards that students must learn, the instructor can discern patterns that appear for groups or individuals based on the level of mastery the student has demonstrated on the concept. The teacher can then revise instruction specific to the desired learning outcome with a report card that provides a comprehensive overview of performance in skills, knowledge, and academics (O'Connor, 2017).

Considering the many reasons a district would decide to adopt a standards-based grading approach, Brookhart and Guskey (2019) encourage the study an examination of this "under-studied" research area to discover and justify reasons for implementation and predict improvements that could be realized with the change in educational practice. System reorganization to a standards-based report card is a multifaceted conceptual transformation. The

shift poses differentiated challenges that range from evaluating the system's needs and facilitating the design of the new practice to overseeing the organizational capacity and system support to undergo, affirm, and perpetuate the change. Because the current focus on outcomes-based student learning goals misaligns with the grade reporting processes that have been entrenched in our society for a century and repeatedly practiced in the classroom, a shift in teacher beliefs and mindset is integral to sustaining the change (Fullan & Quinn, 2016a; Guskey, 2015).

A well-defined and clearly understood purpose for reporting grades in individual classrooms and schools is the actionable piece in this stage of developing a meaningful marking process (Brookhart, 2011). Capacity building through involvement of stakeholders actively learning together is key to developing a skill base of knowledge across the system (Fullan, 2016a). A change in policy and practice should be agreed upon through a purpose statement that grounds teachers and other stakeholders in a robust, reliable, deliberate, and defendable description of the projected grade reporting reform (Guskey, 2015). Guskey and Bailey (2010) suggest that the purpose statement for a district's standards-based report card be printed in a statement on the actual grade card and provides the following example:

> The purpose of this report card is to describe the students' learning progress to their parents and others, based on our school's learning expectation for each grade level. It is intended to inform parents about learning successes and to guide improvements when needed. (p. 35)

Student grade level learning performance is defined through the results of multiple sources of assessment information. Through correlation of the specifically aligned assessments with a well-developed scoring rubric, teachers are guided along a performance expectation continuum to

determine a performance level ranging from non-mastery to mastery to ascertain if the student is learning age and grade appropriately as compared to typical peers. The various assessments and scoring rubric, when aligned with standards-based learning outcomes provide teachers with the opportunity to report grades that are reliable when the process is implemented with fidelity across teachers and schools. The standards-based report card, by design, is a tool that must be used in accordance with the expectations of district policy. The practice of implementing it effectively is contingent on teachers, school leaders, district leaders, students, and parents working collaboratively to ensure that it is practiced faithfully and reliably over time (Fullan, 2016b; Fullan et al., 2017; Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019).

Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity begins with a collective sense of purpose. Successful capacity building is multidimensional characterized by an organization's ability to transform and continuously adapt and grow. The collective human quality of values, beliefs, attitude, and behavior is as important in defining the capacity of an organization as is the physical and contextual dimensions (Quinn & Fullan, 2017). The United Nations Development Program (2015) define capacity building in terms of the organization's functionality and outcomes such as the ability to solve problems and achieve objectives. In the public sector of service, this means targeting different levels for development and growth to ensure individual, institutional, and societal growth. Capacity building is more than the possession of the materials, tools, and equipment used to build, grow, or apply the knowledge of a system proven to effect success elsewhere. With respect to this study, capacity is recognized as effective "change processes that shape and reshape good ideas, as they build capacity and ownership among participants" creating seamless relationships between individuals at the district and school level where boundaries once

existed (Fullan, 2016a, p. 41).

The desired goal of the educational system is for all children to have access to learning and achievement. Capacity building occurs when all stakeholders expand their knowledge and skills to collaboratively support students in meeting learning expectations. Attitudes of individuals in the group directly affect the performance of the organization. Culture and communication are central in shaping organizational performance. At the heart of school organizations are the workings of individuals who build and maintain a connected team that constantly moves forward in effecting specific growth and change in the direction of their mission (Cox et al., 2018).

Moving forward means that the school and system level organizational members do not isolate growth to individualized or team professional development opportunities but engage themselves in a transformative deep learning process that creates a sense of collective understanding and community (Buechner et al., 2020). Marishane (2020) conceptualizes that schools operate in the "real world" and are influenced by a multitude internal and external experiences that define and shape the environment. A school is a "microcosm" of the world and subject to continuous change. Everyday problems will arise that necessitate solutions. Leading successful organizational problem solving and developing processes that support continuous and sustainable change requires not only identifying the obstacle but understanding their root causes, how they impact the future operation and performance of the school. A leader with "contextual intelligence" recognizes that humans are limited to managing problems and creating solutions based on their current level of knowledge and understanding (Khanna, 2015). Building school capacity and facilitating educational reform or redesign calls for teachers and leaders to move beyond their present way of thinking about their school and system, recognize that limited

knowledge impedes growth, and embrace new learning that leads to deeper understanding of the new processes that will permeate their school environment (Marishane, 2020).

The dimensions of capacity building are rooted in the connections that form from learning together. The entire system of district and school leaders must adjust personal and group performance expectations to guarantee and entirely support instructional leadership and high-quality teaching that results in deep learning. These experiences are difficult to define, place on a rubric, or assess in a diagnostic tool (Cox et al., 2018). Yet, the inertia of the continuous process of a system's collective engagement in deep learning and forward motion with goals oriented toward the right drivers creates a culture of coherence and high level of professional capacity (Buechner et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Quinn & Fullan, 2017).

Dimensions of Change

Throughout history educational reform has experienced processes that have worked and others that have not. The missing ingredient is the human understanding of *change knowledge* (Fullan et al., 2009). Change knowledge is the deep comprehension of the theory and dynamics of change. Understanding actionable change requires a consciousness of how the theories directly involve school or district culture. It is a vital determinant in leadership dynamics that produces successful reform (Fullan, 2016a; Quinn & Fullan, 2017). Cohesive partnerships experiencing a common purpose develop shared knowledge and aspirations (Fullan & Quinn, 2016a). Good leaders build horizontal and vertical capacity across their organization. Great leaders shift their practice to become part of the learning partnership along with their organization fostering the emergence of a collective directional vision (Fullan et al., 2009). Change must be shaped, confirmed, and embraced by individuals. Teachers must work together attitudinally and physically to increase their knowledge of concepts, practice, and ideas while

continuously revising strategies (Fullan, 2016a).

When district and school administrators are faced with multiple outside influences forcing change, pressures at the school level become heavy and teachers overburdened. Often, the greatest challenge in orchestrating a solution is considering the environment and culture then creating an approach that ties and commits humans to one another (Demerath, 2018). Previous research provides valuable insight on strategies to engage teachers in collaborative educational processes to generate procedural changes. Top-down directives and district led trainings often fail when leaders are not committed to providing follow-up strategies to ensure that the new practice is replicated. Merely the expectation for implementation and faithful practice is not an assurance that the change will occur. Solutions for deeply engaged mutually adaptive alterations in mindset and beliefs to sustain the change are behavioral and psychosocial in nature (Berger, 2000; Fullan, 2016b).

Organizations may apply various strategies from the many change model theories that exist as an antecedent to implementing a new policy or practice. Theories of change can provide specific strategies to ensure the new process is realized and successful but leaders must consistently communicate the direction and reason for the change (Harris, 2019). Vaca & Dhillon (2018) suggest that an adopted mission or vision statement may not even be recognized or remembered by member of an organization. A quality theory of change incorporates a valuable component for organizational management that supports intervention at each stage. In their study of various change models, while all were characterized by different numbers and types of descriptors and components, the essential elements common to all were:

a. The Design Stage that provides internal coherence evidenced by networked strategies and activities that link to the expected outcome.

b. The Implementation and Monitoring stage whereby timely monitoring is implemented after the implementation. The data is used to make meaningful adjustments in the process.

c. The Evaluation Stage provides vital information as to whether the outcomes were achieved. (pp. 68-69)

Designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating are dominating change factors in business models as well as the greater federal and state education model. These stages are important but do not address the relationship between individuals and lack social-behavioral aspect of change so important to creating a sense of community and a culture of learning and growth. Fullan's (2016b) model for change in education has evolved and improved over his years of practice and merited expertise in the field of education. He presents three core premises as Dimensions of Change which are simple but expand with breadth and depth across multiple factors and processes that are mutual to school organizations in setting and achieving goals in the practice of education:

1. Introduces new resources to the educational process for implementation such as curriculum, applications, and processes which will require innovation and cultural changes as the structures are embedded and alter the current practice in the organization.

2. Requires actional change in behavior and practice.

3. Mobilizes teachers and leaders in making sense and purpose for the change and collectively resolving the challenges of seamlessly, effectively, and sustainably implementing the targeted goal. (p. 27)

The initial stage is the change in practice "whereby *new resources* such as curriculum, applications, and processes are introduced to the school culture" through one or more external

drivers. The change in this study included the construction and design of a quality grade reporting system to align with state standards being taught in the classroom. Engagement in deep and shared learning of best researched practices for developing and implementing a standards-based reporting system is crucial for all district and school level leaders and teachers during this stage (p. 27).

The second dimension is the change in practice that requires actional behavior with the introduction of the practice or use of the *new teaching*. This phase involves individuals and groups engaging in capacity building with a focus on results. They put shared ideas into place through a process of directly shifting over to the new practice (Fullan & Quinn, 2016b). Leading change calls for individuals who can define effective strategies for developing an infrastructure of teaching and learning that engages the whole group in developing a deep understanding of the work that is to be done. Change leadership shapes culture through intentional relationship building and shared learning processes that lead to the successful outcome driven behavioral changes for all members of the group. Fullan (2016a) refers to this as creating "cultures that enable connections which use the group to change the group" (p. 544).

The final stage represents the change in practice that sustains the transformation. The *alteration of beliefs* and mindset manifests from the collaborative process of forming relationships and strong connections molded through collectively facilitating the change process. The new practice remains constant and perpetually improves through individual and group feedback, accountability to self and others, and a process of a continuous deepening of their practice to sustain the change. Collaborative work that is connected to deep learning and inquiry that involves a cycle of transparent planning, acting, reflecting, and assessing is critical to building capacity for lasting change (Fullan & Quinn, 2016a; Hargreave & Fullan, 2012;

Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015).

District Leadership

Teacher instruction directly influences student learning which is the fundamental goal of education. Learning goals for students at the school level are grounded in meeting the expectations of a nationally and state approved common set of outcome-based core standards. Accountability is assessed through a federally mandated and state designed system of achievement tests. While securing accountability using the right drivers is actionable at the classroom level, filtering and determining external drivers comes from the higher authority at the systemwide district level. Influencing improvement and change in multiple schools requires, not only horizontal teamwork, but vertical support from district leaders. Leadership transparency and non-judgmental attitudes remove fear and frees individuals at all levels to learn and try new things. Mutual adaptation to new processes through collaboration in a community of educators with a moral imperative breeds a commitment from all to raise the bar (Bonner et al., 2018; Fullan, 2017; Fullan & Quinn, 2016b; Klinger et al., 2012; Wieczorek & Lear, 2018).

