

## ABSTRACT

Matthew F. Cheeseman, CHANGING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM BEHAVIORS: THE INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF ENGAGING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAMS IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CYCLES AS A MEASURE TO ACHIEVE SCHOOLWIDE ACADEMIC GROWTH (Under the direction of Dr. Dan Novey). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2022.

The North Carolina General Assembly, in 2013, mandated that the state use test scores, academic growth measures, and other outcome-based measures to create an A-to-F performance grading system for all public schools in North Carolina. The annual results are published via the North Carolina School Report Card, which indicates specific school, performance grade, letter grade, and growth designation. Coastal Carolina High School (CCHS) earned a “67” performance grade resulting in a “C” letter grade while meeting academic growth for the 2018-2019 school year but has never exceeded academic growth (Retrieved from [www.dpi.nc.gov](http://www.dpi.nc.gov)). The North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.27 (n.d.) focuses on the School Improvement Team (SIT) as the influential body that focuses on improving student performance and takes into consideration the annual performance goals as set by the State Board of Education under General Statute 115C-105.35 (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). The SIT is tasked with the development and implementation of a school improvement plan that includes “clear, unambiguous targets, explicit indicators and actual measures, and expeditious time frames for meeting the measurement standards” to improve student performance (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). This action research study will focus on changing the SIT’s professional behaviors to improve instructional practices that influence student outcomes. The purpose of this action research study at CCHS is to implement specific models of transformative actions, such as research-based professional learning cycles that are tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. The SIT will engage in a nine-week Professional Learning Cycle embedded within

the Framework for Powerful Results (Nelson & Cudeiro, 2009). During the nine weeks, the SIT will focus on specific research-based instructional practices that are aligned to student needs as identified through the analysis of student-generated data. The CCHS faculty will engage in the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) to measure school leadership effectiveness and growth. Recognizing the totality of expectations from the North Carolina General Assembly, the State Board of Education, and the Public School Unit (PSU), the SIT will be supported by a Deliverology Unit that is designed to set instructional targets, professional development trajectories, and establish protocols and routines (Barber et al., 2020).



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ACADEMIC GROWTH

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by

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## DEDICATION

To my wife, Dr. Lisa Marie Cheeseman, who instilled in me the importance of education, I dedicate this dissertation to you. For over 25 years, the encouragement, unselfish love, and support you shared with me enabled me to obtain my undergraduate degrees, masters' degree, and now this doctoral degree. You made many sacrifices for our family so we could accomplish our goals and dreams. I am forever grateful and thankful that you said, "yes" on December 3, 1994. I promised you the world yet you gave it to me. To encompass the love and gratitude I have for you, I share the very words that were spoken in song by Alison Krauss and Union Station while we danced together on July 6, 1996, as our families and friends celebrated our marriage.

It's amazing how you can speak right to my heart

Without saying a word you can light up the dark

Try as I may I could never explain what I hear when you don't say a thing

The smile on your face lets me know that you need me

There's a truth in your eyes saying you'll never leave me

The touch of your hand says you'll catch me if ever I fall

You say it best when you say nothing at all

All day long I can hear people talking out loud

But when you hold me near you drown out the crowd

Old Mister Webster could never define

What's being said between your heart and mine

The smile on your face lets me know that you need me

There's a truth in your eyes saying you'll never leave me

The touch of your hand says you'll catch me if ever I fall

You say it best when you say nothing at all

To my daughter Zofia Adelina Cheeseman, I thank you for always believing in me, completing our school assignments together at the dinner table, encouraging and referring to me as, "Dr. Dad", and demonstrating that success in life comes from hard work and perseverance. You are so smart! I love you.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The North Carolina General Assembly in 2013 mandated that the state use test scores, academic growth measures, and other outcome-based measures to create an A-to-F performance grading system for all public schools in North Carolina. The grading system utilizes a 15-point scale and is comprised of 80% of the student achievement score and 20% of the school growth score on state tests. The student achievement score and the school growth score combine to make up the overall school performance grade. The school growth score is calculated by weighting achievement indicators used to calculate the school performance grade. The school growth score is reported separately for each school as exceeds, meets, or does not meet expected growth (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). At the conclusion of each academic year, the results are published via the North Carolina School Report Card. The report card indicates the specific school, performance grade, letter grade, and growth designation. Coastal Carolina High School earned a “67” performance grade resulting in a “C” letter grade, while meeting academic growth for the 2018-2019 school year (Retrieved from [www.dpi.nc.gov](http://www.dpi.nc.gov)).

The North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.27 (n.d.) focuses on the School Improvement Team (SIT) as an influential body that focuses on improving student performance. The school improvement team takes into consideration the annual performance goals as set by the State Board of Education under General Statute 115C-105.35 (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). The team is composed of the principal and representatives of the assistant principals, instructional personnel, teacher assistants, and instructional support personnel assigned to the building. The school improvement team is tasked with the development and implementation of a school improvement plan that includes “clear, unambiguous targets, explicit indicators and actual measures, and expeditious time frames for meeting the measurement

standards” to improve student performance (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). Recognizing the totality of expectations from the North Carolina General Assembly, the State Board of Education, and the local Public School Unit (PSU), the school improvement team operates as an influential team focusing on transformative, research-based practices as a measure to achieve annual student growth.

Implementing a strong professional development structure for the school improvement team (SIT), such as the Framework for Powerful Results and a Professional Learning Cycle, aligns with the “clear, unambiguous targets, explicit indicators and actual measures, and expeditious time frames for meeting the measurement standards” to improve student performance as charged by the North Carolina General Assembly. Exposing site-based school improvement teams to quarterly professional learning cycles will advance the desired student outcomes as a result of high-level, collaborative professional engagement and learning at Coastal Carolina High School (CCHS), Eastern Carolina County Schools, North Carolina. Changing the professional behaviors of the CCHS school improvement team is necessary and urgent as the school has never exceeded growth and earned a “C” or “D” on the North Carolina School Report Card accountability model since 2014.

A goal of the Eastern Carolina County Board of Education is for Coastal Carolina High School earns a “B” or better on the North Carolina School Report Card by the end of the academic year 2022-2023. Thus, the focus of practice will specifically monitor the influence and impact of changing site-based school improvement team behaviors through the implementation of a Framework for Powerful Results and a Professional Learning Cycle for Coastal Carolina High School. The study’s first step is to investigate the current school improvement team practices and behaviors. Additionally, the study will focus on the introduction and

implementation of professional learning cycles. Furthermore, the study will analyze the impact of school improvement team behaviors as a result of the team's collaborative professional learning with a Deliverology model.

### **Background of Focus of Practice**

Eastern Carolina County Schools is comprised of approximately 6,300 students across 14 schools which are mainly located in rural North Carolina. Geographically split by the Pamlico River, Eastern Carolina County Schools is essentially divided into three micro-districts as roughly 3,000 students attend schools on the county's west side while 1,600 students attend schools on the north side and 1,700 students attend schools on the south side of the Pamlico River. The existing district strategic plan addresses the desired outcomes for all 6,300 students. However, the business of education appears different across the three micro-districts as site-based collaboration, resource and personnel allocations, school improvement processes, and leadership teams are different from school to school. Coastal Carolina High School serves approximately 400 students on the county's south side.

In January 2019, 71.43% of principals (10 of 14) had three years or less experience in their current role and school assignment. The range of professional principal experience was 1.5 years to 10.5 years, with most principals progressing through the organization from teacher to administrator over time. Although an administrative development pipeline existed within the organization, the quality and scale of principal preparation were minimal. The step-level experiences of employees from teacher to assistant principal to principal, coupled with independent learning in college and university administrator preparation programs, cultivated a districtwide conglomerate of individual thinkers with independent actions. The conglomerate included internal promotions for 78.57% of the current principals (11 of 14) who managed

schools with up to 14 different modes of school processes. A majority of the principals were operating schools in the same historical manner from their days as a new teacher. The phrase, "... because we have always done it this way..." appeared to be the mindset that prohibited transformative leadership practices. Coastal Carolina High School's principal currently has two consecutive years in the leadership role with limited experience in school transformation processes.

Public schools in North Carolina receive an annual NC School Report Card letter grade (A-F). At the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year, 23.07% of schools (3 of 13) earned a "D" letter grade, as 53.85% of schools (7 of 13) earned a "C" letter grade. The Alternative Learning Program at the Educational Technical Center (Ed Tech), which was assessed using a different state matrix, earned a "maintaining" distinction from the State. The three low-performing schools, as designated by the State with a "D" letter grade, were led by principals with a collective 14 years of experience in their current principal role and school assignment. Additionally, 100% of the low-performing school principals (3 of 3) initiated their professional careers with Eastern Carolina County Schools and progressed to the principal position via internal promotions. Collectively, the three principals had 73 years of experience as teachers and administrators. Unfortunately, 100% of the low-performing school principals (3 of 3) had zero experience with school transformation processes, applications, and/or implementation. The three low-performing schools were managed through their own historical experience, which, in turn, was the primary leadership method for the other 11 public schools across Eastern Carolina County. Unfortunately, Carolina County High Schools has fluctuated between "C" and "D" over six years, including two years of low-performing status as defined by earning a letter "D."

## **Context of Study**

Eastern Carolina County Schools embraces the business of teaching and learning through significant teacher influence and impact upon students. As CCHS administrators annually manipulate personnel to best address the academic and social/emotional needs of the student population, teacher leadership opportunities are growing within the school. Participation on the site-based school improvement team (SIT) is commonly viewed as teacher leadership where direct influence on school transformation may occur. Usually, teachers serving as department chairs and/or team leaders are voted or appointed by their peers onto the SIT. The team membership is typically proportional to the size of the school as the more extensive the student population, the likelihood additional teacher leaders will serve on the school improvement team. The principal utilizes the school improvement team to drive school transformation where collectively, a collaborative process coupled with a professional learning cycle will influence teacher behaviors to create innovative change in the way teachers think and act, resulting in new instructional behaviors. As witnessed in San Diego County, the Chula Vista Elementary School District experienced dramatic growth in student achievement, as measured by California's Academic Performance Index (API), using this model (McConnell, 2011). Unfortunately, as of January 2019, Eastern Carolina County Schools did not emphasize the role of the school improvement teams as agents of transformative change.

Recognizing that Coastal Carolina High School has earned a performance letter grade of a "C" or "D" since 2014 on the NC School Report Card, a focus on the practices and the behaviors of the school improvement team (SIT) is warranted. As of March 2019, the principal indicated that no emphasis on the school improvement team, including, but not limited to, professional development or training, had been provided by the district leadership and/or support

teams. Thus, the principal indicated that the school improvement team was managed as an extension of a faculty meeting. School improvement teams were not improving or advancing the teaching and learning process but simply checking off-line-item tasks on monthly agendas. As a result, deep conversations regarding professional research and learning to improve instructional practices were little to non-existent, which may have contributed to lower-performing schools.

Changing school improvement team behaviors is critical in an effort to achieve more significant student outcomes and close achievement gaps. The study will include engaging the CCHS school improvement team in professional learning cycles as a measure to establish a consistent schoolwide focus that will ultimately influence and impact schoolwide academic growth. Professional educators participating on the school improvement teams will focus on research-based instructional practices that are warranted by the supporting site-based student-generated data. In turn, the school improvement team will change their current team practices to a collaborative approach that requires new professional learning and behaviors with the best interest of students in mind.

### **Statement of Focus of Practice**

While principals and site-based administrators represent a major component of school improvement leadership, experts suggest that distributing leadership across a school promotes the facilitation of collaborative implementation (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). As of January 2019, 100% of the principals at Eastern Carolina County Schools, including Coastal Carolina High School, reported having no experience with high-yielding school transformation processes. The specific problem is systemic across the entire school system, as no school possessed a high-functioning school improvement team that focused on driving transformational change. In fact, 100% of the principals reported working with their site-based school improvement team as an

extension of their faculty meetings. Recognizing that Coastal Carolina High School has earned a performance letter grade of a “C” or “D” since 2014 on the NC School Report Card, a focus on the practices and the behaviors of the school improvement team (SIT) is warranted in order to change the behaviors of the site-based school improvement teams as a measure to close achievement gaps comes with heightened urgency. Failure to influence and implement transformative processes with the site-based school improvement team may result in continued mediocrity and passive acceptance among school and community stakeholders.

As a result of 76.91% of the public schools in Eastern Carolina County earning a “C” or worse on the 2017-2018 North Carolina School Report Card, this research study will focus on changing the professional behaviors of the site-based school improvement teams as a measure to close achievement gaps. Specifically, the purpose of this action research study at Coastal Carolina High School is to implement specific models of transformative actions, such as research-based professional learning cycles that are tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. In return, the school improvement team will focus on specific research-based instructional practices aligned to student needs as identified through the analysis of student-generated data.

The study will focus on Coastal Carolina High School, which contains 404 students and 30 educators. The school improvement team will meet, at minimum, on a monthly basis to engage in a Framework for Powerful Results. The school improvement team will be evaluated quarterly using a preassembled matrix that is scored by the SIT participants individually and as a team. Additionally, the school improvement team will provide quarterly progress monitoring updates designated for the specific evaluation of the school improvement plan. Data will be

collected through a Deliverology mentoring process by central office support teammates assigned by the superintendent to a specific school referred to as the Deliverology Unit.

### **Focus of Practice Guiding Question(s)**

This action research study is guided by one overarching research question with three secondary questions:

1. How does a uniquely designed school improvement team process supported by an innovative model of support impact the beliefs, skills, and practice of school educators?
  - To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?
  - To what extent does the utilization of a "Deliverology" model provide support for the school improvement team?
  - To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?

### **Overview of Inquiry**

To answer these Focus of Practice guiding questions, I will use an action research design. During Phase 1, I will conduct interviews with the principal and school improvement team members to gather preliminary team function data. I will provide a self-scoring, multi-question rubric, as seen in Appendix B, for individual school improvement team members to rate their proficiency within a descriptive element. The rubric will be collected and coded for responses to determine the most appropriate research-based professional development to implement within the professional learning cycle for Coastal Carolina High School. Phase 2 will consist of



implementing the Framework for Powerful Results and a nine-week Professional Learning Cycle, which consists of a comprehensive plan that the school improvement team creates based on student-generated data. During Phase 3, I will staff a Deliverology Unit and collaborate directly with the school improvement team to analyze and correlate the student-generated data with the professional learning cycle.

### **Inquiry Partners**

I will work with the principal and school improvement team that is directly responsible for the instructional growth of 404 students at Coastal Carolina High School. School data will be collected and analyzed representing administrator and teacher professional years of service, years of service at current school, and years of service as a member of the school improvement team. I will utilize this information to gather a greater understanding of the school improvement team's experience and historical work related to school transformation practices.

