

# Leadership Alignment: Teachers’ and Administrators’ Perspectives within Two Schools

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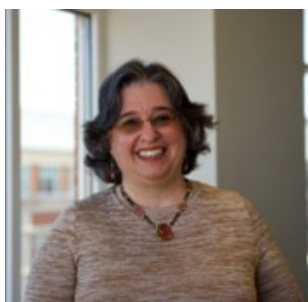
## Abstract

Many school administrators struggle to find a reliably efficient and effective way of stabilizing academic reform implementation within educational institutions. Questionnaire responses were collected from two schools in the same district, including one administrator and four teachers from School 1 and one administrator and two teachers from School 2, with the intent of examining if teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of administrative leadership align within the same school. The findings of this research study coincide with Metz. et al. (2019), concluding that educational leadership can be effectively implemented through a shared vision of the school, communication, collaboration, and supportive resources, along with humane characteristics utilized throughout those categories to create rapport and positive school culture. This study contributes to the greater



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understanding between academic structures of top-down leadership and transformational leadership. Limitations include the small sample size, short time frame of the study, and only middle school representation. The main finding is that distributing responsibilities gives schools a greater chance to cultivate school-wide academic and social change.

*Keywords:* school leadership, transformational leadership, school climate, school culture

## **Leadership Alignment: Teachers' and Administrators' Perspectives within Two Schools**

Academic leadership ultimately affects students, teachers, and school administrators. Although the span of academic leadership ranges from national and state levels to the classroom, often the onus of academic leadership falls on school leaders. School administrators struggle to find a reliably efficient and effective way of stabilizing academic reform implementation within educational institutions (Anderson, 2017; Cooke, 1985; Ravitz, 2010). Various methods of applying personal leadership techniques, attributes, and skills can help school administrators promote and sustain school reform (Cooke, 1985; Fullan, 2014; Heck et al., 1990; Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019). Teachers tend to collaborate infrequently, requiring supervision and guidance from more organized leaders who possess leadership attributes and skills (Cooke, 1985; Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019). Administrators need to know how to better lead and provide resources for their teachers and students across various school cultures and developmental transitions (Anderson, 2017; Atasoy, 2020; Fullan, 2014; Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019; Ravitz, 2010). It is beneficial for a leader to possess leadership characteristics and skills *and* use them to collaborate as a team and share responsibilities to successfully implement change (Cooke, 1985; Klar, 2013). Personal leadership characteristics, along with leadership management style, influence school team commitment, preparation, and positive student outcomes (Anderson, 2017; Cooke, 1985). There is a lack of research in middle school leadership, specifically regarding transformative leadership practices; thus, the purpose of the study is to examine how middle school administrators and teachers perceive leadership.

### **Literature Review**

Leadership is the ability to guide and support others through a distinct, commonly agreed upon, action plan (Atasoy, 2020). Fullan (2014) distinguished principals as “lead learners” who initiate change while others work alongside them to ensure goals for students and the school are performed with purpose and proficiency (p. 55). Leadership attributes such as establishing authority, team building, awareness of school climate and community changes, and encouraging school reform, can help school faculty lead with an open-mind while adapting to changes (Desimone, 2002).

## Leadership Styles Defined

Leadership effectiveness on fostering school change has been split between instructional/transactional leadership (Ishimaru, 2012; Heck et al., 1990; Leithwood, 1994; Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019) and transformational leadership (Anderson, 2017; Desimone, 2002; Ishimaru, 2012; Metz et al., 2019). According to Leithwood (1994) instructional/transactional leadership tries to initiate school-wide reform through principal control in classroom settings. Top-down traditional leadership practice—where administrators micromanage teachers, who are actually responsible for implementing reform tasks—becomes idealized as a “heroic” position (Ishimaru, 2012, p. 6). Although instructional leadership has shown to positively influence student achievement (Heck et al., 1990; Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019), the goal of school reform has recently transitioned to initiating whole-school and community change starting from all stakeholders.