Coherence is "the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work" (Quinn & Fullan, 2017a, p.1). To cultivate a culture of coherence, Fullan and Quinn (2017a) suggest a four-pronged approach with an emphasis on leadership at the center. First, teachers and leaders must focus direction by setting clear strategic goals. "*Cultivating collaborative cultures"* means that growth is dependent on capacity building where leaders at the district and school support learning at all levels, intentionally coordinating and organizing the work. "*Clear learning goals"* targeted at instructional precision focused on new knowledge shapes and enforces the change in a purposeful sustainable direction. Finally, "*securing accountability"* means using the right external drivers to support actions, thus developing

internal transparency, expectations, and ownership (p. 12).

Community members tend to believe that schools play the largest role in what districts do because they have direct contact with teachers, administrators, and school staff. Although district level leaders are not in the forefront or as visible to the public as school employees, their work drives the improvement of learning for students and the imminent course for schools in their system (Leithwood & Mccullough, 2016). Research was conducted by Leithwood and Mccullough (2016) to identify district level leadership characteristics common to high performing school systems. Using multiple sources of evidence, districts experiencing significant growth in student achievement were determined as high performers. Changes in the district performance levels of third, sixth, ninth, and tenth grade language and math scores over a five-year period combined with a qualitative measure of surveying district leaders and principals across 72 districts were used as data to determine the nine practices of strong district leaders which included the following dimensions:

1. Establish broadly shared mission, vision and goals.
2. Provide coherent instructional guidance.
3. Build district and school staffs' capacities and commitments to seek out and use multiple sources of evidence to inform decisions.
4. Create learning-oriented organizational improvement processes.
5. Provide job-embedded professional development.
6. Use a comprehensive performance management system for school and district leadership development.
7. Advocate for and support a policy governance approach to board of trustee practice.
8. Nurture productive working relationships with staff and stakeholders. (p. 29)

Results of the research were used to develop the "Strong Districts Initiative" which is a leadership framework designed to introduce the research to system leaders and increase the number of high-performing districts (Leithwood & Mccullough, 2016, p. 27).

Research conducted by Honig and Rainey (2015) found that when central office staff coordinate, plan, and execute system reform to improve performance alignment, they often miss the mark. District offices are in need of reform. The investigation involved 9 districts varying in size and demographic and 17 central office teams experiencing direct partnerships for support as they reformed their practice through performance alignment. The disagreement between the data and resources at the larger district level and what is needed at the school level can compromise efforts to improve. They determined that for schools and students to realize deeper learning, central office reformation and redesign must be realized. Lack of district departments coming together in a coordinated effort to support teaching and learning can hinder the balance of outcomes at the school level and may not align to the specific professional learning needs of the teachers. System-scale projected planning and improvement that does not integrate school level data to projected needs could also cause other areas of learning to suffer or decline. "District leaders need to address the entire central office's performance, asking themselves: What would the office look like if it were truly designed to support instructional leadership, high-quality teaching, and -ultimately-deeper learning?" (p.9).

Three priorities for district office redesign were realized from this study:

1. Develop definitions of principal instructional leadership and high-quality teaching focused on goals with a manageable number of elements characterized by relationship to students.
2. Ensure that district level supervisors receive a trained level of expertise to support

instructional leadership and are committed to a defined process for supporting principal's as instructional leaders.

3.All district staff members concentrate time and resources to support schools in pursuit of deeper learning ensuring that all their work is related to quality teaching and student learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

Durand et al. (2016) researched how district offices and school leaders attempted to "craft coherence and facilitate organizational learning and improvement" in a multiple case study through an investigation of district leaders' strategies in facilitating and supporting elementary teachers through their implementation of the state mandated CCSS (p. 45). The larger research design was to study policy implementation developed in New York school districts after they received funding from the U.S. Race to the Top (RTTT) (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) competitive K-12 grant. The RTTT is a comprehensive educational reform initiative passed in 2009 designed to reward State programs that meet stringent federal guidelines. General qualifying attributes include:

> States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas can qualify for the funding:
>
> - Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy;
> - Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction;

- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- Turning around our lowest-achieving schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p.2)

The Regents Reform Agenda (EngageNY, 2015) focused on three reform policies to improve a school's instructional core: Common Core State Standards (CCSS), standards-based principal and teacher evaluation systems, and data driven instruction. Important to this research, is the branch of the study targeted at revealing learning focused and adaptive qualities in district leaders. When schools that achieved above predicted outcomes on state assessments were compared to typical performers, findings indicated that district leaders in the high achieving schools engaged in proactive adaptive leadership. District leaders anticipated the change and focused on building relationships with school principals resulting in school leaders championing implementation. Creating a system-wide framework of expectations made familiar to all stakeholders through communications with familiar terminology for implementation of policy set the high achieving schools apart (Durand et al., 2016).

Organizations develop capacity through responding to internal or external pressures. When a district prioritizes goals to support teaching and improve learning, it is imperative that directors, supervisors, and other district staff bridge the gap to improvement at the school level to include all stakeholders in generating a vision for improvement (Wieczorek & Lear, 2018). District leaders should be provided with clear roles, responsibilities, and training that aligns their work with student performance learning and provided with the staffing to accommodate interactive engagement with schools (Meyers & Sadler, 2018). Further, central office leadership personnel should engage with school staff and campuses to redesign the organizational

environment to create a seamless community and culture of learning and growth. It is their duty to develop a sense of contextual intelligence that enables them to understand the complexities of the culture and community of the schools they serve enabling them to identify root causes of problems and collaborate with school staff to realize and apply specific environmentally appropriate solutions to ensure transformative learning (Buechner et al., 2020).

Effective Change in Practice

The standards-based education movement enacted into law under the Clinton administration with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary (ESEA) and pushed forward with No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) under the Bush administration has enforce reform for over 20 years. The law mandated states set "challenging and rigorous" content standards for all students and to create assessments aligned to the standards to measures student achievement and growth (Shepard et al., 2009). Standards-based reform remains the central and guiding policy enforcing educational changes in practice (Colbert et al., 2012). "Movements create change, but as the world that spawned them keeps changing, every moment becomes obsolete" (Froehle, 2020, p. 2). Federal policies with support of state governors have continuously added to their definition of accountability resulting in increased reform and change for districts and schools. Standards-based reform cannot realize its greatest goal, improving student performance, unless it leads to more effective educational practice (Hamilton et al., 2018; Wexler, 2019). District and school leaders must assimilate the outcomes expected from a higher level of authority and policy to plan, develop, design, and implement change despite the centralized nature of power. Fullan (2016a) advises that infrastructures support new processes, but without deep learning and shared meaning, initiatives fail to impact the lack of internal accountability (p. 230). Change in education means more than just putting policy into place.

Lasting fundamental change demands that teachers and leaders work together with shared purpose to put ideas into practice altering the culture of classrooms, schools, districts, states, and the nation. Teachers must develop relevant knowledge grounded in new teaching and learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

States, districts, and schools are challenged to meet the increased demands of determining what works best in how to grade and report student learning. With consideration to the current wide-scale policies and politics involved with the implementation of educational change, evolving to a standards-based design for grading demands a multidimensional approach that steers away from the individual teacher confined to grading in her classroom. Fullan (2016) poses that large-scale reform involves shared meaning that evokes both social and individual change that requires teachers to work together in planning, observing, and revising practice over time. "Physical and attitudinal" change must develop continuously to not only impact curricular materials and teaching approaches but transform attitude, mindset, and beliefs in those charged with sustaining the new practice (p. 11).

High performing districts and schools engage in results driven capacity building with purpose and direction. Movement toward standards-based instruction drives increased rigor and accountability in classroom assessment practices. Quality assessments used to determine and project student achievement align directly to specific learning expectations. The development and design of a quality grade reporting system requires that a target audience be determined and the specific information to be communicated defined (Guskey, 2015; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; O'Connor, 2017; Swan et al., 2014). To avoid the misconception among teachers and parents that standards-based reporting is just another change that will fade in time, planning and communication should be intentional and consistent. The reporting of student progress should be

grounded in the learning goals and expected outcomes for school organizations using a common set of standards for accountability (Connor, 2012). The continuous engagement of district leadership, school principals, and teachers working together both physically and behaviorally through planning and analyzing one another's practice then seeking to revise strategies based on those findings can produce sustainable change. Intensive action constant over time that focuses on key details for organizational change rather than a reactive policy-driven approach elicits natural reform that changes the culture of classrooms, schools, and districts for a more long-term effect (Fullan, 2016a; Fullan et al., 2017).

Foundational to an effective standards-based grading process are clear linkages between standards, assessments, and grade reporting resulting in improvement in learning for all students. Muñoz and Guskey (2015) suggest that the initial step in this process is to ensure that grades accurately reflect the achievement of student learning objectives. To make grades more meaningful, both the purpose and format of the design are important to development. When a consistent set of learning expectations are assigned to a grade level, teachers can provide a more accurate representation of student achievement that is reliable across educators and classrooms (Feldman, 2018). Most states have common standards for student learning and outcomes (Gamson et al., 2015). At present, all except for 4 states have adopted both English language arts and math Common Core State Standards. Minnesota is the only state to have adopted ELA standards and not math. Few states have developed a well-aligned standards-based reporting instrument (*ASCD*, n.d.).

Summary

The history of grading in the United States is deeply ingrained in the culture of education and our nations society. As global competitiveness for student performance has evolved, the A-F

and 4.0 grading systems, with origins in early American society, are proving unreliable in the world of high-stakes accountability standards-based testing. The standards movement in education calls for a redefined method of assessing and reporting achievement when compared to the traditional grading system. Traditional grading often lacks interrater reliability across teachers due to non-academic factors being calculated into the final grade and the subjective nature of the teachers developing their own measurement criteria (Guskey, 2015). As districts and schools attempt to close the assessment feedback gap between the annually administered rigorous state mandated summative tests with benchmark, common, and formative assessment, a more sensible and aligned means of reporting student progress has emerged, the standards-based report card.

Formative assessments inform instructional practice and provide meaningful feedback to teachers as they modify, adjust, and support student learning (Marzano, 2010). A standards-based grade card strategically aligns with the series of formative assessments that high quality teachers regularly use to gain understanding of student abilities as they linearly teach along their grade level learning progression of expected outcomes. Information gleaned from this process, when constructed to correlate with a grade reporting system for students and parents, provides explicit detailed record of learning and achievement. Targeted areas for reporting align with the expected pacing of instruction and matching formative assessments are scored with a rubric demonstrating if a child is above, at, below, or significantly below grade level. Results support the teacher, child, and parent in identifying gaps in learning (O'Connor, 2018).