I will work directly with the district-level curriculum and instruction team as a measure to learn how professional development needs are identified and implemented for the school improvement team as aligned with the school improvement plan for Coastal Carolina High School. Specifically, I will work with the Chief Academic Officer, Director of 6-12 Curriculum, Director of Instructional Technology, Director of Student Services, and Director of Exceptional Children to gather a greater understanding of the expectations for the school improvement team as related to school transformation practices with consideration to the desired student outcomes. As a measure to capture the school improvement process for Coastal Carolina High School, I will work with the Executive Director of Federal Programs, who directly oversees the compliance measures to the NC Star online toolkit. Coastal Carolina High School currently manages the school improvement plan through NC Star, which provides a menu of standards and

tasks that are aligned to school transformation processes. Through this inquiry partnership, I will analyze previous efforts by the school improvement team to engage in school transformation processes.

### **Theoretical or Conceptual Framework**

Every week, the total number of interactions between the office of the superintendent and its constituents can range from hundreds to thousands. These interactions directly involve human capital, which is the greatest resource a school district can provide a student. Unfortunately, with human capital comes the complexity of the relationship between physiological functioning and conflict (Barsky, 2017). Categorized as a biological theory, according to Barsky, the Basic Human Needs Theory suggests that people need to address and satisfy their physiological needs before addressing their higher-level needs. Individuals engaged in conflict resolution will seek to have their basic needs met as a measure to secure a foundation before higher-level conflict negotiation can occur. Focusing on the physiological needs of the school improvement team (SIT) members may mediate conflicts that arise during school transformation processes that are perceived as top-down, central office compliance (DeHaan, 2015). As a result, the school improvement team may have a higher functioning capacity.

Workplace conflict may stem from multiple factors, including, but not limited to, perceptions, emotions, and conscious and unconscious thought processes (Barsky, 2017). Categorized as a psychological theory, according to Barsky, the Personality Theory suggests that people possess specific character traits that impact how they encounter and deal with conflict. As these traits may be inborn or learned, life experiences will align these traits over time with specific behaviors. The theory suggests that people with specific personality traits may develop a conflict with people with opposing personality traits of their own. As Barsky shared, narcissistic

people tend to focus solely on their own needs, thus presenting as entitled individuals. This thinking may clash with an optimistic or pessimistic individual as their identified needs are different. Therefore, their interactions and desires may create a divide when deciding on school transformation processes, goal setting, and desired student outcomes. The principal must recognize the school improvement team dynamics and the character traits that each individual brings to the team as a measure to ensure highly effective team production and outcomes. However, when conflict does arise, it is widely agreed that a core element of a good apology is an admission of responsibility for the offense (Schumann, 2014).

When dealing with school improvement team conflict, often the primary culprit in initiating the conflict is miscommunication. Categorized as a social theory, according to Barsky, the Communication Theory suggests that people send and receive messages in a functional and dysfunctional manner. Communication includes more than the sound of a voice as body language; in addition, written communication should be considered. Authentic leaders within the workforce should pay close attention to not only the message but also to how the message is delivered. Therefore, school improvement team participants should utilize multiple forms of communication mediums such as video, photos, and voice tools to enhance the opportunity to convey their physical, emotional, and cognitive situations. As a result, communication can strategically be used to foster trust among school improvement team participants, which builds positive relationships and greater efficiency with desired outcomes (Barsky, 2017). Communication can diffuse a conflict with greater intentionality than providing distance between the shareholders (Dafoe, 2015).

Recognizing school improvement team participant conflict and being able to draw from a variety of conflict resolution strategies provides school-wide confidence to the principal and the

remaining team members, as well as the organization itself. Although no single theory or strategy can be used to describe or explain all conflicts, strategies and intervention models can help resolve disputes and conflicts among SIT members. Recognizing that principals and employees have disputes, the principles of restorative justice would be influential and impactful on all teammates. Introducing actions of respect, responsibility, restoration, healing, relationships, consensus, truth, and safety would help bridge the gaps that often create miscommunication, no communication, and the stoppage of progress (Barsky, 2017). As the desired result, employees would feel valued as their voices and actions would be received and considered in a safe environment. Thus, restorative justice practices may benefit the school improvement team moving forward throughout the school calendar for a variety of constituents (Barsky, 2017).

Leading a school system draws thousands of interactions and associated feelings that bring together conflict. Team members could focus on core values like honesty and integrity while developing a strategic plan that represents the actions to attain the desired school improvement team outcomes. Therefore, a focus on professional ethics and core value development as a conflict resolution strategy would tie the school improvement team together under a strong vision of trust that calls on social theory. If deception becomes a common practice among SIT teammates, then ultimately, the school students would suffer (Barsky, 2017).

### **Definition of Key Terms**

There are several terms utilized in this study that may or may not be familiar outside of a geographical region, as acronyms and terminology may differ from state to state and school to school. Listed below are key terms and definitions provided for a greater understanding.

*Professional Learning Cycle:* An 8-9 week professional learning plan that builds expertise in all staff through repeated cycles of high-quality learning, followed by opportunities

for practicing, receiving feedback, observing colleagues, ongoing professional reading, and peer discussion about the practices, including examining the impact of the practices on student learning by looking at student work and reviewing student performance data (Nelson & Cudeiro, 2009).

*Framework for Powerful Results:* Designed as a framework for developing leadership to improve learning for all students, this framework is based on research on effective schools, the experience of highly successful practitioners, and the Boston Public Schools model. The “Context for Powerful Learning” includes the Cycles for Professional Learning. Building the capacity of instructional leaders to guide and facilitate the implementation of the “Context for Powerful Learning Framework” within their schools and systems will result in meeting the school improvement team goals for desired student outcomes (Nelson & Cudeiro, 2009).

*School Improvement Team (SIT):* An assembly of voted or appointed school site members that include, but are not limited to teachers, teacher assistants, principal, assistant principals, counselors, and other employees as designed. The SIT directly develops desired outcomes, action items, timelines, and resource allocation with continuous improvement at the forefront of all decisions as related to what is best for students.

*Targeted Instructional Area:* A specific instructional focus that is recommended and implemented schoolwide, through the vision of the school improvement team, based on the overarching evidence of students’ academic needs.

*Powerful Practices:* Proven research-based instructional strategies that when utilized by professional educators achieve significant evidence of student content mastery.

*North Carolina School Report Card:* North Carolina’s school report cards provide information about school- and district-level data in a number of areas. These include student

performance and academic growth, school and student characteristics, and many other details. The report card also provides a culminating specific letter grade based on a 15-point grading system for all North Carolina public schools annually.

### **Assumptions**

Several assumptions may surface with this action research study. I assume the Coastal Carolina High School site-based school improvement team members will engage in professional training on school transformation that includes “clear, unambiguous targets, explicit indicators and actual measures, and expeditious time frames for meeting the measurement standards” to improve student performance (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). Additionally, I assume that the principal and administrative team will implement a specific research-based school improvement framework with fidelity. I also assume that the district leadership team will generate measurable impact functioning as a Deliverology Unit.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Action research is typically conducted by “the person or the people empowered to take action concerning their own actions, for the purpose of improving their future actions” (Sagor & Williams, 2017). I will follow the action research process through the four sequential stages including (1) clarifying the vision and targets, (2) articulating theory, (3) implementing action and collecting data, and (4) reflecting on the data and planning informed action. This quasi-experimental research study will examine the hypothesis that professional learning cycles will have a direct influence on school improvement teams as a measure to impact the desired student outcomes (Sagor & Williams, 2017).

The intended outcome from this action research study is that ultimately the desired student outcomes are achieved through the transformative process of the school improvement

team. I have developed the methodology based on previous professional work experiences, the examination of previous student-generated data, the recognition of the district's current strategic plan, and the experience of others attempting to realize a similar vision (Sagor & Williams, 2017). Throughout the research study, I will use observations and interviews with the school improvement team as well as written documents and district-generated reports as a means of providing validity and trustworthiness. To generate credibility with this qualitative study, I will test tentative conclusions against those of the study participants and the dissertation committee members.

### **Limitations**

Upon the consideration of limitations, including present-day circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth extreme school transformation progress limitations due to the immediate closure of all North Carolina schools through Governor Roy Cooper's executive order for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Additional limitations may include but are not limited to the influence and impact of remote learning for students and professional educators, the reduced collaboration of professional peers, the inability to communicate due to external factors such as internet access, and the shift from school improvement team transformation to student and employee safety, health, and wellness within the school environment.

The researcher recognizes that the integrity of the study design may vary based on the future guidance from Governor Roy Cooper and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction with respect to the 2020-2021 school calendar, remote learning, professional standards of employment, site-based school student and employee configurations, and a greater focus on social distancing within the school setting. Additionally, the researcher recognizes that Eastern Carolina County Schools may change and/or manipulate teacher and administrator

placements for the 2020-2021 school year, which may impact the progress of site-based school improvement teams. In short, the parameters of the research study must be flexible to adhere to future requirements and guidance from the North Carolina General Assembly, Governor Roy Cooper, and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

### **Significance of Inquiry**

The significance of the study will focus on the depth of school improvement team transformation, which ultimately will generate the attainment of desired student and educator outcomes. The acquisition of knowledge will provide the greatest potential for all stakeholders to grow and succeed. The school improvement team's professional growth will serve as the pathway that promotes influence and impact through the legacy of academic relationships between teachers and students. The academic relationships between teachers and students, including high-quality instructional practices, will advance a diverse culture and climate that resonates among all stakeholders under the care of the school improvement team. Education is the 100% focus on children, 100% of the time through the innovative practices of the school improvement team.

When the professional learning cycles were introduced to the Eastern Carolina County Schools principals, 100% of the principals were identified as having zero experience with high functioning school improvement teams. One hundred percent of the principals had no experience with the professional learning cycles as defined by the research (Nelson & Cudeiro, 2009). Additionally, 100% of the principals developed basic agendas for their team meetings with zero set objectives or desired outcomes. As a result, training was provided to grow the principals' capacities in the area of school transformation as a means of recognizing what it looks like, sounds like, and feels like in the process. At the end of the first 8-weeks, 100% of the principals



demonstrated proficiency in developing powerful school improvement team meeting agendas and professional learning cycles. Data charts and professional learning cycles are provided in the accompanying written overview of the need for such a project at the Eastern Carolina County Schools.

### **Advancing Equity and Social Justice**

It is rare to find a one-room schoolhouse with a population of students who represent a single ethnicity or cultural background. Diversity factors must be considered when assembling an elite team of educators that are paired with classroom students. Diversity training for the principals and supporting stakeholders was provided as a means to recognize cultural differences in the learning styles of adult learners. The training highlighted the variability among individual beliefs and expectations regarding the barriers that prohibit teachers and students from coexisting in a world of positivity within the school walls. Keeping in mind that the school improvement team guides school transformation, teachers work with professional learning cycles as a measure to achieve desired student outcomes. A structured environment supported differentiated learning for professional educators and students of varying cultures, including but not limited to Caucasian, African-American, Latinx, and Asian. The principal professional experience ranged from 3 to 14 years in the current job role, with 71.43% of principals having 4 years or less in their current position. To influence the Coastal Carolina High School site-based school improvement team, the principal and Deliverology Unit will develop learning opportunities for the educators to analyze data and identify the cultural subgroups that were deficient in specific content areas. As a result, the school improvement team will recognize the need for instruction that is culturally rich for all students.

## **Advances in Practice**

I believe this action research study may advance the roles and responsibilities of school improvement teams as it includes the notion of student motivation, adult behaviors, employee attitudes, and affective outcomes (Sagor & Williams, 2017). The action research study is designed to improve the desired student and school outcomes. I will focus on implementing a professional learning cycle within the school improvement team as a measure to build greater research-based instructional capacities for all site-based educators. This study shall shed greater light on how the school improvement team develops and implements research-based instructional strategies as a means of improving and achieving desired student outcomes.

## **Summary**

Eastern Carolina County Schools is comprised of approximately 6,300 students across 14 schools which are mainly located in rural North Carolina. As a result of Coastal Carolina High School earning a “C” or worse on the North Carolina School Report Card in 2014, this research study will focus on changing the professional behaviors of the site-based school improvement team as a measure to close achievement gaps. The purpose of this action research study at Coastal Carolina High School is to implement specific models of transformative actions, such as research-based professional learning cycles that are tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. In return, the school improvement team will focus on specific research-based instructional practices that are aligned to student needs as identified through the analysis of student-generated data. The research study will focus on the implementation of professional learning cycles as introduced by former superintendent of schools Dr. Amalia Cudeiro and Dr. Jeff Nelson with Targeted Leadership Consultants. The study will analyze the academic outcomes as a result of the school improvement team’s collaborative professional

learning and alignment to the Instructional Core as researched and written by Harvard University's Dr. Richard Elmore. The Coastal Carolina High School's school improvement team will engage in the research study as the following questions will guide the research study focusing on school improvement team behaviors.

1. How does a uniquely designed school improvement team process supported by an innovative model of support impact the beliefs, skills, and practice of school educators?
2. To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?
3. To what extent does the utilization of a "Deliverology" model provide support for the school improvement team?
4. To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?

In conclusion, greater consideration of the literature regarding school improvement teams and professional learning cycles will be discussed in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.27 (n.d.) focuses on the School Improvement Team (SIT) as the influential body that focuses on advancing student achievement through annual academic growth. The school improvement team focuses on the annual performance goals as set by the State Board of Education under General Statute 115C-105.35 and is tasked with the development and implementation of a school improvement plan that includes “clear, unambiguous targets, explicit indicators, and actual measures, and expeditious time frames for meeting the measurement standards” to improve student performance (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). Recognizing the totality of expectations from the North Carolina General Assembly, the State Board of Education, and the local Public School Unity (PSU), the school improvement team operates as an influential team focusing on transformative, research-based practices as a measure to achieve annual student growth. Recognizing principals and site-based administrators represent a major component of school improvement leadership, experts suggest that distributing leadership across a school promotes the facilitation of collaboration implementation (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Utilizing a uniquely designed school improvement team process is critical in an effort to achieve greater student outcomes and close achievement gaps. The purpose of this action research study at Coastal Carolina High School is to implement specific models of transformative actions, such as research-based professional learning cycles that are tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. In return, the school improvement team will focus on specific research-based instructional practices that are aligned to student needs as identified through the analysis of student-generated data.

## **Theoretical or Conceptual Framework**

The behavioral interactions among the school improvement team constituents can directly impact the trajectory of the desired student outcomes. These interactions directly involve human capital which is the greatest resource a school district can provide a student. Unfortunately, with human capital comes the complexity of the relationship between physiological functioning and conflict (Barsky, 2017). Categorized as a biological theory, according to Barsky, the Basic Human Needs Theory suggests that people need to address and satisfy their physiological needs prior to addressing their higher-level needs. Individuals engaged in conflict resolution will seek to have their basic needs met as a measure to secure a foundation before higher-level conflict negotiation can occur. As a result, ensuring the basic needs of the site-based school improvement team (SIT) may mediate any conflict during transformational change that is perceived as top-down, central office compliance while being locally viewed as a moral victory in conflict resolution (DeHaan, 2015).