On the other hand, transformational leadership tackles reform processes by distributing responsibility to multiple people (Metz et al., 2019). Similar terms associated with this theory include distributive leadership, shared educational leadership, shared power, and group-level leadership. Metz et al. (2019) concluded principals claimed to be transformational leaders, who valued humane qualities, communication, collaboration, shared vision, and supporting the growth of others. Anderson’s (2017) definition of transformational leadership, states “[t]ransformational leadership is characterized by a leader who collaborates with subordinates to identify needed change, creates a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executes the change in unison with committed members of a group” (p. 1). Sharing power goes beyond principals, district administrators, and even teachers; it incorporates community background acknowledgement and parent involvement (Desimone, 2002; Ishimaru, 2012).

### *Sharing Leadership Responsibilities*

Transformational leadership has shown to influence school culture in predicting school-wide reform, incorporating parent and community input, and encouraging change in contextually diverse settings. School culture can be a predictor of how effective school-wide organizational reform will be

implemented. Atasoy's (2020) research suggested transformational leadership has a greater positive effect on teachers and the progression of a positive learning environment. Additionally, transformational leadership style holds potential to reduce negative behaviors, such as an uncontrollable power dynamic between administrators and teachers; therefore, providing opportunity for school-wide change to progress (Atasoy, 2020).

Distributing leadership responsibilities to a team of administrators, teachers, parents, and/or community members can support the development of school reform and student achievement. Along with initiating change within institutions, roles might need to be reevaluated, refined, and/or redefined to stabilize structural leadership and a collective contribution from all persons (Klar, 2013). Distributive leadership could expand from (or go beyond) a School Improvement Team, a group of individuals who work to implement the School Improvement Plan, and administrators (Ishimaru, 2013; Klar, 2013). Shared educational leadership has the potential to reach parents and the surrounding community, encouraging stabilized reform and overall student success. Emphasizing team-based leadership between administrators, educators and community, can foster multiple relationships that sustain change in schools. Leadership skills can extend outside implementation of personal impacts from school leaders, and into instruction and curriculum reform in differing settings. Cravens (2014) condoned the belief that there are general commonalities between a school-wide leadership approach and cross-cultural educational goal of supporting student learning. Researching culturally diverse contexts across various school settings, gathers contextually-based data to demonstrate the effectiveness of change implementation when all school leaders share a common goal.

## **Organizational Reform**

### ***Comprehensive School-wide Reform (CSR)***

Comprehensive School-wide Reform (CSR) is a common organizational strategy that supports the usage of transformational leadership in schools. Comprehensive School-wide Reform, referred to as the potential third wave of school reform, considers the whole school when making improvements that

affect all aspects of the school, including school culture, climate, and improvements in academics and curriculum (Desimone, 2002). According to Klar and Brewer (2013), CSR initiated an increase in student achievement at each school and advised school leaders to institutionalize this practice to effectively progress holistic school reform implementation. Holistic school change is becoming accepted by multiple school districts and encouraged by school administrators (Desimone, 2002). Klar and Brewer (2013) also signify how school-wide reform leadership must be adapted to specific school contexts to support, promote, stabilize, and even enhance school culture, climate, and academics.

### ***School Culture & Climate***

How school faculty work together, communicate, and impact students, otherwise known as school culture, ultimately plays a significant role in how educational reform is implemented and sustained (Atasoy, 2020). School climate, identified as students, faculty, parents and surrounding community members, also contributes to the school's demographics (i.e., socioeconomic status, population, school size) (Ishimaru, 2012; Klar, 2013; Klar & Brewer, 2013; McCommons, 2014; Ravitz, 2010). Schools with high-poverty communities, high-needs or even high-performing schools must be aware of their school context, culture, and climate to enact leadership techniques used to implement organizational change. Urban school resources, populations, and educator and community involvement compared to rural locations have an effect on reform approaches (Klar, 2013; Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019; Ravitz, 2010). Smaller schools, as well as startup schools, have an advantage when implementing strategic change because of the smaller faculty and student population, and typically, more parent and community involvement (Ravitz, 2010). In addition, schools in rural districts possibly have more struggles obtaining resources and experience challenges implementing reform (Lowenhaupt & McNeill, 2019). With the acknowledgement of external factors influencing internal aspects of educational institutions, school leaders can understand how the school climate affects the success of reform implementation.