The work taking place in districts and schools to transform the reporting of student progress must align with learning expectations (Killion & Harrison, 2016). Collective transformation and reform in education achieved by all teachers, school leaders, and district staff,

with passion and purpose, gives teaching its vibrancy. The human connection factor, often overlooked in standards statements and improvement plans, plays a defining role in implementing sustainable change that yields positive outcomes for students (Buechner et al., 2020). Teachers and administrators at the school level to leaders at the district level must break down the walls of classroom isolation and convert teaching to a collaborative and collegial profession.

It is the duty of district and school leaders who are empowering reform to recognize that a change in pedagogical practice must clearly align across classrooms, schools, and district. The change in practice must be facilitated with a collaborative process that builds relationships characterized by deep learning and collegial support (Fullan & Quinn, 2016b). District leadership roles in supporting transformational processes for change should be clearly defined and involve a commitment to engaging with teachers and school leaders as an interconnected part of the school organization (Honig & Rainey, 2015). The actional behavior required to implement the change must be practiced and supported at all levels creating a culture of coherence and professional growth. District sustainability and maintenance of the change should continuously evolve as future growth and policy reform will continuously affect transformational processes. As the new practice is faithfully implemented with fidelity, mindset and beliefs will convert as stakeholders mutually adapt to the change instilling a commitment to improving student learning exemplified by a sense of connectedness through shared purpose and seamless relationship boundaries between change members across all levels of the system (Fullan, 2017; Fullan et al., 2017; Fullan & Quinn, 2016a; Hargreave & Fullan, 2012).

Chapter 3. Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research methodology for this phenomenological study regarding elementary educator perceptions of the change process that occurred while implementing the transition from a traditional grade reporting method to a standards-based system. This study offered opportunity for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of kindergarten through second grade level teachers as they participated in a four-year journey to collaboratively develop then implement a system-wide standards-based report card designed for primary level students. The applicability of the phenomenological tradition for this study is framed in this chapter. The research plan, including site selection, population sample, data collection strategies, data analysis strategies, quality of assessment, and ethical concerns, are principal components to this chapter.

Research Questions

The primary question under investigation was: What are educator perceptions of the organizational change that occurred during the transition from the implementation of a traditional A-F report card to a standards-based grading system? Additional guiding research questions include:

1. What leadership attributes influenced the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of the change?
2. In what ways did the change-system members contribute to the design and implementation of the change (new grade reporting system)?
3. What factors facilitated the change process?
4. What factors inhibited the change process?
5. What types of processes engaged the entire change-system members in deeper and wider

professional learning?

6. How were mindsets and beliefs altered toward the commitment for growth and change?

Research Design

A qualitative approach is appropriate when the research is intended to explain the perception of a person's experience. Phenomenological research attempts to construct the meaning of a concept or reality by seeking to understand perspectives and beliefs of the subjects involved. Research data are derived through the investigator's meaningful engagement in collecting data that reflects the study participants' understanding of their lived experiences in social and concrete situations (Deterding & Waters, 2018; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). The researcher aspired to conceptualize the related experiences from the teachers in this study to construct meaning and purpose applicable to her professional field which requires her to continuously lead and support members of her faculty and staff through transformational processes in response to the internally and externally driven forces for educational change that affect her school organization.

The phenomenological approach was applied to this study through the examination of the reality of teachers who worked collaboratively with district leaders to adapt to the internal changes in a school district's system-wide grading practice externally driven by the larger standards-based movement. Alteration in behavioral practice and beliefs of the teachers as they progressed through the stages of designing, developing, and implementing the new grading instrument was investigated. The national shifts in our educational programs incited by the standards movement call for teachers to be grounded in outcomes-based instruction characterized by specific targets for learning and assessments that evidence student achievement and growth (Peters et al., 2017). The system-wide standards-based grade card design, development, and

implementation initiative in a school district located in the eastern region of Tennessee was executed by leadership representatives at the central office level department of elementary education. Their perceptions of the change process experienced served as the foundation for this research.

Through the lens of the cohort of teachers who collaboratively designed, constructed, and currently use the report card, the researcher conceptualized the findings of the research as compared to Fullan's (2016) multidimensional "change in practice" model (p.28). His work undergirded this research by providing a comparative linear progressive foundation associated with the range of teacher experiences throughout the district and school level change process. The first dimension of the research related to the human reaction to change as applied to the initiation of the new application and process of utilizing the standards-based report card. The next phase involved seeking to understand perceptions of teachers as they encountered changes in professional behaviors and adjusted to the sustained use of the reporting system as they transitioned to using the new grading protocol. The final phase connected to the alteration of teacher beliefs and mindset that evolved as teachers "mutually adapted" and "faithfully practiced" the new process (Fullan, 2016b, p. 28).

The qualitative inquiry method for this study involved a series of questions to the cohorts of teachers being studied. Response data were analyzed to determine the meaning, structure, and essence of their shared experience (Patton, 2015). The researcher sought to analyze connections in teacher responses to find common threads in their behavior and beliefs associated to the shift away from traditional grading, which emphasizes grades over learning, to the reality of implementing the new formative grade reporting system that measures learned standards-based outcomes (Brookhart et al., 2016). The basis of the framework for inquiry developed by the

researcher was foundational to eliciting the resulting data that describes the lived experiences of the teacher cohort participants in relation to initiating, implementing, and acclimating to the organizational change as applied to the conceptual framework of this study. Through the qualitative inquiry process, the researcher sought to:

1. Realize the successes and challenges involved with a collaborative reform process between district leaders, and teacher cohort members in designing, creating, and implementing a standards-based reporting system for elementary-age students (kindergarten through second-grade).

2. Understand the dimensions of the system-change that occurred with the implementation and application of a new process, the standards-based reporting system, that required a change in practice and actionable behavior supported by a mutually adaptive process.

3. Realize how district leaders can institute actionable improvement through the design, development, implementation, and sustainability of meaningful change that is grounded in the refining processes of collaborative learning, shared practice, and relationship building. From the district to the classroom level, promising improvement occurs when all change members mutually adapt to the transformation (Fullan, 2016b; Fullan et al., 2017; Quinn & Fullan, 2017).

Site Selection

The site selection included schools in the district serving primary level grades where the transition to a standards-based grading system occurred. There are 12 schools that met these criteria. Each school in the district initiated and engaged in site-based strategies to implement the standards-based report card created by the district leaders and grade level teacher cohort

members. Teacher cohort representatives per grade level in kindergarten through second grade at each school site were selected on the recommendation of the school principal. The number of teacher cohort members representing each school was based on student population size. Sampling was restricted to schools with district cohort members who continue to be employed at the school they represented during the development and delivery of the current standards-based reporting system. See Table 3 for specific grade levels, student population, and Title I status per district school:

Table 3

Eastern Region of Tennessee School System Demographic

School	Grade Levels	Student Population	Title I School Status
Elementary School A	K-6th	430	No
Elementary School B	K-6th	635	Yes
Elementary School C	K-8th	465	Yes
Elementary School D	PreK-8th	156	Yes
Elementary School E	K-8th	524	Yes
Primary School A	K-3rd	524	Yes
Elementary School F	K-6th	800	Yes
Elementary School G	PreK-4th	705	Yes
Elementary School H	K-6th	321	No
Primary School B	PreK-2nd	740	Yes

Table 3-Continued

School	Grade Levels	Student Population	Title I School Status
	K-3rd	709	No
Primary School C			
Elementary School I	K-6th	180	Yes

Eastern Region of Tennessee School System Demographic

Population and Sample

A distinctive feature of inquiry-based social research is that subjects with consciousness and agency are studied through the production of expressing and sharing their accounts with the phenomena of study, thereby generating the knowledge targeted in the interview. The participants must have a vested experience with the phenomenon (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). To ensure the integrity of the sample population selection process, teacher cohort subjects must have been continuously involved in the district kindergarten through second-grade development and implementation process from inception to completion and have attended 90% of the district scheduled planning meetings. All phases of the district grading method have currently been completed creating a sample selection base for the research of 54 grade level cohort teachers across kindergarten through second-grade. Both district cohort and non-cohort teachers were required to institute the standards-based report card to include 59.8 kindergarten and 153.5 elementary level general education teachers (National Center for Educational Statistics Definitions and Data, 2019).

Role of Researcher

The researcher became involved with the district shift to the standards-based report card at the mid-year point during the 2017-2018 school year when she transferred from a district level administrative position to fill an interim principal position. The kindergarten cohort teachers who represented this school had been selected by her predecessor and had completed the midpoint of the initial yearlong design phase. Kindergarten began utilizing the standards-based report card the following school year. The researcher played a role in the selection of teacher cohort members beginning with the two first-grade teachers who represented this school on the district

team when her principalship was made permanent. Data collected was targeted strictly from the district selected teacher cohort members and used to compare experiences as the study examined the effects of the district-initiated change process and not the subsequent generalized training for all school level teachers by district leadership and teacher cohort members.

The teacher research subjects were selected from the 54 members of the district level standards-based grading cohort. Consideration to a population sample from across grade levels to ensure a representative sample from all three phases of implementation was a priority. The possible population for sampling is represented in Table 4:

Table 4

District Cohort Representatives Per School and Grade Level

School	Kindergarten Teacher Cohort Representative(s)	First Grade Teacher Cohort Representative(s)	Second Grade Teacher Cohort Representative(s)
Elementary School A	1	1	1
Elementary School B	2	1	1
Elementary School C	1	1	1
Elementary School D	1	1	1
Elementary School E	2	2	2

Table 4-Continued

School	Kindergarten Teacher Cohort Representative(s)	First Grade Teacher Cohort Representative(s)	Second Grade Teacher Cohort Representative(s)
Primary School A	2	2	2
Elementary School F	1	1	1
Elementary School G	2	2	2
Elementary School H	1	1	1
Primary School B	2	4	2
Primary School C	2	2	2
Elementary School I	1	1	1
Total	18	19	17

Data Collection Strategies

Permission to conduct research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of East Tennessee State University and Dr. Pamela Scott, the chair of the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis department. Participants were informed of the role of the researcher, the data collection process, and the framework for interviewing. After gaining written and verbal consent from appropriate district authorities, building level administrators, and research participants, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews based on the research questions provided and collected data from each cohort teacher selected. The researcher developed a script to guide the interviews and used a protocol that was conversational and elicited study related information. Interview questions began with introductory questions that were easy with narrative descriptions to provide participants the opportunity to acclimate to describing experiences then progressed to transitional questions that shifted the interview to key questions while maintaining the conversational interview tone (Patton, 2015). Closing questions provided the participant the chance to relate experiences and ideas that may not have been granted during the interview. As theory or phenomenon emerged from the data, some interview questions were modified or added based on feedback to systemize the inquiry protocol to gain further information relative to the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Audio recordings of interview dialogue were transcribed verbatim for data analysis. A folder of field notes was maintained to allow documentation of observations that were not adequately captured through audio-recording, such as environmental contexts, behaviors, and non-verbal communication (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Data Analysis Strategies

The transcripts from the documented interview responses were reviewed and a line-by-line analysis conducted to identify relevant words, phrases, sentences, or sections through coding for first impressions. Deeper coding for actions, activities, concepts, processes, or opinions

followed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The primary purpose of the data analysis was to focus on demonstrating the teacher participants' perceptions of change. The researcher examined specific patterns in the data relevant to her research to conceptualize theories by connecting the late stages of the data analysis to previous research on educational change (Deterding & Waters, 2018).