School improvement team conflict may stem from multiple factors, including, but not limited to, perceptions, emotions, and conscious and unconscious thought processes (Barsky, 2017). Categorized as a psychological theory, according to Barsky, the Personality Theory suggests that people possess specific character traits that impact how they encounter and deal with conflict. Since these traits may be inborn or learned, life experiences will align these traits over time with specific behaviors. The theory suggests that people with specific personality traits may develop a conflict with people with opposing personality traits of their own. As the school improvement team is composed of employees with varying professional experiences and skill sets, the Personality Theory suggests that conflict will surface as a key learning and decision-making opportunities arise. As Barsky shared, narcissistic people tend to focus solely on their

own needs, thus presenting as entitled individuals. This thinking may clash with an optimistic or pessimistic individual as their identified professional needs may be different. Therefore, their interactions and desires may create a divide when deciding on school transformation processes, goal setting, and desired student outcomes, to name a few. Considering this, the principal must recognize the school improvement team dynamics and the character traits that each individual brings to the team as a measure to ensure highly effective team production and outcomes. However, when conflict does arise, it is widely agreed that a core element of a good apology is an admission of responsibility for the offense (Schumann, 2014).

When dealing with school improvement team conflict, often the primary culprit in initiating the conflict is miscommunication. Categorized as a social theory, according to Barsky, the Communication Theory suggests that people send and receive messages in a functional and dysfunctional manner. Communication includes more than the sound of a voice, as body language and a written communication should be considered. Authentic leaders within the workforce should pay close attention to not only the message but also to how the message is delivered. Therefore, school improvement team participants should utilize multiple forms of communication mediums such as video, photos, and voice tools to enhance the opportunity to convey their physical, emotional, and cognitive situations. As a result, communication can strategically be used to foster trust among school improvement team participants, which builds positive relationships and greater efficiency with desired outcomes (Barsky, 2017). Communication can diffuse a conflict with greater intentionality than providing distance between the shareholders (Dafoe, 2015).

Recognizing school improvement team participant conflict and being able to draw from a variety of conflict resolution strategies provides school-wide confidence to the principal and the

remaining team members, as well as the organization itself. Although there is no single theory or strategy that can be used to describe or explain all conflicts, strategies and models of intervention can be utilized to help resolve disputes and conflicts among SIT members (Barsky, 2017).

Recognizing that principals and employees have disputes, the principles of restorative justice would be influential and impactful on all teammates. Introducing actions of respect, responsibility, restoration, healing, relationships, consensus, truth, and safety would help bridge the gaps that often create miscommunication, no communication, and the stoppage of progress. As a desired result, employees would feel valued as their voices and actions would be received and considered in a safe environment. Thus, restorative justice practices may benefit the school improvement team moving forward throughout the school calendar for a variety of constituents (Barsky, 2017).

Leading a school draws thousands of interactions and associated feelings that bring together conflict. Team members could focus on core values like honesty and integrity while developing a strategic plan that represents the actions to attain the desired school improvement team outcomes. Therefore, a focus on professional ethics and core value development as a conflict resolution strategy would tie the school improvement team together under a strong vision of trust that calls to social theory. If deception becomes a common practice among SIT teammates, then ultimately, the school students will suffer (Barsky, 2017).

The following literature review is divided into six sections that connect the theoretical framework to the desired outcomes for the school improvement team. The literature review reflects the influence and impact of the action research study on the school improvement team: Theoretical or Conceptual Framework, North Carolina School Report Cards, School Improvement Team Leadership Transformation, and Targeted Professional Development. It is

synthesized into a logic model that supports the Framework for Powerful Results, which school improvement teams utilize as a primary protocol for school transformation. The literature review relates to the function of site-based school improvement teams (SIT) and the growth capacity of educators through professional learning cycles. The literature cites a variety of opinions regarding educational research and sustainability of best practices related to the mechanics of how stakeholders learn. The articles, journals, and books reviewed were found in searches using a variety of search engines, collegiate libraries, professional networks, and professional memberships. The following keywords were utilized to search for related information: professional learning cycles, professional learning communities, powerful practices, learning styles, learning and innovation, school improvement teams, instructional leadership teams, and professional development.

### **North Carolina School Report Cards**

Since the authorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, school improvement teams have tackled the daunting tasks of educating students in a world where high stakes testing (HST) has become common place in schools across the United States of America. High-stakes testing refers to the development of summative tests that are implemented through specific assessment processes. The summative tests are considered high stakes testing since the student-generated data typically allows school improvement teams and faculties to draw conclusions such as academic progress, promotion and retention, and graduation (Kubiszyn & Gary, 2016). The summative assessment process measures a student's skill acquisition and mastery of academic content standards that may inform the school improvement team whether a particular instructional pedagogy was influential on the end result. Further, critics often cite high-stakes testing as the catalyst for educators to teach to the test while a diverse population of students



becomes limited in their learning (Croft et al., 2016). As a result, school improvement teams may become complacent in their charge to ensure academic growth throughout all grade levels of the school.

As schools and local education agencies (LEAs) steadily gain ground, as reported on the North Carolina School Performance Report Cards, the perception is that students are solely learning how to take a test and, more so, learning what exactly is on the assessment. However, an examination of the education process may show that the student-generated data represents an alignment between the academic standards (what students need to know) and pedagogy (how to teach the academic standards) with respect to the site-based strategic plan as implemented by the school improvement team. Simply, student test scores are increasing due to the intentional efforts to provide a personalized, equitable education plan that encompasses differentiated learning experiences while meeting all students where they are academically.

The three arguments that exist in the literature for incorporating high stakes testing include (1) data from statewide testing is typically available to the public, thus enabling parents and caregivers to make informed decisions regarding school selection, (2) high-stakes test results are used by professional educators to develop, implement and progress monitor individualized learning plans for all students and (3) all students can benefit by learning how to develop skills and strategies necessary to meet higher-level expectations (Kubiszyn & Gary, 2016). Since the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, students are becoming increasingly more acclimated to the demands of high-stakes assessments. Unfortunately, school improvement teams may limit their focus on educating the whole child as a result.

Successful achievement results on a high-stakes test may indicate that the student is a great test taker but not a master of content. Students with learning disabilities whose first

language is not English or who attend vocational schools fail high-stakes tests far more frequently than do mainstream students (Kubiszyn & Gary, 2016). These are the scenarios that should be the primary focus of school improvement team meetings where school shareholders can develop and implement meaningful action.

High-stakes testing remains a political hot-button pushed by politicians. As the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) are meant to raise student achievement, states continue to disagree on what standards-based education should look like across all instructional disciplines for all children (Retrieved from [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)). The disagreement is seen and heard with regard to the Common Core State Standards, as many states are now moving away from the once golden egg of education (McArdle, 2014). High-stakes testing will continue as students register for such courses that have summative assessments that draw on the success measurements reviewed by the North Carolina State Board of Education, which are ultimately published on the annual school report card. The school improvement team, however, should develop innovative models of support that impact the beliefs, skills, and practices of all site-based educators as related to what students need to know based on content standards, not a test.

The political hot-button pushed by politicians was originally seen in North Carolina with HB145, where a 15-point grade scale for school was first introduced. The literature cites the need for school report cards as a means to educate the public by providing key performance information, including yearly school growth and proficiency (Retrieved from [www.dpi.nc.gov](http://www.dpi.nc.gov)). Opponents of the school report card system pinpoint the correlation between school performance measures and high-stakes testing. Unfortunately, a bad day testing students could dramatically

impact the school performance measure. Additionally, a weak teaching workforce or school improvement team could hinder student success.

A significant concern in the United Kingdom had to do with sustaining a strong professional teacher workforce (Jones, 2011). The Teacher Education Research Network (TERN) established a project that focused on targeted professional practices in the workplace. Specifically, the concept of social practices was utilized by the Applied Educational Research Scheme as a measure to improve teacher practices. The literature shows that the TERN project was to grow the capacities of professionals from practitioner to researcher as a means to improve pedagogical inputs.

### **School Improvement Team Leadership Transformation**

The North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.27 (n.d.) cites the school improvement team as the influential team that focuses on student performance outcomes. The constituents, who may or may not have leadership experience, are elected onto the team by their professional site-based peers. Unfortunately, the flaws of leadership training courses and the lack of true leaders engaging school-based constituents in continuous improvement prohibit team growth. The school improvement team would benefit from strong leadership that solicits and selects the right candidates, creates learning challenges, and provides mentoring (Allio, 2005). As leadership programs provide aspiring leaders with historical perspectives on leadership theory, new paradigms, and lists of leadership virtues, aspiring leaders are challenged to change behaviors and practices and raise consciousness among stakeholders (Allio, 2005).

Although Robert Allio focused on team success as initiating from strong training programs, Richard DuFour (2004) narrowed the thinking to developing strong professional learning communities and teams by focusing on four main questions: (1) What school

characteristics and practices have been most successful in helping all students achieve at high levels? (2) How could we adopt those characteristics and practices in our own school? (3) What commitments would we have to make to one another to create such a school? And (4) What indicators could we monitor to assess our progress? Dufour focused on every professional in the building and how they engaged with colleagues, such as school improvement team members, in the professional learning community regarding the following questions: (1) What do we want each student to learn? (2) How will we know when each student has learned it? And (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? School improvement teams would benefit from assembling and utilizing this thinking as part of a continuous improvement model.

The school improvement team is composed of multiple educators with varying roles including, but not limited to, principal, assistant principal, teachers, teacher assistants, counselors, and parents. As the team is elected and assembled, their individual ability, cognitive style, and approach to building professional relationships and trust are essential in establishing and implementing the site-based school improvement plan. Sadler-Smith and Badger (1998) characterized cognitive style as the determinant of individual and organizational behavior that develops itself as a result of the actions at the workplace. The differences between individual cognitive styles with varying personalities may influence the school improvement team and the organizational results. The school improvement team, their processes, and procedures, including innovation, may all be factors that contribute to overall school improvement team success.

### **Targeted Professional Development**

The Framework for Powerful Results and Professional Learning Cycle provides the intentional professional development structure to the school improvement team members.

Exposing the site-based school improvement team to quarterly professional learning cycles may advance the desired student outcomes as a result of high-level, collaborative professional engagement and learning. This work will specifically focus the school improvement team on instructional target areas that address student academic deficiencies. In return, the school improvement team will grow their professional capacities with proven research-based instructional practices that provide influence and impact inside the classroom (Cudeiro, 2009). The logic model may help the school improvement team with building their capacity as David Seiler's research focused on the notion that learning styles change as the adult learner ages. In addition, McCarthy and Anderson (2000) focused on the ability to stimulate interest and inquiry through active learning versus traditional methods. Therefore, the intentional use of the Framework for Powerful Results and Professional Learning Cycle is a strong example of active learning through the differences between walkthroughs and targeted learning walks. As Cudeiro discussed the stereotypical walkthroughs by principals as a compliance measure over the course of time, the focus on targeted learning walks attached to a specific learning measure will cultivate a shift in learning culture for the school improvement team and throughout the building.

Professional Learning Cycles provide an opportunity for school improvement team members to engage in safe practice with new research-based instructional practices. During the nine-week cycle, school improvement team members will analyze student work, engage in learning walks, observe and collaborate with teammates, and research professional readings. Nelson and Cudeiro (2009) focused on the shift from isolated professional development to establishing a professional culture of learning. Their research centered upon professional learning that builds the capacity of all stakeholders, including the school improvement team,

throughout the school. The nine-week cycle focuses on specific research-based powerful practices that target key instructional areas.

As the school improvement team members assemble and engage in the professional learning cycle, a match of teaching and learning styles for a successful instructional setting is essential (McMillian & Dwyer, 1990). While the school improvement team develops their capacity through the learning cycle, there are four essential factors for successfully aligning teaching and learning styles: (1) developmental level of the learner, (2) subject matter to be learned, (3) surrounding context, and (4) goals of education. McMillian and Dwyer's research focused on the facilitator's role as the individual who may advance the alignment of teaching and learning styles. Providing a strong facilitator while engaging the school improvement team in a professional learning cycle is essential for implementation.

### **Teacher Leadership**

The degree of both instructional leadership and teacher leadership in schools is strongly related to the overall academic performance of the school. Focusing on site-based teacher leadership that fosters an atmosphere of trust, respect, and teamwork serves as a springboard to developing a shared purpose and vision among faculty and administrators. The collaboration among teachers throughout the school is essential in establishing an effective school culture that promotes high and consistent academic standards. The research shows that states have developed policies directing public schools to establish site-based teacher leadership councils or school improvement teams. The research also indicates that a majority of teachers within a school setting agree that teachers are held to high professional standards for delivering instruction, yet they do not feel comfortable raising issues or concerns that are important to them (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Phil Schlechty said, "Change in schools is much more urgently needed than most

teachers and school administrators seem to realize. Indeed, I believe that if schools are not changed in dramatic ways very soon, public schools will not be a vital component of America's system of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (DuFour, 2004).

### **Distributed Leadership**

Leadership activity is constituted in the interaction of multiple leaders and followers using specific tools, protocols, and artifacts around leadership tasks. The interdependencies among the constituting elements – leaders, followers, and situation – of leadership activity are critical in understanding leaders' practices (Spillane et al., 2004). This concept is directly connected to the adult behaviors on the SIT. The social distribution of leadership across the SIT is seen through their ability to work collaboratively to execute leadership functions and tasks as defined in the school improvement plan. The principal may deploy various principles of transformational leadership for the school improvement team to adopt and implement.

To assess the effectiveness of SIT's leadership, the behaviors and practices impacted by the transformational leader or individuals who take on leadership responsibilities must be examined (Blitz et al., 2014). Spillane et al. (2004) do not promote a singular leadership style to accompany a distributed leadership perspective. The literature cites that the enactment of certain leadership tasks depends upon resources generated from prior tasks. Thus, distributed leadership is a meaningful lens through which leadership is situational and stretched across an organization where activities and practices should be assessed (Blitz, et al., 2014).

### **Summary**

The North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.27 (n.d.) focuses on the School Improvement Team (SIT) as the influential body that focuses on advancing student achievement through annual academic growth. The school improvement team focuses on the annual

performance goals as set by the State Board of Education under General Statute 115C-105.35 and is tasked with the development and implementation of a school improvement plan. Barsky's research with the Basic Human Needs Theory and the Personality Theory sets the stage for setting a behavioral process to work with the school improvement team to implement the school improvement plan. Focusing on the metrics of the North Carolina School Reports Cards sets the baseline for school improvement team leadership transformation. Utilizing a targeted professional development plan will coordinate the actions, behaviors, and professional growth of the school improvement team and each member individually. The purpose of the action research study, including the methods of inquiry, will be discussed in Chapter 3.