### ***Outside School Influences***

The surrounding school community involvement can influence the rate at which implementing reform occurs *and* its effectiveness. Klar (2013) and Ravitz (2010) recognized a collaborative effort between school administrators, teachers, and parents/community members is more effective in implementing school-wide reform. However, encouragement and persistence, or the lack thereof, from community/parents depends on if school-wide reform movements initiate and mobilize (Ishimaru, 2013). Ravitz (2010) examined schools in various locations and populations including comprehensive schools, “schools that had converted to small learning communities,” and “small school start-up[s],” concluding school demographics can make it easier or harder to further school-wide reform (p. 290). The author also identified a positive teacher culture and effective instructional change in smaller schools than in larger comprehensive schools (Ravitz, 2010). Thus, outside school factors, such as community and parent involvement, can influence the outcome of organizational change efforts.

To summarize, major components of implementing efficient and effective school reform include shared leadership responsibilities, school-wide reform, and positive school culture. School leaders have been moving toward transformational leadership as they implement comprehensive school-wide reform while also considering their specific school culture, school climate, and community factors. Metz. et al. explain how the categories of transformational leadership align with impactful outcomes of progressive school change. The purpose of this study was to understand educational leadership in relation to reform efforts by examining how middle school administrators and teachers perceive their school leadership. The following research question guided this study: How do teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of leadership practices align within the same school?

### **Methods**

A qualitative research design and Transformational Leadership Theory framework was applied to understand how school administrators establish change in schools and how teachers perceive leadership within their own school.

## Setting and Participants

Schools were purposefully criterion sampled based on 2019 report cards from the state's public records; however, participants voluntarily responded to the questionnaire. This study took place within two suburban 6-8 grade middle schools, within the same school district, in a Southeastern regional state of the U.S. The schools mirror the demographics of the district: School 1: 65% White, 12% African American, 15% Hispanic; School 2: 23% White, 28% African American, 42% Hispanic. A total of two school administrators and six teachers participated in the study (see Table 1). Institutional review board permission was obtained for this research study.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics\**

School	Teacher/Administrator	Years of Experience	Duration at School	Highest Degree
School 1	Administrator 1	8	--	Doctorate
	Teacher A	--	3 years	--
	Teacher B	--	3 years	--
	Teacher C	--	6 years	--
	Teacher D	--	9 weeks	--
School 2	Administrator 2	11	--	Masters
	Teacher E	--	1.5 years	--
	Teacher F	--	3 years	--

\* Note: This table depicts self-reported data asked within the questionnaire.

## Data Sources

Data were collected through a constructed questionnaire based on the review of existing literature above (see Appendix A and B). The goal of the open-ended administrator questionnaire was to identify (a) their leadership style and attributes, (b) how change is implemented (i.e., socially, through commu-



nity, and academically), and (c) how often they collaborate with other faculty members. The goal of the partially open-ended and Likert-style teacher questionnaire was to understand (a) how teachers define and perceive leadership, (b) what teachers do to influence school-wide reform, and (c) the level of satisfaction related to the support teachers feel they receive from their administrators and school staff.

### **Data Analysis**

While representing an interpretive epistemological perspective (Saldaña, 2011), a comparative analysis of all data sources was employed to determine commonalities and differences between collected data. The researchers developed short analytic memos to identify findings, comparative patterns, and evident themes between raw data and a priori theoretical categories, supporting the evidence for creating a code to eventually place into a category (Saldaña, 2011). Codes, quotes and corresponding information were stored in a digital codebook. The researchers discussed the findings and interpretations that emerged and came to consensus. Data was triangulated by a review of publicly available school and district documents (i.e., school improvement plans and 2019 district school report cards) describing how curriculum instruction and academic reform was implemented at each school.

### **Findings**

As previously mentioned, Metz et al. (2019) identifies five categories of transformational leadership: humane characteristics, communication, collaboration, shared vision, and supporting the growth of others. The main findings of this study align with Metz. et al.'s (2019) core categories. Thus, the findings are presented within the same bounds of the categories to demonstrate how school administrators and teachers structure their school environment to benefit the efforts toward school improvements.

### **Definition of Leadership**

As part of the questionnaire, both administrators and teachers were asked to define the term leader. All teachers defined a leader as one who “guides” or “helps others” either work toward an individual goal or a collective goal. A couple of teachers indicated “team player,” “organizer,” and “communicator” as qualities of a leader. One teacher felt a leader “sets the vision” and supports execution of that vision.