Sampling subjects across district schools for the study allowed the researcher to conduct a comparison coding to determine areas of agreement and divergence, increasing the validity of the research data and generalizability of the findings. The data were organized through a systematic process of clustering and synthesizing results, then compiling and comparing evolving themes in the context of the overarching conceptual framework of her research. Final analysis of saturated data was diagrammed to depict subsequent relationships to graphically organize the evidence (Green, 2014) as shown in Figure 2.

Assessment of Quality and Rigor

A preformulated interview protocol designed by the researcher based on the research question in this chapter was used as tool to guide the interview process and elicit responses from participants. Desired responses applied to the educational change that occurred with the introduction of new resources, engagement in new teaching behaviors, and the resulting alteration of beliefs. Participants responses to interview questions were coded to determine unifying concepts or themes defined by cross-patterns of individual perceptions of the change experienced (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The researcher further established credibility in the findings through correlating the results from the participant interviews with the results of interviews with elementary level principals who are implementing the standards-based reporting

system. A summary of the transcript and findings was shared with each research participant for review and all were provided with the opportunity to edit or complement the existing documentation (Carlson, 2010).

The foundational research of Fullan's (2016) work provided the framework to anchor findings in this study and substantiate the chance of application and replication in other areas of research where educational change has been studied. To ensure transferability, the researcher's questions applied directly to his research conventions. Teacher subjects in this study and the regulations set in place that constituted change had similar characteristics and qualifications to his larger body of research. Within Fullan's (2016) strict framework for improving educational practice in the dimensions of new resources, behavioral practice and altered beliefs and the researcher's quality coding of the results, readers should naturally realize similarities in this study (p. 28).

The protocol for interviewing, collecting data, and analyzing results were documented with rationale for coding and merging explained anecdotally throughout the evidence by the researcher. This technique was utilized to provide confidence that the findings were shaped through the words and narratives of the participants. The researcher consistently engaged in behaviors of self-reference and reflection on her professional background knowledge and consciously endeavored to refrain from allowing her state of mind to influence the results. Evidence in the form of field note journaling of the interview dialogue was maintained to support the confidence of the findings.

Ethical Considerations/Role of the Researcher

Cohort teacher interview subjects were assured that every attempt would be made to

protect confidentiality in their reporting through prior written and verbally informed notice. Expressions of positive or negative statements were worded in the presentation of this research in such a way that guarded the anonymity of the subjects. Questions directly addressed the successes and challenges of the processes experienced during the transition to standards-based grading. Negative statements expressed toward individuals unrelated to the study, either laterally toward cohort members or vertically toward those in a leadership role, were redirected to the process being researched (Patton, 2015).

The investigations of this study did not involve direct contact with the provision of services to children or underage subjects. The standards-based report card is strictly a documentation of a student's present level of educational performance and progress with explicit achievement expectations per grade level. This correspondence between teacher, parent, and child occurs intermittently throughout an instructional year. Direct information from parents or children associated with this study will not be accessed. The category of person, i.e., student, parent, or guardian, may have been used in the research but the names of the individuals were not recorded during data collection and will remain confidential and protected.

Chapter Summary

This study employed a phenomenological research design to analyze elementary educator perceptions of the organizational change experienced in the shift from traditional grading to a standards-based system. Teacher subjects were a part of the district level teacher cohort involved in the design, development, and implementation of the standards-based report card and reporting process currently in use in a school district in the eastern region of Tennessee. It was designed to collect data from the district cohort teachers to determine their perceptions of the change associated with the shift from traditional to standards-based report cards from the creation and

introduction of new material and grading methodology to full implementation.

The evidence was used to determine the successes and challenges involved with designing and creating the standards-based report card as a district team from the initial change in practice through the design, creation, and implementation phases as compared to Fullan's "Change Model" (Fullan, 2016b, p. 28). The results of this study demonstrated overall teacher perceptions of the change in policy and practice that occurred with the implementation of the standards-based grading system for kindergarten through second grade students. The research outlined in this chapter was implemented with fidelity and produced research findings instrumental for educationists who desire to lead collaborative teams through effective change processes.

Chapter 4. Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine elementary educator perceptions of the organizational change experienced in the shift from traditional grading to a standards-based system. The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in research on educational change and practice associated with district and school level improvement. The thematic purpose for this study was established through the review of literature and foundational body of research involved with educational transformation and system change. The objective of this study was to:

1. Realize the successes and challenges involved with a collaborative reform process between district leaders, and teacher cohort members in designing, creating, and implementing a standards-based reporting system for elementary-age students (kindergarten through second-grade).
2. Understand the dimensions of the system-change that occurred with the implementation and application of a new process, the standards-based reporting system, that required a change in practice and actionable behavior supported by a mutually adaptive process.
3. Realize how district leaders can institute actionable improvement through the design, development, implementation, and sustainability of meaningful change that is grounded in the refining processes of collaborative learning, shared practice, and relationship building. From the district to the classroom level, promising improvement occurs when all change members mutually adapt to the transformation (Fullan, 2016b; Fullan et al., 2017; Quinn & Fullan, 2017).

This chapter is organized to relate the resulting data from this phenomenological qualitative research study. Data were collected from district cohort teachers and elementary level

administrators through a process of qualitative inquiry. Questions were designed to elicit data that reflected the lived experience of the educators involved in the process of transforming their practice to implementing a standards-based reporting system. Data were collected through a method of the researcher asking open-ended semi-structured interview questions. Participants were selected from 54 kindergarten through second-grade cohort teachers across 12 schools as shown in Table 5. Each participant granted permission to obtain this research data through written and verbal consent. A copy of the written consent document approved by the IRB on December, 18, 2020 was provided and explained to each participant individually. As indicated in the agreement, identifying information will remain confidential. The pseudonyms of Principal A, Principal B, and Principal C were used for school administrators and their corresponding data contributions to the research. Teacher participants were identified by the title Cohort Teacher followed by a number from1 to 6.

To ensure that the participants were fully aware of the intent of the research, the conceptual framework for the study was explained to participants prior to the interview with the visual aid of the graphic organizer shown in Figure 1. When the answers to the research questions veered away from the district level change processes specifically involving district leaders and teacher cohort members, the interviewer used verbal prompts to steer the responses back to the conceptual framework focusing participants on the learning relationships and a mutually adaptive change that occurred (Chenail, 1995). Cohort teachers shared their perceptions of the change that they experienced from the initial district led meeting and subsequent year-long planning sessions to the full implementation of the standards-based report card.

Categorizing, segmenting, and coding of the data to identify key patterns and themes was completed after all respondent interviews were transcribed to a text format. Results were aligned

specifically to the conceptual framework of this study to ensure a stronger link between the body of change research and the emerging theory from the data. The researcher used this method to increase the integrity of the analysis and avoid taking away meaning from the research based on her professional preconceived theories regarding the study (Gough & Scott, 2000).The interviews with elementary level principals in position when the change occurred included one principal highly involved with the change process being studied who served on the district level standards-based report card planning team prior to the selection of the teacher cohorts and two principals who became involved when they were asked to select teacher representatives from their schools for the initial kindergarten level cohort.

Results

The sequence of the resulting data in the chapter is organized to present findings in relation to the conceptual framework that undergirded the study. Next, the teacher cohort and principal comments were organized by the shared experiences that the participants perceived to facilitate or inhibit the process separated into Fullan's (Fullan, 2016b) Dimensions of Change in graphic organizer as presented in Figure 2. Finally, the emergent themes concluded from the interview results were summarized. The locus of this study is situational specific to a district change process that occurred where the experiences of the educationists involved are personal and faceted. While cohort teachers represented different school organizations and their experience level varied, commonalties in their perceptions and concepts of the change emerged as related to the conceptual framework. Separating the concept of change that evolved and the actual use of the new standards-based report card at the classroom level of implementation in the interview dialogue proved challenging. The mindsets of the change members where so deeply grounded in the current use and effectiveness of the new grading tool it was difficult to

encourage the participants to separate from their present practice and reflect on the more abstract processes and adaptive behaviors the district leaders and cohort teachers engaged in, which was the focus of the study. The graphic shown in Figure 1 of the conceptual framework proved to be a useful prompt in guiding the participants toward the intentional language expressive of the desired data.

Conceptual Framework

Results of the qualitative interviews are presented within the thematic conceptual framework of Fullan's (2016) work. The researcher interpreted and categorized participants answers from the interview transcripts within the three core premises of the "Dimensions of Change" prevalent in educational practice. The structures are simple but expand with breadth and depth across multiple factors and methods that are mutual to school organizations in setting and achieving goals in the practice of education:

> 1. Introduces new resources to the educational process for implementation such as curriculum, applications, and processes which will require innovation and cultural changes as the structures are embedded and alter the current practice in the organization.
> 2. Requires actional change in behavior and practice.
> 3. Mobilizes teachers and leaders in making sense and purpose for the change and collectively resolving the challenges of seamlessly, effectively, and sustainably implementing the targeted goal. (p. 27)

Curriculum: New Resources, Application, and Processes

The kindergarten teacher cohort was the initial grade level to be involved in the shift to a standards-based report card. According to principal A, of a large primary school, the district decision to convert to a standards-based grade card manifested from the student growth

portfolios required for all pre-k and kindergarten students. Reflecting back to just prior to the district decision to make the shift in grading practice, Principal A shared: This is also the time that we were doing portfolio, and so we would look at the standards that were on the portfolio that were being assessed, and what was focused on there. We went from using that piece and applying that to the standards-based report card.