### **CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY**

As a result of 76.91% of the public schools in Eastern Carolina County earning a “C” or worse on the 2017-2018 North Carolina School Report Card, this research study focused on changing the professional behaviors of the site-based school improvement teams as a measure to close achievement gaps. The purpose of this action research study at Coastal Carolina High School was to implement specific models of transformative actions, such as research-based professional learning cycles that are tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. In return, the school improvement team focused on specific research-based instructional practices that are aligned to student needs as identified through the analysis of student-generated data.

#### **Focus of Practice Guiding Question(s)**

This action research study was guided by one overarching research question with three secondary questions:

1. How does a uniquely designed school improvement team process supported by an innovative model of support impact the beliefs, skills, and practice of school educators?
  - To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?
  - To what extent does the utilization of a “Deliverology” model provide support for the school improvement team?
  - To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?

The questions and corresponding sources, as seen in Table 1, were designed to collect the data that helped answer the questions. The research questions provided a clear focal point as to how specific, targeted professional learning impacts school improvement team behaviors and decisions concerning transformation processes at Coastal Carolina High School. The research study shed greater light on how the school improvement team developed and implemented research-based instructional strategies as a means of improving and achieving desired student outcomes.

As Chapter 3 unfolded, I provided insight into the relationship between inquiry partners and the study population. Additionally, I expanded on the research and rationale, as well as defined the sampling procedures for this study.

### **Inquiry Design and Rationale**

In 2017-2018, 76.91% of the public schools in Eastern Carolina County earned a “C” or worse on the North Carolina School Report Card. As a measure to close achievement gaps, this action research study focused on changing the professional behaviors of the site-based school improvement team through the implementation of a professional learning cycle. When considering an appropriate design approach, I utilized grounded theory procedures to study the views of human participants who were engaged in school transformation processes. I used multiple phases of data collection as a means to correlate the interrelationship between categories of information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I utilized a qualitative methodology to consider the guiding questions to determine the impact of engaging school improvement teams with the implementation of professional learning cycles. I used a qualitative approach that involved the collection of data, analysis, and

Table 1

*Focus of Practice Guiding Questions with Data Collection Methods*

Action Research Study Questions	Data Collection Methods
To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. School Improvement Team (SIT) Survey</li> <li>2. SIT interviews</li> <li>3. Agendas</li> <li>4. Professional Learning Cycle</li> <li>5. SIT artifacts and professional readings</li> <li>6. Observations and Notes</li> </ol>
To what extent does the utilization of a "Deliverology" model provide support for the school improvement team?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SIT interviews</li> <li>2. Deliverology Unit team interviews</li> <li>3. Observations and Notes</li> </ol>
To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL)</li> <li>2. Faculty interviews</li> <li>3. Administrator interviews</li> </ol>

interpretation throughout this study. This approach enabled me to utilize data from student and adult performance outcomes, observations, interviews, and attitudes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This action research study may advance the roles and responsibilities of school improvement teams as it includes the notion of student motivation, adult behaviors, employee attitudes, and affective outcomes (Sagor & Williams, 2017). The action research study was designed ultimately to improve the desired student and school outcomes. I focused on implementing a professional learning cycle within the school improvement team as a measure to build greater research-based instructional capacities for all site-based educators. Ultimately, this study shed greater light on how the school improvement team developed and implemented research-based instructional strategies as a means of improving and achieving desired student outcomes.

### **Context of the Study**

Exposing site-based school improvement teams to quarterly professional learning cycles may advance the desired student outcomes as a result of high-level, collaborative professional engagement and learning at Coastal Carolina High School in North Carolina. Changing the professional behaviors of the school improvement team at Coastal Carolina High School was necessary, as evidenced by the academic growth history on the North Carolina School Report Card accountability model. As seen in Table 2, Coastal Carolina High School met growth four of the last six years. However, the school has not exceeded growth since the accountability model was introduced. Additionally, Coastal Carolina High School has earned a performance grade of “C” or “D” in each of the last six years.

The 2019 student proficiency data shows CCHS scored below the State of North Carolina

Table 2

*NC Report Cards: Coastal Carolina High School*

Year	Academic Growth	Performance Grade	Letter Grade
2020	No Growth Data Available*	N/A	N/A
2019	Met Growth	67	C
2018	Met Growth	66	C
2017	Did Not Meet Growth	54	D
2016	Did Not Meet Growth	51	D
2015	Met Growth	62	C
2014	Met Growth	66	C

*Note.* \*North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper's Executive Order #117 closed public schools on March 16, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

averages in four key subject areas, including Biology, English II, NC Math I, and NC Math 3. The significant Grade Level Proficiency (GLP) and Career and College Readiness (CCR) shortfall at Coastal Carolina High School, as compared to the State of North Carolina, is shown in Table 3. The GLP and CCR data demonstrate student competency over challenging subject matter. The CCHS students fell short of their competencies versus their peers across the state.

### **Inquiry Partners**

Exposing site-based school improvement teams to quarterly professional learning cycles required me to engage in direct inquiry partnerships. Specifically, I worked with the principal and school improvement team directly responsible for the instructional growth of approximately 400 students at Coastal Carolina High School. School data were collected and analyzed, representing administrator and teacher professional years of service, years of service at current school, and years of service as a member of the school improvement team. I utilized this information to gather a greater understanding of the school improvement team's experience and historical work related to school transformation practices.

I worked directly with the district-level curriculum and instruction team as a measure to learn how professional development needs were identified and implemented for the school improvement team as aligned with the school improvement plan for Coastal Carolina High School. Specifically, I worked with the Chief Academic Officer, Director of 6-12 Curriculum, Director of Instructional Technology, Director of Student Services, and Director of Exceptional Children to gather a greater understanding of the expectations for the school improvement team as related to school transformation practices with consideration to the desired student outcomes.

As a measure to capture the school improvement process for Coastal Carolina High School, I worked with the Executive Director of Federal Programs, who directly oversees the

Table 3

*Comparison: Grade Level Proficiency and Career and College Ready*

CCHS vs State of NC	GLP*	CCR**
Biology – CCHS	51	43
Biology – State of NC	60	52
English – CCHS	41	29
English – State of NC	60	50
NC Math I – CCHS	37	07
NC Math 1 – State of NC	41	15
NC Math 3 - CCHS	52	24
NC Math 3 – State of NC	47	26

*Note.* \* Grade Level Proficiency – Levels 3, 4, and 5; \*\* Career and College Ready – Levels 4 and 5.

compliance measures to the NC Star online toolkit. Coastal Carolina High School managed the school improvement plan through NC Star, which provided a menu of standards and tasks that were aligned with school transformation processes. Through this inquiry partnership, I analyzed previous efforts by the school improvement team to engage in school transformation processes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In consideration of the approval process for this research study, specific benchmarks were completed throughout the prescribed academic pathway for East Carolina University K-12 Educational Leadership Cohort-19 graduate students. Prior to engaging human participants in this qualitative research study, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program ethics course entitled Social/Behavioral Research Investigations and Key Personnel as a measure to build capacity in ethical, moral, and legal protocols for working within a human research study. As a measure of program oversight, I engaged in ongoing dialogue and content review with the dissertation committee chairman throughout the development and implementation of the research study. Additionally, I confirmed approval with the Eastern Carolina County Board of Education regarding the study that was conducted within the school system. I recognized that potential conflict could exist during the study as I serve as the superintendent of Eastern Carolina County Schools. Therefore, I worked with the dissertation committee chair to ensure parameters were set forth to promote study participation without fear. Finally, I forecasted a successful engagement in the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to ensure the research study was both viable to the educational community and safe for human subjects involved throughout the study.

Focusing on the safety of human subjects throughout the study, I conducted all data collection processes with transparency. Specifically, I obtained approval from individuals who



provided Internet responses to electronic interviews and/or surveys (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, I provided all interview and survey question sets to the research study participants in advance. Anonymous surveys were available and treated with confidentiality to ensure human participant safety. I anticipated that all engagement with the site-based school improvement team and/or individual team members would occur beyond the school hours for students. I accommodated study participants at other times during the day, such as teacher planning periods, as a measure to honor their time after hours and minimize disruption to student learning. During any time throughout the research study, individual study participants could request to opt-out of surveys and interviews, if so desired.

When the research study was completed, the results of the study were shared with the research participants and the Eastern Carolina County Board of Education. It was my desire that the research participants recognize the progress of this study through the proper implementation of professional learning cycles while witnessing the increase in student growth in real-time. Understanding that the safety and security of collected data and relevant information were significant, I followed suit with the recommendation of the dissertation committee chair regarding the archiving and/or disposal of all artifacts. All data is secured on an encrypted flash drive at the Coastal Carolina County district office as all participants remain anonymous.

### **Inquiry Procedures**

During Phase 1, I conducted interviews with the principal and school improvement team members to gather preliminary team function data. I provided a self-scoring, multi-question rubric, as seen in Appendix C, for individual school improvement team members to rate their proficiency within a descriptive element. The rubric was collected and coded for responses to determine the most appropriate research-based professional development to implement within

the professional learning cycle for Coastal Carolina High School. School faculty members completed the CALL, which is a cloud-based school-wide leadership assessment and feedback system. Phase 2 consisted of implementing the Framework for Powerful Results and a nine-week Professional Learning Cycle, which consisted of a comprehensive plan that the school improvement team created based on student-generated data. During Phase 3, I established a Deliverology Unit and collaborated directly with the school improvement team to analyze and correlate the student-generated data with the professional learning cycle.

### **Phase I**

The school improvement team (SIT) is an essential component of the school transformation process through direct engagement and implementation of the site-based strategic plan. Working with a school improvement team, I designed the pilot study to assess specific elements through the lens of the school improvement team participants. The main purpose of the pilot study was to ensure that the research design, including questions, surveys, and data collection, were structured in a manner that generated actual data and artifacts that could be analyzed, interpreted, and referenced in the future.

The pilot study was presented to a site-based school improvement team during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools for students per North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper's Executive Order #117. It is important to recognize that the SIT team dynamics during this pilot study were certainly different than the traditional school setting as many employees were working on a remote status versus being comfortable within the same on-site work environment. The typical observations of non-verbal cues were minimized since most participants were separated and mostly joined through technological applications. As such, the school improvement team worked through the pilot study with few complications overall.

### ***Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies***

The school improvement team was composed of 11 employees who directly participated in the pilot study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two employees were unable to participate due to the lack of technological access from a remote region within the county. In consideration for the upcoming year, additional arrangements and accommodations may be provided to the school improvement team employees once the research study is implemented. Overall, the school improvement team was comprised of one principal, one assistant principal, eight teachers, and one school counselor.

### ***Instrumentation***

The pilot study design and data collection techniques were assembled to promote critical thought and individual responses to key elements that the researcher believes are essential to a high-performing school improvement team. The pilot study was constructed in a two-fold process. The survey instrument was designed for school improvement team participants to complete individual self-evaluations regarding the overall team's proficiency in specific elements and categories. Additionally, the survey instrument was designed for the school improvement team participants to engage in collaboration and determine one team rating for each element and category. In short, the pilot study design was manufactured to encourage self-reflection and team reflection as a means of charting a true pathway for individual and team professional learning. I believed the school improvement team's professional learning would be an indicator of true school transformational practices that generate academic growth for students, as validated by the success in the Chula Vista Elementary School District (McConnell, 2011).

The school improvement team survey was developed in collaboration with educational partners from Chicago Public Schools in 2011. It has been adapted to meet the needs of school

improvement teams within Eastern Carolina County Schools. The survey focused on the key essential school transformation elements. Listed below are seven of the twenty-nine elements found within the survey, as seen in Figure 1, that promote essential conditions for school improvement team success.

1. Team Purpose
2. Meeting Frequency
3. Roles & Responsibility
4. Norms & Trust
5. Equity of Voice
6. Agenda & Use of Time
7. Action Items

The entire school improvement team survey can be found in Appendix C.

The school improvement team (SIT) survey focused on six specific categories I believe drive high-functioning school improvement teams. Listed below are the six overarching categories that contain specific elements for consideration.

1. Conditions for Team Success
2. Professional Learning Cycle
3. Strategy and Goals
4. Teacher Teams
5. Communication
6. Common Core State Standards

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)
Team Purpose	Few or no team members understand the team's purpose or priorities	Most team members have a common understandings of the team's purpose and priorities	Team members share a common understanding of the team's purpose and priorities
Meeting Frequency	Meetings take place infrequently and/or irregularly	Meetings take place at least once a month, but not more, and/or last less than an hour	Meetings take place at least twice a month and last a minimum of one hour
Roles & Responsibilities	Team members are unaware of their responsibilities and do not have assigned roles	Team members are assigned roles and responsibilities, but do not execute consistently	Roles and responsibilities area assigned to team members (permanently or on a rotating basis), who execute their responsibilities consistently
Norms & Trust	The team may have norms, but inattention to violations make them irrelevant. Interactions may be cordial, but lack of trust prevents team members from fully engaging in discussion.	Team has norms, but norm violations are rarely attended to and/or is only addressed by the principal. Team members are cordial and engage in dialogue, but tough issues are not addressed as trust is still developing.	Team members know and follow established norms to ensure productivity and build trusting relationships. Team members call attention to instances when norms are violated. Team members demonstrate trust in one another and do not hesitate to dive into tough issues.
Equity of Voice & Use of Protocols	Several team members do not contribute to the meeting, or do so only in superficial ways. Protocols are used superficially, if at all.	The majority of team members contribute to the conversation in meaningful ways. Protocols are attempted, but are not adhered to consistently.	All team members contribute meaningfully to conversation. Protocols are effectively utilized accordingly.
Agendas & Use of Time	Session lacks an agenda or clear objectives; the meeting frequently loses focus and team members get off-task	An agenda and/or objectives exists, but they are not followed consistently; the meeting occasionally loses focus or is focused on non-instructional matters. Efficiency or effectiveness is compromised.	Each meeting is guided by an agenda with clear objectives that are focused on the school's priorities related to improving instruction and student outcomes. Time is effectively and efficiently utilized.
Data-Driven Decision-Making	Data is rarely used to inform decisions, or is used to draw conclusions that do not relate to improving instruction.	Data sometimes informs decisions or is only discussed in superficial ways that do help inform decisions.	The team uses data and evidence to inform decisions that improve instruction. Data is relevant, timely, and helps the team better understand an issue.
Action Items	No action items generated address improvements to the the instructional core and/or are outside the SIT's sphere of influence. Action items are assigned without designating an owner and/or do not have deadlines.	Action items sometimes focus on the instructional core; occasionally action items focus on external factors. Most action items have owners, but may not be listed as specific people (e.g. Administration, SIT, Teachers, etc); action items sometimes have deadlines or have unrealistic deadlines.	Action items focus on improvements to the instructional core and are within the SIT's sphere of influence. Each action item has an assigned owner and reasonable due date.
Monitoring Process	SIT has no tool or protocol for monitoring the implementation and success of action items generated in meetings	SIT may have a tool for tracking/monitoring action items, but the tool is used inconsistently and/or in an ad hoc or disorganized way	SIT has a systematic way to track action items and consistently monitors both their success and implementation

Figure 1. School improvement team survey.