Another teacher defined a leader as one who “takes responsibility for their actions.” One administrator’s definition of a leader aligned with the teachers’ ideas of a person who “facilitates” a goal for the group. While the other administrator identified facilitating as a leadership action, his/her definition also included the methods by which a leader facilitates, guides, or helps, that is, “by teaching, learning, conflict management and problem solving.”

When examined at the school level, School 1 teachers gave definitions of leadership qualities that fell under Metz et al.’s (2019) categories: humane characteristics, communication, collaboration, shared vision, and support for the growth of others. The administrator’s definition of leadership only included two of Metz et al.’s categories, that is, humane characteristics and support for the growth of others. In School 2, teachers also gave definitions of leadership qualities aligning with Metz et al.’s categories. The administrator’s definition included all of Metz et al.’s five categories except *shared vision*.

### **Communication**

Both teachers and administrators were asked to address leadership communication styles. In School 1, the administrator mentioned using various large and small group meetings (i.e., SIP meetings, department meetings, and PLCs) as methods to communicate with school staff about school change. Both teachers in this school indicated they were satisfied with the amount and type of communication. In School 2, the administrator indicated they used frequent meetings in smaller settings. They indicated they “find more success in starting changes” when meeting with grade levels and departments rather than whole staff meetings. The majority of the teachers in School 2 were not completely satisfied with the form and frequency of communication.

### ***Implementing Change***

In response to the question of how participants communicate with regards to implementing change in the school structure, overall, four teachers indicated they would use direct communication such as “talking in person” with or directly emailing the administration. Every teacher in School 2 mentioned using direct communication. In contrast, the administrators at each school indicated commu-

nication with smaller groups, such as the School Improvement Team, “influential members of the staff,” or “teachers or staff that are part of the initiative,” is how they would communicate to implement change. Only one teacher agreed with the method of communication to a small group, or a “delegation.”

### **Collaboration with Community**

Participants were asked about how the community influences school change. In School 1, the administrator acknowledged the importance of the community. They indicated there was “a lot of community history, several generations of families have gone to school there.” Due to the strong generational continuity, the administrator noticed “there have not been any radical changes” at the school over the years. The teachers indicate they would like parental and student involvement and more communication to families. In School 2, the administrator believes the community’s influence should be embedded into school changes. Two teachers’ responses aligned with the administrator’s ideas because they teach with a focus on local issues and community events. One other teacher felt the School Board influenced the school’s changes.

### **Shared Vision**

Participants were asked how the school vision and mission was disseminated and enacted within the school and in the community. In School 1, there was alignment in responses regarding how the school’s vision and mission are communicated and implemented. The administrator indicated the vision and mission was “discussed monthly” by the School Improvement Team and “weekly in PLCs,” and they are “one team with one goal and no excuses.” Teachers indicated the vision and mission needed to be implemented by all leaders, and another teacher stated, “I make sure to do my part.”

In School 2, the administrator indicated the school’s vision and mission “are incorporated in everything [they] do—mentioned in staff meetings, recited in announcements.” They also have a “dedicated person” for implementing the vision and mission. However, the teachers did not mention these regular practices, they mentioned “several times a year” they revisit the mission and vision statements. Yet, one teacher, who was new to the school, said, “I am not sure of the school’s vision or mission.”

### ***School Improvement Plan (SIP)***

The SIP is a document reflecting the school's vision and mission in collaboration with the school and local community. In School 1, there was alignment in responses about how the SIP is communicated in curriculum and instruction. The administrator indicated teachers have goals similar to the SIP. The teachers said they make goals aligning with the school goals. One teacher includes these goals in her daily lesson plans. In School 2, the administrator holds monthly SIP meetings and embeds the SIP goals into their personal development plans (PDP). Teachers at this school followed the administrator's example and they embedded the SIP goals in their PDP as well as in their lessons. One teacher questioned whether the SIP applied "to the students [they taught]."

### **Supporting Others' Growth Through Resources**

Both teachers and administrators were asked about the resources available for school change. In School 1, the administrator indicated "early release professional development days" and staff meetings (e.g. grade level meetings) as a resource and support to implement school structural changes. One teacher indicated being dissatisfied and one teacher indicated being satisfied with accessible resources. However, when looking at educational training to further professional development, both teachers at School 1 were satisfied. It seems "accessible resources" for school change might mean something different to teachers and administrators.