Since pre-k through kindergarten students in this district are not tested with a state achievement accountability assessment, the portfolio measure serves as the 35% growth component portion of the teacher's level of effectiveness in the state aligned teacher accountability evaluation process used in the district. The portfolio process involved the culmination of collected evidence of student learning over time by the classroom teacher. Purposeful sampling of the scored student work to be included in the portfolio was based on sampled pairs per student as designated by the teacher. One sample from three differentiated groups is required including one student each performing in the emerging, proficient, and advanced range. The portfolios are submitted to the state department of education for scoring (*Tennessee Department of Education: TEAM Team Educator Model*, n.d.). Principal A made connections from the pre-k through kindergarten portfolio process to the standards-based report card district reform:

> Originally, the initial facilitation of the change that would get us to go to standards-based, pretty much, was the portfolio process. It had always been discussed, standards-based, for quite a while. Because when the standards came in back in 2011, we knew then that it was everybody focusing strongly on standards as that's what we wanted to make sure that we're communicating to the parents. We were looking at the A through F report card, being what has been done for many, many years, but it doesn't give the parents

> information as to what the child can and can't do, or know, and what's expected of them in kindergarten. Parents were saying, "My child can count to 10. My child can count to 100. My child can recite the letters of the alphabet." Based on the [traditional] report card, they were ready for first grade. That report card was not evidence of what the standards were expecting them to know to be successful in first grade. From that, leaders, principals, and assistant principals were chosen from the county to discuss a possible change to a standards-based report card. So, we [district leadership team] talked about that, and we came up with a decision that we would like to see that done. We had also talked with our teachers in our building and felt like that was something that the teachers would like to see done."

The connection between portfolio assessment for pre-k through kindergarten students and the idea to change the grading policy provided district and school leaders who held decision making power a framework to align both practices and a grade level of teachers with foundational experience with standards-based assessment and grading to begin their planning process. Principal A explained the decision-making processes that occurred while participating on the district leadership team involved with researching and planning the change to a standards-based report card prior to the establishment of teacher cohorts:

> At that time, we were looking at a rubric for the portfolio, and why would we not look at a rubric for the progress reporting, because when we were using the A, B, C, D, F, there was nothing meshing with that portfolio. And if we were going to continue that process with our kindergarten teachers, which we were under the impression we would be, through the state department, then it needed to be something that would align. Accountability measures have shifted the teaching in early grades to a more cognitive

approach. The developmental progression from kindergarten to second-grade, which encompasses the range of students who experienced the standards-based report card shift in this study is cognitively a foundational stage where standards for learning are skill specific (T. Wright & Murray, 2015). The incongruency of the A-F traditional grade card with the pre-k through kindergarten portfolio teacher accountability process paved the way for the district change as explained by Principal A:

> The one piece that we felt strongly about for kindergarten was foundational skills. They have to have the foundational skills. And if we could tell parents and show parents on a report card, using a rubric scale, that this is what your child knows, and this is what your child doesn't know and it's very clear, then we felt like we could give more information to the parents, and they would understand that at this time we're discussing deficiencies, at this time we're discussing retentions, and this is why your child is excelling or not excelling. It's across all the levels of learning.

Principal A explained how the initial learning that took place at the school level transferred to the planning piece integral to the design and construction of the district's new customized report card:

> We started the process of just gathering information to make that change and roll it out. We continued with kindergarten. First-grade did not have to do the portfolio. It was still decided, because we were using the standards-based assessment for progress reporting, that we would roll that on into first-grade. But the kindergarten teachers would be available, within this cohort at the district level, to assist the first-grade teachers in how they designed theirs, where they pulled standards, and why. They [cohort teachers and district leaders] prioritized the standards. And, like I said, kindergarten was the

> foundation. And then when you got into first grade and second, you were looking more at that fluency piece. This is for ELA [English language arts] obviously.
>
> Basically, the change that occurred with implementing this new standards-based report card was really completely designed and developed by those teachers and the leadership team. They didn't just purchase a product from somebody and use it. It was fully designed. They looked at other districts using and implementing standards-based . . . at their report cards. But they didn't have one that said, “Here, this is the one we're going to imitate and copy.” Or, they didn't have one that they were going to go look at and purchase. It was, "Okay, this is what we want. How are we going to organize it and put it in a format that can resemble a progress report grade card?”

Cohort Teacher 1 confirmed that, while reporting models from other systems were studied, the district cohort designed an original standards-based report card for districtwide practice:

> There were some other people that had brought in samples of other report cards use by other school systems and that was very helpful. Plus, we all brought assessment pieces and made folders. If we all use a common assessment, then it's going to be more consistent across the district.

The standards-based report card evolved into creation as a new resource to be faithfully practiced and implemented throughout the district in grades kindergarten through second-grade. The collaborative work of the teacher cohort and the district leadership members through ongoing monthly meetings supported the culture of cohesive planning, learning, and sharing that facilitated the design and creation of a new practice. Kindergarten Cohort Teacher 1indicated:

> Well, they were very open to our suggestions. There were some things that needed to be altered, changed, or updated. I was on the committee to do that, and they were very open to our suggestions of things that had not worked well and things that had worked well.
>
> That [portfolio leadership team] was there the year of the kindergarten portfolio. I was on the team [district leadership team] the next year. There was a bigger group. I think that we were second. There was just a small group of people that did the very first one. And then there was a bigger group that did the modification.

Cohort Teacher 2, a first-grade instructor, explained the connectivity and feedback cycle between the school level teachers and the district change process:

> I met with my grade level regularly. I took what their thoughts were and everybody in the cohort brought what their people thought and then we took it to the meeting. We just discussed it that way. And everyone agreed or disagreed. That's how we did it.
>
> For us it was just about monthly [meetings] for the full year before we implemented it.
>
> I actually had big paper that we wrote the standards on and we wrote why we would like this or why we don't feel like this is necessary. And then everyone took it to the meeting at central office. I did a lot of visuals. I mean I have my big notepad that I use on my easel. Me, I have to see it. So, we sat down as a grade level and I went over every standard. Why do we need this on there or not? I took that. I don't remember anybody bringing a big piece of paper but they brought feedback.

Cohort Teacher 3 shared:

> What I noticed, in addition to just being open to things, they were willing to change something even if they thought otherwise to begin with. There were things that we looked at and were like, "This doesn't work for us" and they would be like, "Well, okay but let's

talk about that because we feel this way." But then we were like, okay, as teachers in the field, here's what we're saying. This is what we're thinking. And they were very open to that. They listened and to me that really made the process easier, but it also made it more effective for what we were using.

And it was good too, that they had the end in mind already. It wasn't like they were just throwing it on us. They had in mind what they were looking for. They had a roadmap for where they were going. It helped a lot that they already had in mind of what they're looking at and then listened to us to go forward with it.

The baseline development of the kindergarten standards-based report card evolved from the state funded pre-k though kindergarten portfolio assessment. Substantial planning took place on behalf of the district leadership members to solve the dilemma of the misalignment of the portfolio assessment process that required teachers to engage in a labyrinth of assessment practices to evidence student performance and the traditional grade reporting method. The new practice created a situation where teachers were overly tasked with assessing students with differentiated processes. Streamlining the assessments became the goal for the educators involved. As the linear timeline of implementation progressed from kindergarten through second-grade over a 4-year period, the kindergarten cohort teachers experienced the change and the mutually adaptive process of teachers and leaders collaborating to solve this problem closer to the root cause than any other grade level. The kindergarten standards-based report card, in full practice, was the model for learning for the newly formed first-grade cohort. A full day of learning from the kindergarten cohort teachers and district leaders initiated their yearlong endeavor of creating the first-grade standards-based report card. According to first-grade Cohort Teacher 2:

> That's when I came onboard when the first grade was going to the skills-based and standards-based reporting. So, we had the kindergarten model to go by, which really helped, although first grade is, of course, a different ballgame.

The new standards-based reporting practice in place, shaped through the mutual learning and planning of the kindergarten cohort that resulted in a grading measure that aligned with the pre-k through kindergarten portfolio, advanced to first-grade as expressed by Cohort Teacher 2:

> So, the leadership was wonderful. It was District Leader A, District Leader B, District Leader C, and District Leader E. And they took all of our suggestions because I brought suggestions after I had met with my grade level. We had to sit down and decide what standards that we thought were most important. Even though we're still teaching every single standard, we had to bring standards that we would assess on the grade card for parents to see.
>
> It's what started the whole change-over because it was aligned to showing progress. And then for each individual standard, we had to choose certain ones to show growth on. So that's where I think it originated from. I know it started at the same time.

Cohort Teacher 4 shared thoughts and recollections of the origins of the change process from a first-grade teacher perspective:

> I think that it started from the head people at Central Office. They had the vision, and they started at the very bottom with kindergarten. They picked teachers from each school in first grade so that everybody was represented. And they had us in a meeting with the kindergarten teachers first. That was our very first meeting. The kindergarten teachers were in there. They presented how they felt about it and how it took them some time to adjust.

Cohort Teacher 6 recalled the origins of the change process from a second-grade perspective which is a full year removed from the passage of the kindergarten cohort:

> And, let's face it, what they're doing in kindergarten, there's a lot of different between kindergarten and first grade and even more difference between kindergarten and second grade. They're completely different and that caused problems.

Cohort Teacher 6 continued by expressing concern about the assessment piece:

> And, it's still a problem because the reason of going to a standards-based report card is because your A may not be my A. The problem now is your *one* may not be my one and your three may not be my three because we still don't have a common assessment to look at. We have different report cards because they're different grades and they're different and we should've started out different.
>
> We did get to choose some standards, but we were limited. We were told we could only have a maximum number of standards on it and we weren't given freedom and we were told some standards had to be included . . . like power standards. In talking to teachers from kindergarten and first-grade that were already using the report card, that's what the majority of them were doing.

The new learning and engagement of cohort members during the district's first round of grade-level change was naturally occurring and the change in behavior and practice was grounded in an actualized need for change. As the other grade-level cohorts were phased in, the standards and expectations for teaching and learning shifted. Teachers in the higher grades experienced an internal driver for their district directed change that aligned more closely with kindergarten standards and expected outcomes as opposed to their own. The gap between the educators' deep understanding of the purpose for the new resource and the change in practice widened over time

as grade-levels increased. Clear linkages between the standards being taught and the need for a new grade reporting system perceivable to the kindergarten cohort members was increasingly lost with the following grade levels. The existing stimulus that inspired then drove the change was not directly accessible to the first and second grade level cohorts. The lack of understanding the intent and purpose for a change in practice among non-kindergarten cohort teachers created a gap in the natural progression of the change model (Fullan, 2016b).