Each category contained at least two elements for school improvement team participants to rate individually based on professional observations of the school improvement team. The individual participants were assigned specific scores of 1-3 based on their professional experience that the school improvement team is (1) emergent, (2) developing, or (3) proficient.

### ***Pilot Study/Baseline Data Collection***

The data collection process occurred over three intentional phases. During Phase 1, I conducted interviews with the principal and school improvement team members. All collected interview data was transcribed manually. I provided a self-scoring, multi-question rubric, as seen in Appendix C, for individual school improvement team members to rate their proficiency within a descriptive element. Each element directly correlated to school transformation processes. The rubric was collected and coded for responses to determine the most appropriate research-based professional development to implement within the professional learning cycle. Phase 2 consisted of implementing a nine-week professional learning cycle which consisted of a comprehensive plan that the school improvement team created based on student-generated data. The school improvement team and I monitored, measured, and modified the professional learning cycle during the nine weeks. During Phase 3, I established a Deliverology Unit, which was a team comprised of Central Office staff, and collaborated directly with the school improvement team to analyze and correlate the student-generated data with the professional learning cycle. All data collected from interviews conducted with the principal and school improvement team members were analyzed as a measure to ensure non-numerical or unstructured data management and organization. I utilized a scoring matrix as a means of identifying and organizing overarching themes, as it is recommended for qualitative and mixed-methods research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## ***Data Analysis***

The data specifically collected throughout the action research study was aimed at answering the following questions: (1) What effect does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors with regard to school transformation processes? and (2) What impact does the introduction and utilization of a Deliverology model have on school improvement team behaviors as a means of achieving the desired student outcomes? The purpose of this action research study was to implement specific models of transformative actions, such as research-based professional learning cycles, that are tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. To study the potential outcomes, data were collected throughout the research study through the use of observations and interviews with the school improvement team, as well as written documents and the attainment of district-generated reports.

The survey produced varying results from the 11 school improvement team members as participants commented on the survey as a tool that would help guide their school improvement team in the future. The overall school improvement team survey ratings for each category are listed as follows:

1. Conditions for Team Success - Developing
2. Professional Learning Cycle - Emergent
3. Strategy and Goals - Developing
4. Teacher Teams - Developing
5. Communication - Developing
6. Common Core State Standards – Proficient

The survey results indicated 4 of 6 categories ranked as Developing, 1 of 6 categories ranked as Emergent, and 1 of 6 categories ranked as Proficient. Upon speaking with the participants, I found that the school improvement team favored the Developing ranking versus the Proficient ranking in the categories of Conditions for Team Success and Strategy and Goals due to the survey comparisons of “All” versus “Most” in the element descriptors. In short, the school improvement team participants, in 4 of 6 categories, cited a hesitation in committing to the word “All” within the survey choices. As for the category marked Proficient, the school improvement team believed that the continuous site-based professional development on Common Core State Standards ensured that “All” participants and employees were engaged with the standards.

The survey served as a great thought-provoking tool that funneled school improvement team participants into selecting specific categorical ratings based on their experiences. The ratings varied among the participants due to their different professional experiences. For example, a professional teacher with 15 years of experience may have viewed the selection choices from a different perspective than a professional teacher with three years of experience. Considering this possibility, I directed the school improvement team participants to select an individual rating and an overall team rating for each category through collaboration supports needed to establish protocols for team success.

It is not surprising that the Category for Professional Learning Cycle was ranked as Emergent. Although the work with Professional Learning Cycles from educators Jeff Nelson and Amelia Cudeiro (Nelson & Cudeiro, 2009) is familiar to me, the concepts were relatively new to the school improvement team participants. However, the survey prompted significant inquiry among the participants as to how the concepts of professional learning cycles can build the



capacity of site-based educators. In short, the school improvement team participants were eager to engage in new methods as a measure to advance student growth.

Although 4 of 6 survey categories were designated as Developing, the results were aligned with my initial predictions. The survey focused on true school improvement team behaviors that promoted both individual and team success. I recognized that the concept of school improvement team involvement in the site-based school transformation process was a new concept for many participants. Participants generally commented that key elements such as roles and responsibilities, norms and trust, agenda, use of time, and monitoring processes have rarely been defined in past experiences. Therefore, the Developing rating was assigned to those elements.

### ***Summary of Phase I***

The pilot study produced multiple reflection points for consideration moving forward with the Focus of Practice (FoP). Although I did not influence the individual school improvement team participant size, I suggest that the larger number of participants may increase the challenges of coming to a survey rating consensus. As each participant was allotted 30-minutes to complete the survey, the collaboration and efforts to go to a team rating consensus, at times, seemed to be endless. In reflection, I sought a smaller population to engage in the survey that would be shared with the entire team at a later time.

The pilot study survey's categories and elements were appropriate for collecting data as a measure to achieve the desired FoP outcome. However, I observed participants engaging in the survey as a protocol or tool for developing new methods for future school improvement teamwork. I recognized the challenges of conducting the survey at face value versus the school

improvement team members using the collaboration time to develop new team methods. In short, established protocols were necessary to implement the survey to avoid tangential moments.

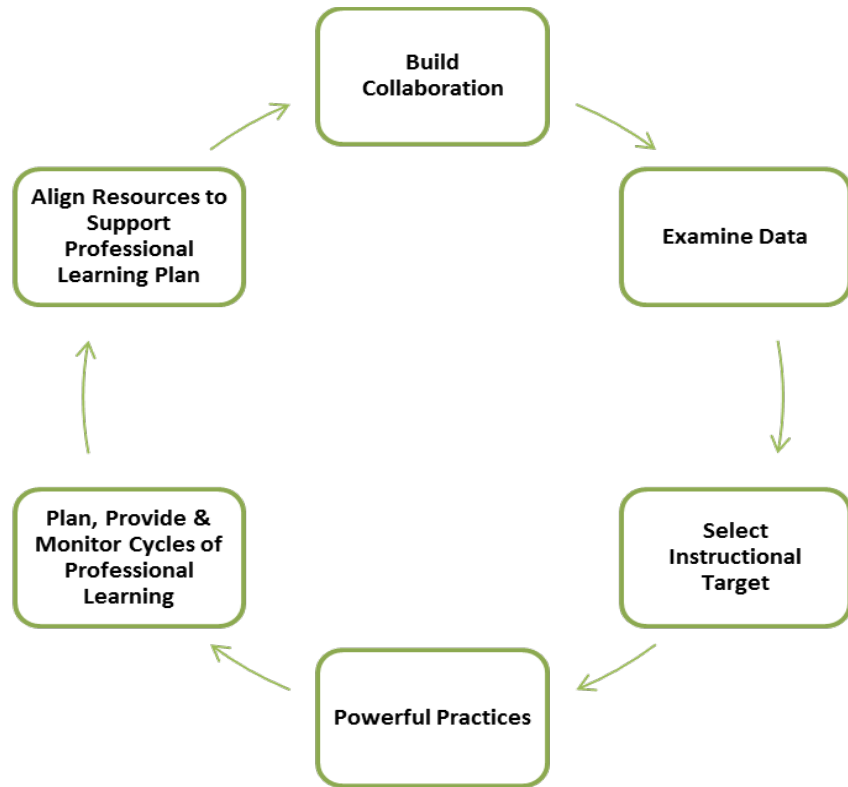
Serving as the superintendent of schools within the district where the survey was conducted may have yielded unintentional participant biases. To minimize unintentional positional pressure, I used an external facilitator to conduct surveys with school improvement teams. Additionally, I assembled a third-party team to collect and analyze the survey data to ensure the validity and communication of the results.

## **Phase II**

To attain the desired student outcomes, the school improvement team engaged in the 6-step Framework for Powerful Results, as illustrated in Figure 2. This logic model guided the school improvement team in the initial work necessary to promote academic growth for all students. The school improvement team was trained on the purpose, intention, and implementation of this collaborative framework. The school improvement team examined student-generated data and identified one instructional area that all site-based educators could target. Once the instructional area was identified, the school improvement team investigated and identified research-based powerful instructional practices that had proven successful in generating student academic growth.

### ***Inquiry Approach/Intervention***

While the school improvement team engaged in the Framework for Powerful Results, I introduced the Deliverology model in Phase 3 to provide support individually and collectively. Once the school improvement team identified the targeted instructional area, I implemented the 7-step, nine-week Professional Learning Cycle, as illustrated in Figure 3. The



*Note.* \*Framework for Powerful Results starts with the school improvement team engaging in collaboration: “Build Collaboration.”

*Figure 2.* Framework for powerful results.

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*Note.* \*Professional Learning Cycle starts with the school improvement team identifying effective inputs: “Input.”

*Figure 3.* Professional Learning Cycle.

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professional learning cycle provided an opportunity for educators to engage in safe practice with new research-based instructional practices. During the nine-week cycle, school improvement team members analyzed student work, engaged in learning walks, observed and collaborated with teammates, and researched professional readings. The school improvement team, principal, and I monitored, measured, and modified the professional learning cycle during the nine weeks as student-generated data dictated.

### ***Summary of Phase II***

The Framework for Powerful Results and Professional Learning Cycle provided the intentional professional development structure to the school improvement team members at Coastal Carolina High School. Exposing the site-based school improvement team to quarterly professional learning cycles advanced the desired student outcomes as a result of high-level, collaborative professional engagement and learning at Coastal Carolina High School. This work specifically focused the school improvement team on instructional target areas that addressed student academic deficiencies. In return, the school improvement team grew their professional capacities with proven research-based instructional practices that provided influence and impact inside the classroom. In Phase 3, I introduced the Deliverology model as an intentional means to support the school improvement team during the nine-week professional learning cycle.

### **Phase III**

Deliverology is an approach to managing reform initiatives. Initially pioneered in the United Kingdom, this approach has had a significant continuous improvement impact worldwide (Barber et al., 2020). Three critical components of the approach are the formation of a Deliverology unit, data collection for setting targets and trajectories, and the establishment of

<b>Title</b>
Superintendent
Assistant Superintendent
Chief Academic Officer
Chief Finance Officer
Chief Operations Officer
Director of 6-12 Curriculum & Instruction
Director of Career & Technical Education
Director of Exceptional Children
Director of Instructional Technology
Director of Student Services
Director of Technology

*Figure 4.* Deliverology unit.

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routines. The Deliverology unit, as listed in Figure 4, was composed of district-level administrators, chiefs, and directors who had direct knowledge and skill sets to work with the school improvement team at Coastal Carolina High School.

### ***Analysis of Approach***

The Deliverology, as depicted in Figure 5, embodies six elements in the continuous improvement work with performance management. Deliverology unit members were committed to servicing the school improvement team at Coastal Carolina High School through specific behaviors that embody the following commitment:

1. Set direction and context
2. Establish clear accountabilities
3. Create realistic budgets, plans, and targets
4. Track performance effectively
5. Hold robust performance dialogues
6. Ensure actions, rewards, and consequences

The Deliverology Unit focused on the performance of the school improvement team at Coastal Carolina High School. It worked with the school improvement team to gather performance data during the nine-week professional learning cycle, set instructional targets and professional development trajectories, and establish protocols and routines. The Deliverology Unit developed a supportive relationship with the school improvement team.

The Deliverology Unit worked with the school improvement team at Coastal Carolina High School to construct the necessary professional support required to achieve professional growth and the desired student outcomes. The team collectively reviewed the initial surveys provided to the school improvement team and created support mechanisms that helped grow



*Figure 5. Deliverology.*

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each member individually from emergent to proficient. The Deliverology Unit had access to all Coastal Carolina High School historical data, including the data related to the FoP. Utilizing this information, coupled with the school improvement plan and the nine-week professional learning cycle, the school improvement team members at Coastal Carolina High School experienced a change in their professional approach that initiates academic growth among all students.

Considering the overall action research study conducted at Coastal Carolina High School, all actions, protocols, and routines, especially those that generated data, were completed with high ethical and moral standards. The implementation of the Framework of Powerful Results, Professional Learning Cycle, and Deliverology were new concepts to all participants. Therefore, transparency was essential to maintain trust as all data generated as a result of this action research study was made available to the school improvement team at Coastal Carolina High School.

### ***Summary of Phase III***

I conducted interviews during Phase 1 with the principal and school improvement team members. Phase 2 consisted of implementing a nine-week professional learning cycle which consisted of a comprehensive plan that the school improvement team created based on student-generated data. The school improvement team and I monitored, measured, and modified the professional learning cycle during the nine weeks. During Phase 3, I established a Deliverology Unit and collaborated directly with the school improvement team to analyze and correlate the student-generated data with the professional learning cycle. The school improvement team experienced a significant professional change in behaviors that promoted a renewed sense of urgency. To measure school leadership effectiveness and growth for all faculty, including the

school improvement team members, the CALL was re-administered. As a result, Coastal Carolina High School educators engaged in the Framework for Professional Results and Professional Learning Cycle with the newly established support structures of the Deliverology Unit.

### **Inquiry Design Rigor**

When I considered credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness related to the action research study, I recalled Stephen Covey's book entitled, *The Speed of Trust*. Covey specifies how constituents and participants within an organization build suspicion if left without a communication portal. Additionally, Covey speaks about how the best-planned strategies fall short if the members have little trust or feel undervalued. As a result of reading Stephen Covey's work, I attempted to create processes and protocols that would be transferable to other action research studies. Simply, the Framework for Powerful Results and the Professional Learning Cycle can be replicated for other context studies. Additionally, the Deliverology model with the Deliverology Unit has been well-documented since 2011 in the United Kingdom as a model that supports a client-based focus through a team approach.

The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL), developed and validated at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is a leadership assessment and feedback system that utilizes a comprehensive survey to assess core leadership practices. The CALL survey measures leadership practices in five core domains:

1. Focus on Learning
2. Monitoring Teaching and Learning
3. Building Nested Learning Communities
4. Acquiring and Allocating Resources

## 5. Maintaining a Safe and Effective Learning Environment

The CALL instrument enables district and site-based leaders, including school improvement team members, with information on school leadership effectiveness.

The external validity can favor researchers who wish to enlarge this action research design to maximize the total number of schools within a district or across a region and state. I solely focused on one school as an attempt to bring forth an opportunity that reflects depth within one school improvement team without generalizations across multiple schools. In other words, depth versus brevity within this study was the most appropriate approach.