In School 2, the administrator said he/she had "monthly and weekly meetings." The teachers' feelings of satisfaction varied greatly from dissatisfied to satisfied. With regards to educational training, teachers felt either neutral or satisfied with the professional development offered to them. It seems the resources administration offers are insufficient in meeting all the teachers' needs.

As can be seen in Table 2, the data concluded the average frequency of communication was lower, rather than the same as or higher, than the satisfactory rating of administrative support. Both administrators gave insight to this statistic, stating their form of support and resources are professional development sessions/training. Teachers seemed satisfied with educational training.

**Table 2**

*Percentage of Satisfaction: Teacher Questionnaire Responses*

	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied
Administrative Support	16.67%	16.67%	66.67%
Available Resources	33.33%	16.67%	50%
Educational Training	0%	33.33%	66.67%
Frequency of Communication	16.67%	33.33%	50%

*Note.* The questionnaire items originated on a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Dissatisfied to Strongly Satisfied); however, the researcher did not notice a significant difference in responses between the strongly dissatisfied and dissatisfied and strongly satisfied and satisfied; therefore the data is shown as a three point-scale (Dissatisfied, Neutral, and Satisfied).

### **Discussion**

The transformational leadership categories from Metz et. al.'s (2019) study aligned with the findings in this study. There was a common theme of wanting humane leadership characteristics in a leader, collaboration and communication between all individuals, and shared leadership practices between school faculty and the community. At the middle school level, the categories are all intertwined which calls for delegation of leadership responsibilities between administrators, teachers and community partners. Each of the categories contributes to the acknowledgement of school-wide and community culture, in hope of developing a stronger relationship to create a larger impact through school changes.

#### **Leading with Common Language**

Administrators defined leaders as “facilitators;” however, teachers noted a leader as an individual who mainly “coaches,” supports through guidance, and can ultimately delegate tasks while still doing their part. Teachers and administrators do not seem to be using the same terminology around leadership; thus, it makes it difficult for school change to occur. School culture should be based around a common language, understood and accepted by all individuals. A transformational leadership style would encour-

age administrators and teachers to communicate, collaborate, and disperse tasks evenly. Cooke (1985) also emphasized how personal leadership traits (including supportive and humane) can advance the distribution process of responsibilities to many levels of school and community members, strengthening the effectiveness of school reform.

### **Communication**

Teacher and administrator communication is shown to be inconsistent, with uncoordinated messaging methods. At each school, the administrators apply different methods of verbal and written dissemination - small group, department, whole school, and community—sometimes via email; therefore, the effectiveness of change is static. Distributive leadership can be obtained with consistent communication of changes. Whether from the principal, other administrative staff, parents, and/or School Improvement Team (SIT), change is more likely to occur efficiently and effectively if all parties are aware of what is happening and can be part of the planning and implementation process (Cooke, 1985; Desimone, 2002; Ishimaru, 2012). Although all members have influential impacts, it is imperative principals and other school administration professionals be receptive to staff members' and the community's needs.

Working with large and small groups inconsistently can be detrimental to a transformational leadership practice. However, solely working with smaller groups can increase the changes in incremental measures. Ravitz's (2010) findings on smaller school implementation effectiveness also correlates with small group implementation (i.e., starting at a grade level or department, small group interventions). When the school population is smaller, there is a higher success rate of imploring a distributive leadership approach, because the number of staff and students are reduced (Ravitz, 2010). Starting small to create a larger impact is a sustainable practice when looking to organize reform in school settings.

### **Collaboration**

The findings on community influences were similar between administrator and teacher responses, stating the surrounding school community should be more informed, participate in school reform movements, and should be considered before making school changes (especially those that directly affect the

community). Teachers stated they include “local ideas” and events in the community into their teaching practices (Teacher D, Teacher E). Administrator 2 believed the “community should influence school decisions...such as community values, aspirations, principles, etc.” Whether there is a strong sense of community input or not, the data urges for further support from the surrounding school community.