> The problem for implementation is not only one of teachers "learning how to do it," but of teachers learning the theoretical precepts upon which participant structures and activity structures are based. Absent knowledge about why they are doing what they're doing, implementation will be superficial only, and teachers will lack the understanding they will need to deepen their current practice or to sustain new practices in the face of changing contexts. (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001, p. 307)

See Figure 2 for resulting interview statements reflecting teacher and principal perceptions that facilitated or inhibited the change:

Figure 2

Curriculum-Application of Resource-Procedures

Curriculum-Application of Resources-Procedures *Denotes Principal Comment	
Facilitates Change	*Inhibits Change*
-So, it's the reliability, and it's making the grade card actually assess what you're teaching. * -They prioritized the standards. And, like I said, kindergarten was the foundation. * -Basically, the change that occurred with implementing this new standards-based report card was really completely designed and developed by those teachers and the leadership team. They didn't just purchase a product from somebody and use it. It was fully designed. * -They pulled in their report cards for examples. I don't think anybody from the districts came in, but they did pull their report cards and look at those from surrounding counties. * -You can't put every standard that you're supposed to teach on a progress report card. You've got to look at the ones that anchor that standard or have the anchor standards put up there. * -I think one of the things that helped it is; it had been explained to us that the reason being is because your A is not my A, and it really does look at standards. And so, you really do know where a child is struggling rather than just saying, "Oh, he made an F in reading." That child may be able to read very fluently.	-It needs to be well explained into what we're doing and why we're doing it. And a real understanding, especially with this standards-based report card, that was completely new, we'd never seen anything like that before. And so, how do we do that? We were kind of going off what they had done. And, let's face it, what they're doing in kindergarten too, there's a lot different between kindergarten and for first grade and even more difference between kindergarten and second grade. They're completely different and that caused problems. -So, the biggest leadership problem was a division between what the district thought and what teachers mainly thought about how to grade students. They never explained. Other than the only explanation we got is kindergarten teachers and first grade teachers that had this type of report card had been complaining about the number of standards that they have on their report card and about the scale. -We were still at odds with one another. You had this side that had wanted these standards and a five-point scale, you had this other side that wanted the three-point scale and wanted these standards. We're still at odds with each other and yet we're having to "work together" and spread the love to all the second-grade teachers in the county.

Curriculum-Application of Resources-Procedures *Denotes Principal Comment	
Facilitates Change	*Inhibits Change*
-Well, they [district leaders] gave us more freedom, I think...than second grade. In reference to scoring . . . in what we saw as a one, two, or three. And it just, I guess, everybody had a different opinion. Even now- -We spent that day together creating assessments online at the district office so that any teacher can access them through the shared drive. There is a folder (district shared). They go right along with it [standards-based report card]. To me, that was great thing that our leadership did. It showed that they were thinking ahead even that much farther than just the report card. -It's developed into something that they are pleased with and it works well. -And some of the assessments, if you know that that's their present level of performance and they can do it, you don't even really need it. -It drives your small group instruction because now you look at that and you know what student needs to be at each level. We really changed how we've done our lesson planning, and our teaching since this has all evolved. -And it was different because, all these years of teaching, we were on the ABCDF grade card. And it was just having to rethink how we go about it differently, instead of just grading papers.	-They want more range than is offered, a plus or a minus, and I think that they [district] got upset with them for doing a plus and minus. * -I think what would have been good, if they would have taken a class, somebody's second grade, their students, and shown their TN ready scores, their benchmark test scores, and some examples of their classwork and had that and shown then how that related onto a standards-based report card and we could have really seen the difference and then finding out the background of this child and seeing how well it works. -If they had been to other systems to look at their grade card and see how it was in place, I don't know. They didn't really say. I think they'd already gone over that with kindergarten and they were like, "We're rolling out the next one. Just get behind it." -Some of it was just going to be put on there no matter if second grade teachers wanted it or not (1st grade cohort teacher). -The most troublesome part of moving it from one [A-F report card] to the other [standards-based report card], to me, was the assessments. Not really the document itself but trying to do the assessments.

Behavior: Actional Behavior and Practice

Kindergarten cohort teachers participating in this study related their engagement with the collaborative efforts of the district change process expressive of the behaviors and practice that align with the concepts of collaborative learning that Fullan (2015) refers to as:

> Leading from the middle; a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance. (p.24)

District leaders set the stage for collaborative planning and learning with shared background knowledge experienced at the school level through the pre-k through kindergarten portfolio practice, examples of standards-based report cards in practice from other districts, and a clear cyclic plan for cohort teachers to collaborate over time. The linear timeline of monthly meetings over the school year provided opportunities for teachers to participate in district level planning, return to their school to practice with teacher colleagues, and then present findings to their district cohort creating a feedback loop for refinement as expressed by Cohort Teacher 3:

> They knew that this would be a continually growing process. It wasn't like, "Okay, here's what we're doing. We've got it. We're done." Because like this year with CKLA [new district ELA curriculum], with us piloting it here, we all looked and said, "Oh, this has got to change. This has got to change". And we've already been having those conversations with district level leadership. They agree that we will have to sit back and look at this based on the new curriculum. So again, they're still flexible to our needs.

The new teaching and assessment practices that aligned with the use of the standards-based report card went through a continuous refining process. According to Cohort Teacher Cohort 1:

> This is like the third version of our kindergarten report card we modified. There wasn't a rubric to go with the levels. And there were five levels, which [a score of] three was considered on grade level. But then it went on up to five and a lot of parents were expecting their kids to be a five, "Why is my child not a five?" I think it was very confusing for parents to have that many levels. And then we had to continuously test and try to get farther than just the on-grade levels. So, they modified.

Cohort Teacher 2 stated:

> Because with the standards-based report card, if it's a three, they know it, it's mastered, a 2 is everything in between, and a one is nothing. So, there is a lot of room between [the scores]. But we just decided that's how it needed to be.

Cohort Teacher 3 shared insight on the relationships and personal interactions that were an integral part of the refining process:

> There is always going to be disagreement or debate that can fall into encouraging it or inhibiting it. Everybody was on the same page in the cohort. I felt. You have got your individual opinions zone, how many sight words, or how many of this, or do we do that, what list do we use. But I think, on a positive, that we were able to work through that in the environment that we were in. It lends itself well to that kind of debate.

The modifications and adaptations to the new standards-based report card were not limited to adjustments in the point scale. Cohort teachers soon realized that to ensure the reliability of assessments across students, they would need to build a framework of assessments that aligned with the individual learning outcomes represented on the reporting tool. Kindergarten Cohort Teacher 3 provided deep insight on how this occurred:

> We spent that day together creating assessments online at the district office so that any

> teacher can access them through the shared drive. There is a folder for assessments and there they are. They go right along with it [standards-based report card]. And it drives your small group instruction because now you look at that and you know what student needs to be at each level. And some of the assessments, if you know that that's their present level of performance and they can do it, you don't even really need it. To me, that was great thing that our leadership did. It showed that they were thinking ahead even that much farther than just the report card.

Cohort Teacher 3 provided a description of the assessment building process that occurred at the first-grade level:

> When we created all those [assessments for the standards-based report card], they told us that we could go back into them. They left it open for a while. They even said, "Now, this is here for you, but if you have something else, that's okay too." So, we've tweaked some of ours. It's a little bit time consuming, especially at the beginning of the year when you're pulling kids back individually. Now at this point of the year, it's getting a little easier, but there is a little time for all those . . . when you have to do individual assessments, but it's so worth it because you are with every child. You see, every child's face.

Cohort Teacher 2 presented her experience with learning the collaborative nature of the planning an assessment timeline with cohort peers indicating a direct relationship to the classroom and student ability levels:

> I think too, we had made some changes about when to assess. We have a curriculum guide to follow. And then the progress report indicated when we would have to assess that standard. I remember there were a lot of conversations about some may think that,

"Oh, we could assess that the second six weeks" and I may be sitting there and saying, "No. With my group, I'm fine!"

I remember specifically that one year I had a challenging group academically that just weren't there. I was having to move a little bit slower. So, I was thinking, "Oh no, I could not test that then." I would need to wait. We had some of that. But I mean, not in a negative way, just conversation.

See Figure 3 for resulting interview statements reflecting teacher and principal perceptions that facilitated or inhibited the change:

Figure 3

Actional Behaviors and Practice

Actional Behaviors and Practice *Denotes Principal Comment	
Facilitates Change	*Inhibits Change*
-It was a great way to roll it out because it was peers that were presenting it to each other. * -The process was a good process. I mean, District Leader A, thought a lot about how to implement and to make sure that professional development was implemented, and teachers had the opportunity to participate. * -I met with my grade level regularly. I took what their thoughts were and everybody in the cohort brought what their people thought and then we took it to be meeting. We just discussed it that way. And everyone agreed or disagreed. That's how we did it. -So, we sat down as a grade level and I went over every standard. Why do we need this on there or not? I took that. I don't remember anybody bringing a big piece of paper but they brought feedback. -When you have to do individual assessments, but it's so worth it because you are with every child. You see, every child's face. -There are gaps. Although I do feel, and I'm speaking for first-grade and have not really looked at kindergarten, but our pacing guides and curriculum are very good. They're very good now.	-As an administrator, I don't believe that I have played a very big part in any part of that. * - A lot of my information just came from what the teachers were telling me they were supposed to do. * -Well, I wasn't in those meetings. * -I didn't know what they were bringing back to show the other teachers. * -You have some teachers that are giving regular assessments and their data is going to be correct because they have several [assessments] over time by then and they're continuing to do it with each grading period. The teacher that that student goes to [the following year], that [student's] report card is going to make sense. A teacher who just puts all ones or all twos or all three based on one question, one time, it doesn't tell anybody anything. -I don't feel like we were ever shown how it works.

Beliefs: Change in Belief and Mindset

The mindset and beliefs that sustain meaningful change was evidenced particularly among the kindergarten cohort. As the timeline of cohorts moved further away from the grass roots kindergarten change process, change members were less connected with the purpose for the shift.

Principal A, who was involved with the initial district level team that recognized the need for a shift in grading practice, shared thoughts on mindset as it pertains to the district decision to design and implement a standards-based report card:

> Some of them, District Leader A, District Leader F, and District Leader G, had talked with teachers, especially with the pre-K teachers, and they felt like teachers would have much more input because they use it every day. And with them having that input, that would be a better way to get a buy-in for all teachers because we knew that this would be a significant change for them because you're going from an A, B, C, D, F, to a rubric. You are looking at mindset and change, that was part of it.

Cohort Teacher 1 contributes the level of engagement in the change process for the kindergarten grade-level cohort:

> I'm teaching the standards. I'm doing everything I did before. It's just now I'm assessing specific standards. I think that our county is very fortunate that we have this now. Now at the beginning I was like, "Oh my goodness" because I'm not big on change.

Cohort Teacher 6 shared the challenges at second-grade-level experiences:

> They [district leaders] were relying on kindergarten teachers. Here we were [second grade] and no one in second grade piloted this report card. So, they were basing everything they wanted us to do on kindergarten.... already established and pretty much

just wanting us to take theirs and tweak it to second grade standards and keep it like that. Whereas, we have different report cards because they're different grades . . . and we should've started out different.

We were trying to come to an agreement with the district and the potential expectations of parents. We were trying to figure that out and then also, think about effectiveness. That's one thing I think we're probably still struggling with. We struggled that day [initial district cohort meeting] and we fought.

There were a lot of arguments. Several of the teachers, I would say it was about 50-50, wanted a five-point scale. Five being the most successful, mastered, one being the least successful. The problem was they had had a school pilot, the report card already, and they did a five-point scale. And all the district had heard was it's too much to try to figure out what determines a two, what determines a three, what determines a four [in a five-point scale].