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

Action research is typically conducted by “the person or the people empowered to take action concerning their own actions, for the purpose of improving their future actions” (Sagor & Williams, 2017). The researcher will follow the action research process through the four sequential stages, including (1) clarifying the vision and targets, (2) articulating theory, (3) implementing action and collecting data, and (4) reflecting on the data and planning informed action. This quasi-experimental research study will examine the hypothesis that professional learning cycles will have a direct influence on school improvement teams as a measure to impact the desired student outcomes (Sagor & Williams, 2017).

The intended outcome of this action research study was that the desired student outcomes were achieved through the transformative process of the school improvement team. I developed the methodology based on previous professional work experiences, the examination of previous student-generated data, the recognition of the district’s current strategic plan, and the experience of others attempting to realize a similar vision (Sagor & Williams, 2017). Throughout the research study, I used observations and interviews with the school improvement team as well as

written documents and district-generated reports as a means of providing validity and trustworthiness. To generate credibility with this qualitative study, I tested tentative conclusions against those of the study participants and the dissertation committee members.

As previously discussed in Chapter 1, there were several considerations of limitations to this study. The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth extreme school transformation progress limitations due to the intermittent closures and re-entries of North Carolina schools. Additional limitations included, but not be limited to, the influence and impact of remote learning on students and professional educators, the reduced collaboration of professional peers, the inability to communicate due to external factors such as internet access, and the shift from school improvement team transformation to student and employee safety, health, and wellness within the school environment.

Upon return to school beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the school improvement team looked different. Specifically, membership and leadership within the site-based school improvement team changed as the district shifted personnel to-and-from various schools to respond to both predicted and unforeseen areas of need. In short, the membership changed within the site-based school improvement team, which could have manipulated the team's culture of trust.

### **Role of the Scholarly Practitioner**

I served as the superintendent for Eastern Carolina County Schools in North Carolina during the research study. As superintendent, I was the immediate supervisor for the Coastal Carolina High School principal working within this study. As responsible for his professional growth, I implemented this research study into the annual professional development model and school improvement plan as a measure to grow capacity regarding school transformation, school

improvement teams, and Deliverology models. Thus, the principal had a direct understanding of how the study related to the actual school improvement work happening at Coastal Carolina High School. I ensured that the principal was aware that the student-generated data, as well as any research data, would be shared with the school improvement team as it aligns with the study to ensure both validity and transparency. As a measure to ensure there was no bias on my part, all qualitative and quantitative data was shared with the dissertation chair as a measure to gather a third-party review.

### **Summary**

The action research case study centered upon an area of focus and passion for what is instructionally best for the students of Eastern Carolina County. When reflecting on why this study matters, it includes the notion of student motivation, adult behaviors, employee attitudes, and affective outcomes (Sagor & Williams, 2017). In Chapter 3, I focused on the specific methodology that was utilized to address the research questions. Additionally, I provided an explanation as to how the study was conducted as related to the desired outcome of the study.

The action research study was designed to improve the desired student and school outcomes. There was a focus on implementing a professional learning cycle within the school improvement team as a measure to build greater research-based instructional capacities for all site-based educators. Within this chapter, the specific role of the superintendent was discussed as well as potential conflicts in the professional relationship with the human participants within the study group. Additionally, I defined the population group that was directly engaged in the research study, such as teachers, counselors, and principals.

Chapter 4 will provide a thorough accounting of the survey results alongside narrative themes developed from the interviews. It will also examine the pre- and post-intervention survey results from those participants.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

The purpose of the action research study was to focus on changing the School Improvement Team's (SIT) professional behaviors prompting improved instructional practices that influenced student outcomes. The action research study at CCHS (CCHS) examined specific models of transformative actions, including a research-based professional learning cycle that was tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. The SIT engaged in a nine-week Professional Learning Cycle embedded within the Framework for Powerful Results. During the nine weeks, the SIT focused on specific research-based instructional practices that were aligned to student needs as identified through the analysis of student-generated data. The CCHS faculty completed the School Improvement Team Rubric as well as the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) to measure school leadership effectiveness and growth. The study examined if there was a noticeable change to the level of SIT behaviors through the engagement of a professional learning cycle as well as support from a Deliverology Unit that was designed to set instructional targets, professional development trajectories, and establish protocols and routines. If my analysis reveals a high level of proficiency and enhanced level of collaborative professional engagement, then my hypothesis that implementing a strong professional development structure for the SIT will improve student performance will be confirmed. Additionally, the findings may result in expanding the intentional professional practice to develop school improvement teams at additional schools throughout the school district.

### **Research Questions**

This action research study is guided by one overarching research question with three secondary questions:

1. How does a uniquely designed school improvement team process supported by an innovative model of support impact the beliefs, skills, and practice of school educators?
- To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?
  - To what extent does the utilization of a "Deliverology" model provide support for the school improvement team?
  - To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?

### **Demographics**

The volunteer participants in this study included teachers, counselors, and administrators who serve on the School Improvement Team at CCHS. The career experience of the research study participants included four teachers with 15 to 20 years of teaching experience, three teachers with 5 to 10 years of experience, one counselor with greater than 10 years of experience, one counselor with less than 5 years of experience, one administrator with greater than 20 years of experience, and one administrator with less than 5 years of experience. In Table 4, the employment position and years of experience are provided for each of the SIT study participants. Overall, there were two white males, one black male, one black female, and seven white females that volunteered to participate in the research study.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this action research study began and concluded during the spring semester of 2020-2021 school year after receiving approval to conduct the research from the East Carolina University and Medical Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). I met with the CCHS administrators and



Table 4

*Career Experience: School Improvement Team Volunteer Participants*

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SIT Member	Position Title	Years of Experience
STM 01	Administrator	>20
STM 02	Administrator	<5
STM 03	Counselor	>10
STM 04	Counselor	<5
STM 05	Teacher	>15
STM 06	Teacher	>15
STM 07	Teacher	<10
STM 08	Teacher	>15
STM 09	Teacher	>15
STM 10	Teacher	<10
STM 11	Teacher	<10

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school improvement team to announce and explain the relevance of the research study. During the meeting, I provided specific details regarding the phases of research and explained the timeline for data collection. I specifically described, discussed, and answered questions related to The North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.27 (n.d.) which focuses on the school improvement team and presented the matrix and surveys that would be utilized throughout their volunteer participation. I explained that the focus of the action research study was to implement a strong professional development structure for the school improvement team (SIT), including the Framework for Powerful Results and a Professional Learning Cycle, as a method to align to the “clear, unambiguous targets, explicit indicators and actual measures, and expeditious time frames for meeting the measurement standards” to improve student performance as charged by the North Carolina General Assembly.

### **Data Analysis**

The SIT completed the school improvement team survey twice during the research study. Upon collection of the final survey data, I made comparisons between the two surveys, both initial and final. This included highlighting and identifying trends throughout the data, including advancements, no changes, and/or declines seen in the data outcomes. In reviewing the patterns, emergent themes were developed by analyzing score growth and/or declines throughout the specific elements of the school improvement team survey. The themes included advancements from emerging to developing on several survey elements, including Conditions for Team Success, Strategies and Goals, and Teacher Teams.

Additional themes were identified through the CALL survey, which is a proven, research-based leadership assessment that is both strong in reliability and validity (Blitz et al., 2014). The SIT completed the CALL survey during the research study. The CALL survey provided multiple-choice questions covering five domains and 20 subdomains that assessed core leadership practices that are distributed across the school building. All ratings were based on a

scale of 5, where 5 was the highest score, and 1 was the lowest score. The survey ratings were recorded within three categories, including teachers, administrators, and support staff. The data were calculated and reported automatically by the CALL survey platform. I used the data to study trend outcomes among teachers, administrators, and support staff. Several themes developed throughout the CALL survey, including data agreement in domain 2 (Monitoring Teaching & Learning) and domain 3 (Building Nested Learning Communities).

### **Participant Recruitment**

To conduct the action research study, I asked all school improvement team members to consider volunteering to participate as I sought a desired 75% participation rate at a minimum. I specifically communicated that participation was voluntary and would not have any impact on their professional evaluations as my district-level supervisory position may cause hesitation among some employees. Twelve of the 14 school improvement team members volunteered, resulting in an 85.71% participation rate. However, one volunteer withdrew from the study prior to engaging in the completion of surveys and/or matrixes. Overall, the action research study progressed with a 78.57% participation rate.

### **School Improvement Team (SIT) Survey**

The school improvement team survey was developed in collaboration with educational partners from Chicago Public Schools in 2011. It was adapted to meet the needs of school improvement teams within ECCS and CCHS. The survey focused on the key essential school transformation elements that drive high-functioning school improvement teams. Each category contained at least two elements for school improvement team participants to rate individually, based on professional observations of the school improvement team. The individual SIT participants assigned specific scores 1, 2, or 3 based on their professional experience that the

school improvement team is (1) emergent, (2) developing, or (3) proficient. Listed below are the six overarching priorities that contained specific elements for consideration.

1. Conditions for Team Success
2. Strategy and Goals
3. Professional Learning Cycle
4. Teacher Teams
5. Communication
6. Common Core State Standards/Standard Course of Study

### **Conditions for Team Success**

The Conditions for Team Success is comprised of nine elements that are designed to promote school improvement teams to effectively lead school transformation. “K-12 schools, especially those that are falling behind and not adequately serving all students, need to also step back and reflect on their practices” (Crow et al., 2019). The nine elements guide school improvement teams in planning, implementing and reflecting on their collaborative team practices as aligned to achieving the desired student outcomes. The nine elements, including the associated proficiency standards, initial average SIT ratings, and final average SIT ratings, are listed in Table 5.

After engaging in a nine-week professional learning cycle, the SIT completed the school improvement team survey. The results, as listed in Table 5, show significant change among the nine elements that comprise the Conditions for Team Success. Initial survey responses, prior to

Table 5

*Conditions for Team Success*

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Team Purpose	Few or no team members understand the team's purpose or priorities.	Most team members have a common understandings of the team's purpose and priorities.	Team members share a common understanding of the team's purpose and priorities.	1.64	2.36
Meeting Frequency	Meetings take place infrequently and/or irregularly.	Meetings take place at least once a month, but not more, and/or last less than an hour.	Meetings take place at least twice a month and last a minimum of one hour.	2.09	2.09
Roles & Responsibilities	Team members are unaware of their responsibilities and do not have assigned roles.	Team members are assigned roles and responsibilities, but do not execute consistently.	Roles and responsibilities area assigned to team members (permanently or on a rotating basis), who execute their responsibilities consistently.	1.64	2.18
Norms & Trust	The team may have norms, but inattention to violations make them irrelevant. Interactions may be cordial, but lack of trust prevents team members from fully engaging in discussion.	Team has norms, but norm violations are rarely attended to and/or is only addressed by the principal. Team members are cordial and engage in dialogue, but tough issues are not addressed as trust is still developing.	Team members know and follow established norms to ensure productivity and build trusting relationships. Team members call attention to instances when norms are violated.	2.18	2.36

Table 5 (continued)

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Equity of Voice & Use of Protocols	Several team members do not contribute to the meeting or do so only in superficial ways. Protocols are used superficially, if at all.	The majority of team members contribute to the conversation in meaningful ways. Protocols are attempted but are not adhered to consistently.	All team members contribute meaningfully to conversation. Protocols are effectively utilized accordingly.	1.82	2.27
Agendas & Use of Time	Session lacks an agenda or clear objectives; the meeting frequently loses focus and team members get off-task.	An agenda and/or objectives exists, but they are not followed consistently; the meeting occasionally loses focus or is focused on non-instructional matters. Efficiency or effectiveness is compromised.	Each meeting is guided by an agenda with clear objectives that are focused on the school's priorities related to improving instruction and student outcomes.	2.64	2.82
Data-Drive Decision-Making	Data is rarely used to inform decisions or is used to draw conclusions that do not relate to improving instruction.	Data sometimes informs decisions or is only discussed in superficial ways that do help inform decisions.	The team uses data and evidence to inform decisions that improve instruction. Data is relevant, timely, and helps the team better understand an issue.	2.18	2.45

Table 5 (continued)

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Action Items	No action items generated address improvements to the instructional core and/or are outside the SIT's sphere of influence. Action items are assigned without designating an owner and/or do not have deadlines.	Action items sometimes focus on the instructional core; occasionally action items focus on external factors. Most action items have owners, but may not be listed as specific people (e.g., Administration, SIT, Teachers, etc.); action items sometimes have deadlines or have unrealistic deadlines.	Action items focus on improvements to the instructional core and are within the SIT's sphere of influence. Each action item has an assigned owner and reasonable due date.	2.09	2.18
Monitoring Process	SIT has no tool or protocol for monitoring the implementation and success of action items generated in meetings.	SIT may have a tool for tracking/monitoring action items, but the tool is used inconsistently and/or in an ad hoc or disorganized way.	SIT has a systematic way to track action items and consistently monitors both their success and implementation.	2.00	2.27

the nine-week professional learning cycle indicated that 33.33% (3 of 9) of the elements were ranked as “Emergent” and 66.67% (6 of 9) of the elements were ranked as “Developing.” It is a point of intention to note that 0% (0 of 9) of the elements were ranked as “Proficient.” The three elements that were identified as “Emergent” included Team Purpose, Roles & Responsibilities, and Equity of Voice & Use of Protocols. The final survey results indicate that the initial three elements ranked as “Emergent” converted to “Developing,” resulting in 100% (9 of 9) of the elements ranked as “Developing,” and 0% (0 of 9) of the elements ranked proficient. It is important to note that 88.89% (8 of 9) of the elements increased in their average ratings from initial to final survey results. The Meeting Frequency element had no change from initial to final survey ratings remaining at 2.09. The CCHS SIT maintained a meeting frequency of once per month during the research window, with the COVID-19 pandemic contributing to the inability to achieve proficiency.

### **Strategy & Goals**

Collaboration is defined as a systematic process in which people work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice to improve individual and collective results. There are four elements associated with the Strategy & Goals priority, as seen in Table 6, that require collaboration as defined. The survey results for the Strategy & Goals section show increases across 100% (4 of 4) of the elements but not to the point of a “Proficiency” designation. The CCHS SIT rated the Strategy & Goals element as “Developing” in the initial and final survey results. A key point of interest is that the school improvement team recognizes that one or more of the established goals are not aligned, and the school’s theory of action may be missing components or may be unclear.