### **Shared vision**

The idea of a vision or mission to instill school-wide reform found in the data is congruent with Anderson’s (2017) definition of transformational leadership; the administrators and teachers agree a leader is one that works with others to create and executive a vision. Although the schools in this research study do not claim to be transformative schools, it is clear teachers desire transformative school characteristics—considering various school community inputs that advance reform processes. Through the perceptual lens of transformational leadership theory, comprehensive school-wide reform becomes feasible in practice if all individuals apply a shared mission centered around a growth-mindset and engage in productive collaboration.

### **Limitations**

The limitations include being a small sample size, short time span, and only two middle schools. Unfortunately, only six teachers responded to the questionnaire within the bounds of this study being conducted within one month. If the research extended for a longer time period, there is a possibility the voluntary questionnaire would have attracted more recipients. School culture and school climate are difficult factors to navigate (Atasoy, 2020; Heck at al., 1990); however, internal and external school relationships, although taken into consideration when developing the questionnaire, are uncontrollable factors. Furthermore, this study’s lens was under the scope of only middle schools; thus, elementary and high school levels were not represented, and future research should aim to overcome this limitation.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this research study conclude that educational leadership can be effectively implemented through a shared vision of the school, communication, collaboration, and supportive resources,

along with humane characteristics utilized throughout those categories to create rapport and positive school culture. The common themes between all data were related to properly facilitating accessible resources (i.e., training, PLC, School Improvement Team) *and* engaging with the community and school faculty in a meaningful manner. School administrators and teachers can practice co-leadership efforts to initiate and sustain growth of a school culture and climate. Allowing a shared vision to be achieved by multiple people who distribute responsibilities demonstrates efficiency in accomplishing school-wide reform greatly impacting both faculty, students, and the greater community.



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# APPENDIX A

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## Administrator Questionnaire

### Personal Background

1. What are the initials of the school where you currently teach? (e.g., Wolf Heights Middle School would be WHMS)
2. What is your educational background? (i.e., Degrees, Licensure, Certificates, etc.)
3. How many years of experience do you have as a principal/administrator/school leader?

### Perspective of Leadership

1. In your own words, define the term Leader.
2. What do you consider to be important characteristics of a leader?
3. How has your experience as a principal/administrator shaped you as a leader?
4. How do you go about implementing school structure changes such as using a new curriculum, enforcing school social norms, creating a positive school culture, etc.?
5. What methods of communication (i.e., hold staff meetings, in-person conversations, one-on-one meetings, exchange information through email, etc.) do you use to interact with school staff when discussing implementation of school change?
6. How do you ensure the school's shared vision or mission is communicated to the school community?
7. How is the school's shared vision or mission being effectively implemented?
8. What supports and/or resources do you provide to teachers when implementing school structure changes? For example, do you hold professional/leadership development days and/or routinely scheduled staff meetings?
9. How do you address the School Improvement Plan objectives as the school principal/administrator?
10. What training have you had to implement school-wide changes in organizational reform?

### Leadership Culture

1. What elements of the surrounding community influence the way you implement school change?
2. How do you acknowledge the school's culture to implement school-wide change?

# APPENDIX B

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## Teacher Questionnaire

### **Perspective of Leadership**

1. In your own words define the term Leader.
2. What do you consider to be important characteristics of a leader?

### **Collaboration**

1. How do you communicate with administration when supporting implementation of school-wide changes such as initiating a new curriculum, initiating different ways of instruction, enforcing your school's social norms (i.e., respect, responsibility, accountability, punctuality), and/or creating a positive school culture?
2. How do you ensure the school's shared vision or mission is being effectively performed?
3. How do you incorporate the School Improvement Plan objectives into your curriculum and instructional techniques?

### **Closed Questions: Levels of Satisfaction**

1=Strongly Dissatisfied, 2=Dissatisfied, 3=Neutral, 4=Satisfied, 5=Strongly Satisfied

“How satisfied are you....”

1. With the amount of support the administration team at your school provides when enacting school change?
2. With the types of resources accessible to you used to implement school changes?
3. With educational training available to you to further your professional development?
4. With the amount of communication from your principal regarding school reform?

### **Personal Knowledge**

1. What are the initials of the school where you currently teach? (e.g., Wolf Heights Middle School would be WHMS)
2. How long have you been teaching at your current school?
3. How involved are you in the school community?
4. What elements of the surrounding community influence the way you implement school changes?

ISSUE 2

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE

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