They wanted the change. They were positive about the change. The only negative ... I think they just didn't want to hear complaints about it. And we were kind of being just told, "Hey, this is how it is, we're doing it." And I think sometimes it's nicer to have a conversation and not just be pointed and told.

See Figure 4 for resulting interview statements reflecting teacher and principal perceptions that facilitated or inhibited the change:

Figure 4

Alteration of Mindset and Belief

Alteration of Mindset and Beliefs *Denotes Principal Comment	
Facilitates Change	*Inhibits Change*
-The commitment is there. Teachers want their children to grow. They want to see the change because they know that we can't continue doing the same thing we've done over, and over, and over. * -We were thinking . . . end in mind for each lesson. And, by the end of the year these are our goals. We really were more focused on standards. -When you're 30 plus years into it, I was like, "Wow, this is really going to be a change." I'm so happy that we did it. -I'm teaching the standards. I'm doing everything I did before. It's just now I'm assessing specific standards. I think that our county is very fortunate that we have this now. Now at the beginning I was like, "Oh my goodness" because I'm not big on change. -Everybody was on the same page in the cohort. We were able to work through [individual opinions] that in the environment that we were in. It lends itself well to that kind of debate. -I think the ones [teachers] who would have a negative mindset would be those teachers who were not teaching the standards and the things they should have already and now are having to because of the report card.	-We were not given a chance to adapt to the change… parents have never adapted to the change. Parents didn't understand. -I don't want to feel stupid, I'm sitting here thinking, "Well gosh, should I have tried to find out more? Should I have gone to those meetings with them [teachers]? * -I think our kindergarten teachers are much more committed and [have] buy-in. I still think there's some things that are vague and that they have concerns about. As long as we're willing to listen to them, and let them know they're being heard, then they're going to move on and be just fine. Second grade will get there. First grade has gotten there. Second grade will get there. * -And if we could have had some of that "deeper why," it might have provided a different perspective. -They wanted the change. They were positive about the change. The only negative ... I think they just didn't want to hear complaints about it. And we were kind of being just told, "Hey, this is how it is, we're doing it." And I think sometimes it's nicer to have a conversation and not just be pointed and told.

Emergent Themes

Educator perceptions of the change that occurred in the shift to the new practice of implementing a standards-based report card were analyzed through the common themes shared with the researcher by the participants. The resultant transcribed interviews became the measurable data that were analyzed through a process of content analysis and coding. Linking the raw data of interview responses to the research question created a data base for further analysis. As the researcher identified patterns in the data then integrated the common themes with the theorized conceptual framework and primary question for this study, a series of emergent themes evolved (Gläse & Laudel, 2013). The previous presentation of the data in this chapter is embedded with descriptors explaining the alignment of the participants experiences with the change process that supported introducing the data to the reader. The common themes important to this research that emerged from the saturated data were:

1. The collaborative work of the teacher cohort and the district leadership members, through ongoing monthly meetings, supported a culture of cohesive planning, learning, and sharing that facilitated the design and creation of a new practice. Teacher and district cohorts engaged in a shared feedback cycle that increased the professional learning of all change members through a process of cohort teachers returning to their practice at that classroom level between district meetings to engage in using the new resource they had created. Their shared interactions with their grade-level colleagues at the school level were brought back to the district level meetings promoting shared learning and mutual adaptation to the ongoing improvement process.
2. The internal driver for the new standards-based reporting practice in place manifested from an incongruency with the A-F traditional grade card with the pre-k through

kindergarten portfolio teacher accountability process. Transformational change was shaped through the mutual learning and planning of the kindergarten cohort to create a new practice resulting in a communally agreed on grading measure. The kindergarten standards-based report card, in full practice, was the model for learning for the newly formed first-grade cohort. As the linear timeline of implementation progressed from kindergarten through second-grade, over a 4-year period, the kindergarten cohort teachers experienced the change through a mutually adaptive process that most closely resembled Fullan's (2016b) change model expectations. Teachers and leaders collaborated to solve a problem closer to the root-cause than any other grade level.

3. The new learning and engagement of cohort members during the district's first round of grade-level transformation naturally occurred and the change in behavior and practice was grounded in an actualized need for change. The state standards and expectations for teaching and student learning increase with each grade level transitioning from a skills-based to a standards-based approach. The misalignment between the drivers and practice that stimulated the transformation at the kindergarten level and the purpose for the first and second grade level shifts created a gap between the educators' deep understanding of the purpose for the new resource and the change in practice widened over time as grade-levels increased. As grade levels increased, teachers in cohorts became further removed from the origin and purpose for the change. The previous grade level teacher cohorts displaced the driving stimulus for the change through modeling, discussing, and sharing their experiences to replicate the purpose and intent of the new practice.

Summary

Chapter 4 included a review of the purpose of this study followed by a narrative

introduction to the organization of this chapter. Results of the qualitative inquiry data were presented in accordance with the conceptual framework, subsequent data, and emergent themes. Chapter 5 provides an overview of this study of educator' perceptions of the organizational change experienced in the shift from traditional grading to a standards-based system. A narrative discussion drawn from the findings will present a synthesis of the emerging themes from the resulting data and findings in alignment with conceptual framework. The synthesis of the results of the research will culminate in recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The research findings, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research are presented in Chapter 5. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand educator perceptions of the organizational change experienced in the shift from traditional grading to a standards-based system. Research was conducted on grade-level cohorts of educators and district leaders implementing the change to a standards-based report card in kindergarten through second-grades in a district located in the eastern region of Tennessee. The organizational transformation that occurred was compared to a conceptual framework that defines effective transformation as sustainable outcomes created by change members mutually adapting to a new resource, teaching, and practice through a process of deep learning and faithful implementation (Fullan, 2016b). A method of qualitative inquiry was used by the researcher to determine how the lived experiences of the cohort teachers applied to the conceptual framework of this study.

The presentation of this study comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research with a statement of the problem and significance of this study followed by the research questions that undergird the study. The delimitations and limitations pertinent to the study are described followed by a closing summary. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature based on the foundational body of research pertaining to educational transformation, grading practice, and system change. Chapter 3 presents the methodology, data collection strategy, and justification for the research design. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of research data and compares results to the conceptual framework for educational change presented in this study. Chapter 5 is the culminating piece of this study providing an interpretation of the findings accompanied by a final recommendation for practice and future research.

Discussion

The depth and breadth of theory and research dedicated to improving practice in educational systems is as vast and diverse as the policy driven forces that have pressured school change throughout history. The framework for this study was designed to simplify the faceted nature of organizational change theory research by focusing on the basic processes of introducing a new curricular practice, shifting professional behaviors, and understanding the contributing relational factors that affect mindset and beliefs in the acceptance of the new process. At the core of Fullan's (2016b) dimensions of change theory are the relationships of humans learning, planning, and practicing their profession collectively. The entire system is engaged. The role of external and internal drivers related to educational change are important to the process as these policies and pressures are the catalyst and often the purpose for the shift (Fullan, 2015, 2016a; Quinn & Fullan, 2017). Educational policy drivers represent the rudimentary "why" that kindles the change (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Essential but less significant than the relationships among educators responsible for the transformation, change drivers permeate the process with deep roots in establishing the foundation of information that should engage the entire system in learning to gain a deeper understanding of the purpose for the change (Fullan, 2002).

Curriculum: New Resources, Applications, and Processes

The misalignment of the pre-k through kindergarten state accountability portfolio process with the traditional grading practice in place pressured educators involved in this study to seek an improved way to measure and report student performance by aligning the assessments required for the portfolio with the report card. The portfolio process engaged kindergarten teachers in a new skills-based assessment practice requiring them to transfer evidence of student

learning across three performance levels through an elaborate process of uploading video or permanent product in an electronic format to a state supported database across multiple benchmarks. Having participated in using an evidence-based assessment practice with the portfolio requirement and an understanding of the purpose for the shift to a standards-based report card, the kindergarten cohort teachers experience most closely aligned with the change theory conceptualized in this study. The purpose to streamline both the standards-based portfolio and grade reporting processes was anchored in the district leaders and cohort teachers shared learning, previous practice, and mutual adaptation to the portfolio process which drove the transformation to a standards-based grading practice.

Behavior: Actional Behavior and Practice

The mutually adaptive change in behavior and practice that kindergarten cohort teachers experienced clearly linked to the professional learning that occurred. The oversight provided by district leaders connected to the reality of working with the kindergarten teachers to solve the challenge of a problem that materialized into the change studied in this research. The leaders and teachers synthesized the difficulties and successes they had already learned together and collectively identified with the purpose for initiating a change in grading practice. Their change to the new standards-based grading system also involved replacing a similar skills-based checklist report card rather than an A-F marking process. Technically the transition from a traditional letter grade report card occurred only in the first and second grade levels in this study.

The first-grade cohort teachers were using a traditional report card where A-F grades were applied based on the expectations of the individual teacher. Their practice was limited to their understanding of the traditional process outlined in the district policy absent the experience with a portfolio assessment approach to assessing students. Their knowledge gap was supplanted

with a shared day of planning with the kindergarten cohort teachers who presented their new practice and shared the purpose for the new grading system. District leaders had the forethought to plan for the first-grade cohort teachers to engage in shared learning from teachers who had first-hand experience with the initial change. While the first-grade cohort teachers benefited from the learning, they continued to experience gaps in understanding the purpose and process of the assessment piece as stated by first-grade Cohort Teacher 5, “The most troublesome part of moving it from one [A-F report card] to the other [standards-based report card], to me, was the assessments. Not really the document itself but trying to do the assessments.”

Cohort teachers farthest away from the internal driver for the change with limited understanding of the purpose produced responses to the research questions that indicated a desire to find meaning. A similar training day was provided to second-grade cohort teachers by the first-grade cohort teachers. The meaning and purpose for the change began to dissipate at the transition from kindergarten to first-grade and lost even more ground when the second-grade teacher cohort initiated the change. Compounding this challenge was the increasing differences in the standards for student learning expectations. Cohort Teacher 6 expressed a desire for professional learning strategy that might have provided a shared learning experience for cohort teachers modeled after an authentic pattern of practice occurring in their grade-level assessment processes:

> I think it would have been good, if they would have taken a class, somebody's second grade, their students, and shown their TNReady scores, their benchmark test scores, and some examples of their classwork and shown them how that related to a standards-based report card and we could have really seen the difference and then finding out the background of this child and seeing how well it works.