Table 6

*Strategies & Goals*

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Goals	Goals are not clear or measurable.	One or more goals are not aligned with scorecard or TIA.	The school has established clear, measurable goals for student achievement aligned with scorecard metrics and school-specific TIA.	2.20	2.60
Theory of Action (TOA)	The school has not crafted a TOA, is not explicit in identifying a TIA or powerful practice, or most of the cycle components.	The school's theory of action begins to outline a focus and cycle components but may be missing components or may be unclear.	The school has established a clear theory of action that outlines the school's TIA and powerful practices and incorporates the professional learning cycle components. TOA is updated during the school year as needed.	2.09	2.36

Table 6 (continued)

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Targeted Instructional Area (TIA)	TIA is not identified or is identified with little evidence schoolwide.	The school environment reflects the TIA. Professional development is focused on the TIA. Mixed evidence in classrooms of TIA and/or not all staff relate to the TIA.	All teachers and students can relate to and articulate the TIA; the school environment reflects the TIA. Classroom implementation of powerful practices is at a rigorous level.	2.00	2.09
Resource Alignment	The school has not yet begun to align resources to its TIA.	The school has aligned some of its resources to focus on its TIA.	The school aligns its resources (time, people, and money) to focus on its TIA.	2.09	2.36

## **Professional Learning Cycle**

The nine-week professional learning cycle is a model that creates a professional learning plan that builds expertise in all staff through repeated cycles of high-quality learning, followed by opportunities for practicing, receiving feedback, observing colleagues, ongoing professional reading, and peer discussion about the practices, including examining the impact of the practices on student learning by looking at student work and reviewing student performance data. “Being strategic about what teachers need to learn and implementing a targeted professional learning plan with repeated cycles that provides teachers with the support they need to develop expertise are great ways to move toward that goal as well as toward the ultimate goal of improving student learning” (Nelson & Cudeiro, 2009). During the nine weeks, the SIT focused on specific research-based instructional practices that were aligned to student needs as identified through the analysis of student-generated data.

The SIT completed the school improvement team survey after completing the professional learning cycle. The results, as listed in Table 7, show promising change among the eight elements that comprise the Professional Learning Cycle. Initial survey responses prior to the nine-week professional learning cycle indicated that 25% (2 of 8) of the elements were ranked as “Emergent,” and 75% (6 of 8) of the elements were ranked as “Developing.” Similar to the Conditions for Team Success and Strategy & Goals, it is important to note that 0% (0 of 8) of the elements were ranked as “Proficient.” The two elements that were identified as “Emergent” included Observing Colleagues: Learning Walks and Observing Colleagues: Peer Observations. The final survey results indicated that the initial two elements ranked as “Emergent” converted to “Developing” resulted in 100% (8 of 8) of the elements ranked as “Developing,” and 0% (0 of 8) of the elements ranked proficient. It is important to note that 62.5% (5 of 8) of the elements

Table 7

*Professional Learning Cycle*

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Cycle Calendar & Implementation	SIT has implemented less than 1-2 cycles with missing components.	SIT has implemented 1-2 cycles but is missing some components of the cycle.	The SIT is leading the school in at least 1-2 cycles per year, implementing all components of the Cycles of Professional Learning around one or two Powerful Practices. Cycle calendar fully developed and outlines SIT and teacher team activities on a weekly basis.	2.64	2.64
Professional Reading	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle.	Staff read articles and texts pertaining to effective teaching strategies in the TIA at least once per cycle.	Staff read articles and texts pertaining to effective teaching strategies in the TIA at least three times per cycle.	2.27	2.27
Powerful Practice	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle.	Selected practice is not a pedagogical practice, does not connect to TIA, and/or does not integrate higher-level thinking skills.	Selected practice is a pedagogical practice that connects to TIA and integrates higher-level thinking skills into learning (aligned to CCSS).	2.56	2.64

Table 7 (continued)

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Input/Training	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle.	Staff trained, but not all staff are targeted or training is of low quality.	Staff understands success criteria for selected powerful practice as a result of SIT-planned training/modeling.	2.36	2.36
Observing Colleagues: Learning Walk	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle.	The SIT observes classrooms but strays from focus on powerful practice and/or does not use learning walk to identify additional supports.	The SIT observes classrooms focused on the use of the powerful practice, following a period of safe practice. The SIT identifies additional training and supports.	1.73	2.09
Observing Colleagues: Peer Observations	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle.	Some teachers observe each other.	All teachers observe each other at least once per cycle and learn from each other.	1.82	2.09
Receiving Feedback	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle.	Only administrators provide feedback and/or feedback is neither timely nor relevant to the powerful practice.	SIT members provide timely and relevant feedback that reinforces teachers' positive actions and suggests specific improvements.	2.27	2.55

Table 7 (continued)

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Looking at Student Work & Data	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle.	Teachers begin to use data to identify student needs and areas for improvement, but teachers are varied in using this information to change practice.	Teachers use internal/external assessment data and LASW data to inform their practice, craft their own assessments, and address student needs.	2.09	2.18

increased in their average ratings from initial to final survey results. The three elements that had no change in ratings at the conclusion of the nine-week professional learning cycle were Cycle Calendar & Implementation, Professional Reading, and Input/Training, with a 2.64 rating.

### **Teacher Teams**

At CCHS, there are a variety of opportunities for teachers to participate in leadership roles beyond the classroom. Beyond the school improvement team, teachers may serve as department chair, grade level chair, beginning teacher mentor, and a host of other possible roles as identified by need at the school level. When focusing on school transformation, it is beneficial that the school improvement team participants establish their leadership in varying roles beyond SIT. There were two elements that comprised the Teacher Teams priority embedded in the survey. Listed in Table 8, both elements, Teams Established & Meeting and Support & Coaching, were rated in the final survey as “Developing” with Support & Coaching initially designated “Emergent” with a 1.73 rating. In achieving the “Proficient” designation for Support & Coaching, the CCHS school improvement team would need to demonstrate consistent and intentional support of teacher teams through training and coaching as aligned to team goals, protocols, and action items, as well as the resulting impact on student achievement. The final survey rating of 2.09 indicates a growth measure of 17.22% but falls well short of the desired team proficiency. Based on the comparison of the final survey data versus the initial survey data, there was 0% growth in Teams Established & Meeting as the initial rating of 2.18 remained unchanged. This is an indication that one or more CCHS teachers are not assigned and/or part of a teacher team that meets regularly.

## **Communication**

Regular collaboration and team planning sessions are extremely valuable to school improvement teams and across the entire school staff. “Engaging in these practices has a positive impact on teacher effectiveness. Education is a highly difficult concept for those outside the field to understand” (Meador, 2019). Listed in Table 8, both elements, Staff & Teacher Teams and Parents & Community were rated in the final survey as “Developing,” with Parents & Community initially designated “Emergent” with a 1.18 rating. In achieving the “Proficient” designation for Parents & Community, the CCHS school improvement team would need to directly involve parents and community stakeholders to support student progress in the defined targeted instructional area of the professional learning cycle. The final survey rating of 1.27 indicates a growth measure of 7.09% and falls significantly short of the desired team proficiency. Based on the comparison of the final survey data versus the initial survey data, there was 3.92% growth in Staff & Teacher Teams as the initial rating of 2.45 increased slightly to 2.55. This is an indication that communication across CCHS is sporadic, and parents and community shareholders may be unaware of the school-wide targeted instructional areas.

## **Common Core State Standards/Standard Course of Study**

Nearly a decade ago, school districts across the country were rolling out the newly adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2011 and 2012. North Carolina adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics (Math). Today, North Carolina continues to use the CCSS for ELA and Math, as well as committing to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for all other subject content areas. The CCSS priority featured in the school improvement team survey is composed of four elements, as seen in Table 8. Although the initial and final surveys do not demonstrate “Proficiency” in any of the



Table 8

*Teacher Teams, Communication, and Common Core State Standards*

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Teams Established & Meeting	The majority of teachers are not part of a teacher team that meets at least twice a month.	Some teachers are not part of a teacher team that meets at least twice a month.	All teachers are members of at least one teacher team that meets at least twice a month (ideally, weekly).	2.18	2.18
Support & Coaching	SIT does not provide support for or understand Teacher Team goals, protocols, or action items.	SIT has some understanding of Teacher Team goals, protocols, and/or action items but does not track their implementation or effectiveness.	SIT supports teacher team through training and coaching and understands all the teams' goals, protocols, and action items as well as their resulting impact on student achievement.	1.73	2.09
Staff & Teacher Teams	SIT does not systematically communicate with the staff, and some teachers are unaware of what the SIT does.	Team meeting calendars are created but not shared widely. SIT activity is shared with all staff sporadically.	SIT & teacher team calendar is shared widely. SIT members communicate SIT activity to the school's faculty members at large after each meeting.	2.45	2.55
Parents & Community	Parents and community are unaware of targeted instructional area.	Parents and community are aware and understand the targeted instructional area.	Parents and community actively support student progress in the targeted instructional area.	1.18	2.27

Table 8 (continued)

Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)	Initial	Final
Standards Familiarity	Less than half of the teaching staff are familiar with CCSS.	The majority of teachers have been introduced to CCSS.	All staff have been introduced to the CCSS, their structure, and where they came from.	2.55	2.55
Unpacking Standards	Less than half of the teaching staff have experience unpacking CCSS standards.	The majority of teachers experience unpacking at least one CCSS standard using a protocol with colleagues.	All teachers have experience unpacking at least two standards using a protocol with colleagues.	2.18	2.18
Performance Assessments	Less than half of the teachers can identify the features of a high-quality performance assessment and can articulate the process for developing one.	The majority of teachers can identify the features of a high-quality performance assessment and can articulate the process for developing one.	All teachers can identify the features of a high-quality performance assessment and can articulate the process for developing one.	2.09	2.09
Unit Planning	Less than half of the teachers understand the process for developing standards-based units.	The majority of teachers understand the process for developing standards-based units.	All teachers understand the process for developing standards-based units.	2.09	2.27

four categories, the SIT rated itself “Developing” in 100% of the four elements surveyed. There was weak growth at 7.93% in the Unit Planning element as the initial 2.09 rating increased to a 2.27 final survey rating. The significant difference between the “Proficient” and “Developing” ratings for the four elements associated with the Common Core State Standards/Standard Course of Study is the commitment to “all” or “majority” within each element descriptor. The 2.09 ratings for Performance Assessments and Unit Planning represent an inconsistent effort for a unified approach to teaching and learning. It is important to recognize that the “Developing” rating for the Standards Familiarity element demonstrates that one or more professional teacher has not been introduced to the Common Core State Standards/Standard Course of Study, their structure, and where the standards originate.

### **Professional Learning Cycle Implementation**

The professional learning cycle was implemented by the school improvement team (SIT) during the spring semester of 2021. The nine-week professional learning cycle was designed as a scripted professional learning plan that was intended to grow the professional capacities of all staff. The SIT team and faculty members of CCHS engaged in content-specific professional development, including opportunities for practicing, receiving feedback, observing colleagues, professional reading, and peer discussion about the newly acquired instructional practices. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and health restrictions, the professional learning cycle was modified for the CCHS staff members to participate, whether working at school or at home.

The first week of the professional learning cycle prompted school improvement team members and staff to individually research and select content-specific professional development that would promote professional growth. The selections were gathered and shared with the

school improvement team. During the second week, the CCHS teachers and staff engaged in the selected professional development. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic closures and restrictions, the majority of professional development offerings were provided online as face-to-face gatherings were heavily restricted across the region. The third and fourth weeks were established for safe, professional practice opportunities. Educators were encouraged to implement their new learning within the classroom instruction. It is important to note that much of the implementation of new learning was through the delivery of online instruction from teachers to students, as the school building was often at minimal capacity.

The school improvement team (SIT) met during week six of the professional learning cycle. During the meeting, the school improvement team promoted and established peer observation schedules. To observe and promote safe classroom practice, teachers and staff members visited face-to-face and online classroom settings. The professional collaboration among peers provided an opportunity to gain feedback and suggestions reducing the fears associated with implementing new instructional practices during formal evaluations. Extending into week 7, the school improvement team promoted professional research and readings. All SIT members were asked to identify and review proven research-based articles that supported the implementation of the initial content-specific professional development.

The final two weeks of the nine-week professional learning cycle provided opportunities to measure and align the professional educator's learning within the content-specific professional development. During week eight, the site-based administrators observed teachers and staff providing direct instruction using the newly acquired, research-based instructional practices. The final week of the professional learning provided an opportunity for the school improvement team to review student-generated work, including classroom assignments and assessments. The

school improvement team members self-reflected and shared their areas of professional growth with regard to achieving the desired student outcomes.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

On March 14, 2020, Governor Roy Cooper closed North Carolina public schools for face-to-face instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially planned as a two-week closure to gather information and develop a plan of action, CCHS students did not return for face-to-face instruction for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. Graduation and promotion ceremonies were held virtually, with CCHS adapting to the rapidly changing pandemic and health protocols implemented by the school district and the county health department. The school district developed and implemented a school re-entry plan as required by the Governor and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. CCHS students and employees engaged in remote teaching and learning for the first nine weeks of the 2020-2021 school year. The Board of Education reopened CCHS and the other district schools on October 12, 2020, for face-to-face instruction. Due to the growing COVID-19 positive cases and associated deaths in the county, over 50% of the students and employees stayed home.

CCHS teachers engaged their students in an asynchronous learning environment. The school district quickly acquired and distributed laptop technology to all students and educators. Hotspots were distributed to CCHS families and educators who lacked and/or could not afford home internet connections. Professional development was provided to CCHS educators who found instructional challenges in teaching students at home while simultaneously teaching students face-to-face in a classroom. I observed low teacher morale, low student attendance, varying academic outcomes, and skyrocketing parent frustration.

The school improvement team (SIT) dynamic changed at CCHS due to the combined fears and behaviors of the participants. During the 2020 Fall semester, SIT participation varied based on employee accommodations and work/life priority balances. The CCHS school improvement team rarely met from August to December as many employees feared coming to the school building due to COVID-19 health risks. The average daily student attendance rate for grades 9-12 was less than 15% during the initial return to face-to-face instruction at school in October 2020. The majority of CCHS students attending school were ninth and tenth graders who were spread across the school building. Few teachers were teaching from their classroom or campus. Substitute teachers were scarce. The school building was essentially empty. The school improvement team (SIT) functioned via Zoom meetings, emails, and telephone conferences.

As the new calendar year changed to January 2021, an increasing population of students and employees began to return to the CCHS campus. COVID-19 protocols and mitigation efforts were in full force, including masks, temperature checks, isolation rooms, and quarantining procedures. The school improvement team (SIT) met once per month during the 2021 Spring semester. The initial SIT completion to the CALL research survey participation request was 7.14% (1 of 14) within the initial 30-day timeline. Upon multiple requests, the completion rate grew to 57.14% (8 of 14), which was short of the targeted 75% response rate. I met with the CCHS principal to strategize additional methods to increase SIT participation with the School Improvement Team (SIT) survey. Twelve of the 14 school improvement team members volunteered resulting in an 85.71% participation rate. However, one volunteer withdrew from the study prior to completing surveys and/or matrixes. Overall, the action research study progressed with a 78.57% participation rate.