Beliefs: Change in Belief and Mindset

As the new practice progressed through each full year of planning per grade level with each ascending school-year from kindergarten to second-grade, the integrity of the process of "mutual adaptation" was compromised. The district kindergarten teacher cohort involved at the inception designed and created the initial product. The original learning and work for kindergarten became the new practice for first-grade teachers. Cohort Teacher 3 rationalized the difference in grade level change that occurred: "As for kindergarten, I don't want to say it was easier, but we were mostly on the same page." Cohort Teacher 1 commented:

> And even though we don't do the portfolio [District decision to terminate and forfeit funding], we didn't know that at the time. It has developed from that. It's developed into something that they are pleased with and it works well. It's what started the whole change-over because it was aligned to showing progress. And then for each individual standard, we had to choose certain ones to show growth on. So that's where I think it originated from. I know it started at the same time.

Increased directives from leaders and decreased shared learning specific to the purpose and drivers for the change required of the first-grade cohort teachers created a slightly less positive perception of the change. As the distance between the grade level cohorts and the deep initial learning widened, teachers seemed to be "mobilizing action" as opposed to "mutually adapting" to the shift to the standards-based reporting system (Fullan et al., 2017, p. 33). The portfolio process linked the standards to the assessments, which provided the kindergarten teachers with understanding and predictability in how the standards-based report card assessments might work. Subsequent grade level cohort teachers' lack of experience with assessment practice for marking the report card created confusion as expressed by Cohort Teacher 6:

> You have some teachers that are giving regular assessments and their data is going to be correct because they have several [assessments] over time by then and they're continuing to do it with each grading period. The [assigned] teacher that student goes to [next grade level], that [student's] report card is going to make sense. A teacher who just puts all ones or all twos or all three based on one question, one time, it doesn't tell anybody anything. I don't feel like we were ever shown how it works.
>
> …there's a lot difference between kindergarten and first grade and even more difference between kindergarten and second grade.

Resulting data form the interviews indicate that the district leaders were intentional in their planning for the shift to the standards-based report card practice. The multiple planning days scheduled over an entire school year for the development and a follow-up year for implementation indicates that considerable effort was made to redesign the function of central office leadership to engage with school level professionals. Sincere effort was made to ensure opportunities for learning and planning between district and school staff. Creating a learning environment for teachers, much like what they are charged to do for the students in their classroom, must align with the teachers' professional needs based on the grade level standards they are required to teach, developmental age of their students, and the multiple factors within their classroom and school environment they must interface with on a regular basis. When the antecedent that elicits change is not naturally occurring, as in the case of kindergarten teachers in the study, learning must be simulated and appropriately programmed to meet the specific needs and understanding of the professionals involved to ensure a process of shared "meaningful" learning resulting in the collective belief that the change that they have been charged with is purposeful to their practice.

Implications for Practice

After reviewing the literature, analyzing the data collected, and conceptualizing the results of this study, the researcher contributes the following recommendations for practice:

- The mandates of the standards-based accountability movement have pressured district leaders with external drivers forcing system change. To manage the internal drivers in their charge, district leaders must be equipped with the professional change knowledge and aptitude to apply strategies and plans for professional learning and development that considers the mutual adaptation of all change members to the new process.
- School leaders should consider building learning relationships when implementing system level change. School organizational transformation directed from the district level begins with the intentional planning and professional development crafted with the end in mind and includes all educational change members. The alteration of mindset and beliefs of change members is central to professional development that produces meaningful and sustainable change. Belief in a new practice with a positive mindset to sustain meaningful change begins with the establishment of a foundational purpose and collaborative learning culture to ensure new curricular processes are embraced and faithfully practiced.
- District leaders and principals should value perspectives of what teachers consider important and effective in transitioning to a new practice. Attention to the participative behaviors and formed relationships that either facilitated or inhibited the change gleaned from the teacher cohort members provides information meaningful to professional planning and development for teachers, principals, and district leaders. Top-down directive approaches symbolic of leadership driven by external accountability are less effective than a transformational process guided by teachers and leaders learning together

to make targeted decisions for educational change (Berger, 2000; Fullan et al., 2017; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). The creation of policies may appease government entities but "it will do little to change the system unless sufficient thought has been given to the actual process of delivery or implementation" (Harris, 2012, p. 397). When the rich learning that naturally transpires when change members are working together to grow, transform, and develop, the new practice pervades through the different groups, grade levels, or teams and gains momentum "not driven by policy or by the top (government). It gains its strength from the "middle" (districts) and from the "bottom" (students, teachers)" (Fullan et al., 2017, p. xv). The initial stimulus and learning that brought about the original change must be replicated or reinvented to establish purpose and understanding of the right drivers. System change can be staggering and cause frustration for teachers. When standards-based practices are enforced as directives without leaders instilling the purpose and facilitating learning relationships that support teachers in adapting, the professional culture and capacity for change is compromised (Vatterott, 2015).

- District leaders championing a change to a new curricular practice to be implemented at a multiple grade levels must be cognizant of the stimulating factors that drive the change. Students follow a track of being promoted from one grade level to the next. The vertical alignment of the state expected learning outcomes project standards that are initially skill specific in the early grades and become increasingly more content oriented and standards-based per grade level. The deliberate application of differentiated approaches to professional learning when the change in practice is replicated across subjects and grade levels may require strategic planning and generate added challenges. Results of this study

indicate that teachers are more apt to develop a positive mindset and integrate the new practice with confidence and fidelity when leaders plan front end learning linked specifically to their current practice.

- Educators choose to serve in their profession for a reason. They encourage the desire to learn for themselves and others. Mindfulness of the professional educator's need to learn and understand the purpose and meaningfulness for change is a leader's first step in designing methods to introduce, facilitate, and sustain a new curricular process.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research design for this study was framed to follow a district-initiated school level curricular, behavioral, and beliefs transformational process through explicit comparisons to Fullan's (2016b) three dimensions of change theory based on the assumption that the driving stimulus for the change was constant. The resulting data culminated in unexpected results directly related to the vertical discrepancies in grade-level practices causing the educators perceived experiences to be contingent on their grade-level. Presented below are the researcher's recommendations for future research:

- The conceptual framework of this study is simple and can easily be generalized to organizational change across environments. Attention to the themes specific to shifts in the differentiated factors stimulating the change across subject and grade levels shared by the researcher in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 should be considered when selecting participants for studies using Fullan's(2016b) dimensions of change model.
- This study was limited by the representative sample. Participants included two kindergarten teachers, three first grade teachers, and on second grade teacher. One of the first-grade teachers had participated on the first-grade district level cohort and then

transferred to second-grade the following year, providing a unique perspective of the change experience at both grade-levels. Creating a sample population of participants at the same subject or grade level would eliminate the variability in change drivers and differentiated educational practices foundational to teachers' daily school level experiences.

- To ensure the integrity of meaningful organizational improvement, change members must mutually adapt to a new process by sharing in learning targeted at a deep understanding of the purpose or driver for the change. Without the "why," change is superficial. Specific research in the area of determining supports for district leaders in defining strategic generalizable processes to ground professional development for a new practice in shared authentic learning related to the drivers and purpose for the change would provide a leadership framework to actualize this part of teacher training that is often overlooked or not considered. Qualitative research of district leaders as they develop an understanding of the realities of leading a change in practice in classrooms and schools would support identifying the discrepancies that created the gap between the grade level change in positive mindset and beliefs in this study. Research applied to creating professional development inclusive of mutually adaptive shared learning processes could be used to shape and continuously refine the process.
- A more narrow but relevant suggestion for future research would be to determine the effectiveness of professional development that targets the usefulness of replicating the stimulus that triggered the original change for subsequent grade levels. For example; subsequent research may support identifying the effectiveness of simulation, case-study,

policy analysis, assessment data, literature review, or other valid interventions when the naturally occurring antecedents for the change are not present.

School systems can support deeper learning and performance alignment by leading from the middle (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Changes to improve student learning in a policy driven standards-based society increasingly shifts school-based decision making to the district level. Collaboration between schools and districts to share responsibility as "collective drivers of change" pulls district leaders away from top-down reform and directs them to the more promising practice of working together (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015, p. 46). This study supports the increased need for productive relationships between district staff and teachers and leaders to ensure meaningful changes in educational practice that support student growth and learning.

Summary

The findings of this research provide school leaders with educator perceptions of the change experienced during the shift from a traditional A-F report card to a standards-based grading system. This qualitative phenomenological research was guided by eight research questions targeted at eliciting data to align with the conceptual framework of the study. Fullan's (2016b) three dimensions of change model follows a process of a shift in practice driven by internal and external policies and forces. The new practice evolves through the introduction of a change in curriculum, application, or process that charges educators to transform their behaviors. Participants mutually adapt to the practice through shared learning and purpose. The developing change in mindset encourages faithful practice and fidelity of implementation. Teachers who trust and believe in their practice willfully engage in the behaviors required to carry out the change and improve their instruction.

The effectiveness of the three dimensions of change researched in this study was demonstrated in the initial shift for the kindergarten teacher cohort. The district leaders' professional development plan proved highly effective for this grade level. As the grade levels for implementation increased, the mutually adaptive process of shared learning and planning that supports a positive change in belief and mindset was compromised. Intentional efforts were made by district leaders to engage the entire system of cohort teachers and district leaders at the first-grade and second-grade levels in the change processes through a series of monthly full-day meetings designed for training and collaborative planning. Positive change occurred at all levels of implementation but the clear linkages to the purpose that sustained the kindergarten cohort lost definition at each subsequent grade level. As teachers learn, practice, and mutually adapt to a new process, their engagement in continuously improving their practice should result in success. The results of this study indicate that as district leaders and teachers engage in the work of improving student learning through building professional relationships that are guided by a collective moral purpose in determining the right drivers for change, the continuous collaborative process of learning, planning, implementing, and refining their practice will ultimately result in positive change. Principal A, who participated in district level decision making throughout the entirety of the shift to a standards-based report card, best exemplifies the learning gap experience by cohort teachers:

> As long as we're willing to listen to them, and let them know they're being heard, then they're going to move on and be just fine. Second grade will get there. First grade has gotten there. Second grade will get there.

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APPENDIX: Interview Protocol

Research Questions: What are educator perceptions of the organizational change that occurred during the transition from the implementation of a traditional A-F report card to a standards-based grading system?

1. What leadership attributes influenced the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of the change?

   (New resource/district delivery of new practice to stakeholders)

2. In what ways did the change-system members contribute to the design and implementation of the change (new grade reporting system)?

   (Change related to developing the new practice, contributing roles, and mutual adaptation)

3. What factors facilitated the change process?

   (Curriculum change, actional behavior, and beliefs) (Initiation, implementation, and institutionalization)

4. What factors inhibited the change process?

   (Curriculum change, actional behavior, and beliefs) (Initiation, implementation, and institutionalization)

5. What types of processes engaged the entire change-system members in deeper and wider professional learning?

   (Shared learning, learning leaders, and mutual adaptation)

6. How were mindsets and beliefs altered toward the commitment for growth and change?

   (Alteration of beliefs contributing to implementation and sustainability.)

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