Throughout the 2021 Spring semester, I witnessed behaviors of professional and personnel exhaustion and fear among school improvement team members. I witnessed school improvement team members trying to embrace their personal conflicts of attending work or remaining home with some individuals ultimately taking an unpaid leave of absence. Due to the pandemic, the SIT and the CCHS employees were simply trying to function and survive each day. Due to the survey response rates, coupled with the site-based circumstances driven by COVID-19, I mainly focused my research findings on the utilization of the school improvement team (SIT) survey and the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) results.

### **Deliverology**

The Deliverology unit members were committed to servicing the school improvement team at CCHS (CCHS) during the spring semester of 2021. The Deliverology unit members, composed of 11 district team members, were assembled to provide support to the school improvement team in the following capacity:

1. Set direction and context
2. Establish clear accountabilities
3. Create realistic budgets, plans, and targets
4. Track performance effectively
5. Hold robust performance dialogues
6. Ensure actions, rewards, and consequences

The Deliverology concept was established to provide key supports as a measure to promote continuous improvement within the school improvement team and throughout the school. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and health restrictions, the Deliverology team members

did not meet face-to-face with the school improvement team at the school site. Unfortunately, 55% (6 of 11) of the Deliverology unit members were quarantined due to a positive test for COVID-19 or identified as a close contact to another person who tested positive for COVID-19. The six members of the Deliverology unit were directly quarantined during the implementation of the CCHS professional learning cycle. In most cases, the quarantined members did not participate online with school improvement team members as their illness was significant.

The concept to establish a Deliverology unit to promote and advance the continuous improvement of the CCHS school improvement team and, consequently, the desired student outcomes remain a professional practice that I will continue moving forward. Unfortunately, the alignment of the Deliverology unit to the teachers and staff was largely prohibitive due to the inability to align supports within the face-to-face site-based setting.

### **CALL Survey**

The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) survey was developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It was adapted to measure instructional leadership practices relevant to current school contexts and present constructs that reflect the work being done in schools. The CALL constructs delve deeply into leadership practices, often inquiring about the work of teachers in the classroom. The CALL survey measures research-based leadership tasks or practices, thus shifting the focus from the individual to the work of school leaders (Blitz et al., 2014). The CALL survey provides multiple-choice questions covering five domains and 20 subdomains that assess core leadership practices that are distributed across the school building. All ratings are based on a scale of 5, where 5 is the highest score and 1 is the lowest score. The survey ratings are recorded within three categories including



teachers, administrators, and support staff. Listed below are the domains and subdomains included in the CALL survey.

1. Focus on Learning
  - 1.1 Maintaining a school-wide focus on learning
  - 1.2 Formal leaders are recognized as instructional leaders
  - 1.3 Integrated instructional design
  - 1.4 Providing appropriate services for all students
2. Monitoring Teaching & Learning
  - 2.1 Formative evaluation of student learning
  - 2.2 Summative evaluation of student learning
  - 2.3 Formative evaluation of teaching
  - 2.4 Summative evaluation of teaching
3. Building Nested Learning Communities
  - 3.1 Collaborative school-wide focus on teaching and learning
  - 3.2 Professional learning
  - 3.3 Socially distributed leadership
  - 3.4 Coaching and mentoring
4. Acquiring & Allocating Resources
  - 4.1 Personnel practices
  - 4.2 Structuring and managing time
  - 4.3 School resources are focused on student learning
  - 4.4 Integrating external expertise into school instructional program
  - 4.5 Coordinating and supervising relations with families and the external community

## 5. Maintaining a Safe and Effective Learning Environment

5.1 Clear, consistent, and enforced expectations for student behavior

5.2 Clean and safe learning environment

5.3 Student support services provide safe haven for all students

Overall, I utilized the CALL survey to understand the impact of participant school leaders on teachers at the school level. CALL is a nationally valid and reliable instrument based on the distributed leadership theory designed to assess leadership as a function in a school (Blitz, Salisbury, and Kelley 2014; Halverson and Kelley, 2017; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2001). The CALL reporting system disaggregates the data by roles, thereby showing the differences in experiences among administrators, teachers, and support staff. The comparison supports school leaders in identifying discrepancies in school activities and opportunities for growth (Blitz and Modeste, 2015).

### **Focus on Learning**

The Focus on Learning subdomains, as viewed in Table 9, show confidence with 75% of the CCHS survey ratings ranking above the CALL average ratings. The rating for subdomain 1.2 (Formal leaders are recognized as instructional leaders) was 4.25, which is the highest rating within the domain and the entire CALL survey. The administrator rating of 4.63 in subdomain 1.2 is the highest rating among this domain of all participating respondents. In contrast, the rating for subdomain 1.1 (Maintaining a school-wide focus on learning) was 3.39, which is .17 below the CALL average ratings at 3.56. The teacher rating of 3.26 in the subdomain 1.1 is the lowest rating among this domain of all participating respondents. It is important to note that the administrator and support staff ratings of 3.64 and 3.57, respectively for subdomain 1.1, ranked above the CALL average ratings independently. However, the teacher rating was significantly

lower, thus pushing the average ratings below the CALL average rating threshold. Further discussion with the school improvement team is warranted to determine why the data show misalignment between subdomains 1.1 and 1.2. According to the data, the teachers' value the formal leaders as instructional leaders. However, the data suggest that maintaining a school-wide focus on learning has fallen short in comparison.

### **Monitoring Teaching & Learning**

The Monitoring Teaching & Learning subdomains, as viewed in Table 9, show minimal confidence, with 25% of the CCHS survey ratings ranking above the CALL average ratings. The administrator rating of 4.00 in subdomain 2.4 (Summative evaluation of teaching) is .77 and .50 above the teacher and support staff ratings, respectively. Although the subdomain 2.4 ratings rank above the CALL average ratings of 3.37, the CCHS teacher ratings of 3.23 demonstrate administrator and teacher trends moving in opposite directions when focusing on teacher summative evaluations. The subdomain results for 2.3 (Formative evaluation of teaching) are well below the CALL average ratings at 2.84. A cross-comparison between teacher ratings in subdomain 2.3 (2.27) and administrator ratings in subdomain 2.4 (4.00) show a spacious gap in the integrity of the evaluation process for professional teachers. It is important to note that the data results suggest a correlation between the ratings for subdomain 2.3 (Formative evaluation of teaching) and 3.4 (Coaching and mentoring) at 2.42 and 2.20, respectively.

### **Building Nested Learning Communities**

The Building Nested Learning Communities subdomains show moderate confidence, with 50% of the CCHS survey ratings ranking above the CALL average ratings. The strength within this domain is represented in subdomains 3.1 (Collaborative school-wide focus on teaching and learning) and 3.2 (Professional learning) with respective ratings of 3.71 and 3.66.

Upon review of subdomain 3.2, the administrator respondent ratings of 4.17 were significantly above the CALL average rating of 3.53, whereas the support staff respondents' ratings were 3.00. Although the subdomains show a 50% confidence, it is important to recognize 75% of the support staff ratings within this domain are below the CALL average ratings. The CCHS survey rating for subdomain 3.4 (Coaching and mentoring) is 2.20, which is the lowest rating within the domain and the entire CALL survey. All three respondent categories within the 3.4 subdomain registered ratings below the CALL survey averages, including the 1.00 ratings for support staff. The CALL survey results show a lack of confidence in subdomains 3.3 (Socially distributed leadership) and 3.4 (Coaching and Mentoring), which identify critical practices in areas including, but not limited to, utilizing teacher experience, teacher and staff involvement in decisions, and mentoring programs for struggling teachers.

### **Acquiring & Allocating Resources**

The Acquiring & Allocating Resources subdomains show a 60% confidence level as three of the five subdomain ratings ranked higher than the CALL average ratings. The 4.1 (Personnel practices) subdomain ranked the highest within the domain and the second highest across the entire CALL survey. Both the teacher and administrator respondent ratings ranked the highest within the domain as key practices such as teacher expertise, staff teaching assignments, and addressing poor teacher performance were key practices identified in this area. The subdomain 4.3 (School resources are focused on student learning) average rating of 2.85 ranks the lowest in the domain and in the bottom 25% of subdomains over the entire CALL survey. There is a significant contrast in results as the administrator average rating at 3.45 is 1.70 higher than the support staff average ratings at 1.75 for this subdomain. The teacher average rating is 2.77 resulting in teacher and support staff average ratings recorded below the CALL average

Table 9

*CALL Survey Results*

Domain	Subdomain	CALL	CCHS	Teacher	Admin	Staff
1.1	Maintaining a school-wide focus on learning	3.56	3.39	3.26	3.64	3.57
1.2	Formal leaders are recognized as instructional leaders	3.92	4.25	4.10	4.63	4.25
1.3	Integrated instructional design	3.47	3.87	4.21	3.63	3.63
1.4	Providing appropriate services for all students	3.58	3.66	3.89	3.50	3.50
2.1	Formative evaluation of student learning	3.71	3.33	3.30	3.22	3.86
2.2	Summative evaluation of student learning	3.61	3.46	3.47	3.08	4.50
2.3	Formative evaluation of teaching	2.84	2.42	2.27	2.67	2.67
2.4	Summative evaluation of teaching	3.37	3.46	3.23	4.00	3.50
3.1	Collaborative school-wide focus on teaching and learning	3.57	3.71	3.70	3.67	3.86
3.2	Professional learning	3.53	3.66	3.59	4.17	3.00
3.3	Socially distributed leadership	3.32	2.80	2.56	3.20	3.20
3.4	Coaching and mentoring	2.61	2.20	2.47	2.14	1.00
4.1	Personnel practices	3.37	4.19	4.16	4.50	3.75
4.2	Structuring and managing time	3.54	3.05	3.15	3.27	2.00
4.3	School resources are focused on student learning	3.14	2.85	2.77	3.45	1.75
4.4	Integrating external expertise into school instructional program	3.14	3.33	3.53	3.00	3.00

Table 9 (continued)

Domain	Subdomain	CALL	CCHS	Teacher	Admin	Staff
4.5	Coordinating and supervising relations with families and the external community	3.15	3.27	3.23	3.40	3.27
5.1	Clear, consistent and enforced expectations for student behavior	3.62	4.16	3.90	4.67	4.44
5.2	Clean and safe learning environment	3.49	4.11	4.23	4.14	3.43
5.3	Student support services provide safe haven for all students	3.08	3.30	3.33	3.25	3.25

ratings. The survey results demonstrate a lack of confidence in subdomain 4.3 (School resources are focused on student learning), which includes key practices including the identification of staffing needs, adding instructional time for students, and the alignment of financial resources to learning goals.

### **Maintaining a Safe and Effective Learning Environment**

The Maintaining a Safe and Effective Learning Environment subdomain exceeds in confidence, with 100% of the subdomain survey ratings ranking above the CALL average survey ratings. The strength within this domain is represented in subdomains 5.1 (Clear, consistent, and enforced expectations for student behavior) and 5.2 (Clean and safe learning environment) with respective ratings of 4.16 and 4.11. The survey ratings indicate strong support for the key practices within the subdomain that include administrators' understanding of school-wide behavioral expectations, consistency of discipline policy for students identified with an emotional behavioral disability, the safety of classrooms, cleanliness of hallways, and the safety of hallways. Additionally, subdomain 5.3 (Student support services provide a safe haven for all students) average ratings of 3.30 indicate an alignment to the effectiveness of planning for addressing discipline and behavior referrals as well as addressing dropout rates.

### **Overview of Findings Regarding Research Question 1**

Question 1 in this study asked, "To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?" I gathered data from the school improvement team (SIT) survey as well as the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) survey. The initial SIT survey results for the Conditions for Team Success prior to the nine-week professional learning cycle indicated that 33.33% (3 of 9) of the elements were ranked as "Emergent," and 66.67% (6 of 9) of the elements were ranked as

“Developing.” I was not surprised that 0% (0 of 9) of the elements were ranked as “Proficient” as the concept of the school improvement team-leading school transformation was new for the team. The three elements that were identified as “Emergent” included Team Purpose, Roles & Responsibilities, and Equity of Voice & Use of Protocols. As the professional learning cycle initiated, it was clear that the SIT members had limited to no experience in serving as change agents. The school improvement team members struggled to establish team purpose, define roles and responsibilities, and implement intentional and purposeful protocols.

There was a significant change in behaviors for the SIT members as the typical monthly SIT meetings were restructured with intentionality with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The final SIT survey results, upon the conclusion of the professional learning cycle, indicated that the initial three elements ranked as “Emergent” converted to “Developing,” resulting in 100% (9 of 9) of the elements ranked as “Developing,” and 0% (0 of 9) of the elements ranked proficient. The fact that 88.89% (8 of 9) of the survey elements for Conditions for Team Success increased in their average ratings from the initial to final survey results demonstrates the influence and impact of the school improvement team’s structured collaboration throughout the professional learning cycle.

The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) survey ratings for subdomain 3.1 (Collaborative school-wide focus on teaching and learning) and subdomain 4.1 (Personnel practices) demonstrate the school improvement team’s newfound ownership in the school transformation process. The subdomain 3.1 average survey ratings demonstrate a collective and collaborative SIT behavior as teachers, administrators, and support staff ratings were 3.7, 3.67, and 3.86, respectively. The collaborative-centered SIT established team purpose, roles and responsibilities, and a school-wide focus on teaching and learning while engaged with



the professional learning cycle. The subdomain 4.1 average survey ratings show a high confidence in personnel practices with an average survey rating of 4.19. The teachers, administrators, and support staff ratings all independently scored above the CALL average ratings with ratings of 4.16, 4.50, and 3.75, respectively. I believe the school improvement team, as represented in the aforementioned data, set new expectations and SIT behaviors as a result of their experiences with the professional learning cycle.

### **Overview of Findings Regarding Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 in the study asked, “To what extent does the utilization of a “Deliverology” model provide support for the school improvement team?” The concept of Deliverology was to assemble a core group of professionals who exclusively focus on challenging performance standards by engaging school improvement teams with difficult questions that generate innovative approaches to the site-based targeted needs. Each member of the Deliverology team had a particular skill set that would help the school improvement team in moving the goals and strategies forward. The Deliverology team that was assembled to support the school improvement team’s goals at CCHS was composed of 11 district team members.

During the spring semester of 2021, COVID-19 closures and health restrictions significantly impacted the intended design of Deliverology at CCHS. Fifty-five percent (6 of 11) of the Deliverology unit members were quarantined due to a positive test for COVID-19 or identified as having close contact with another person who tested positive for COVID-19. The Deliverology team was unable to provide consistent support from its members - the Chief Academic Officer, Chief Finance Officer, Director of Technology, Director of Student Services, Director of Instructional Technology, and the Director of Career and Technical Education during the entire nine-week professional learning cycle. The Deliverology team was not able to work

together consistently and collectively during the nine-week professional learning cycle. The CCHS professional learning cycle focused on content-specific professional development for the school improvement team members as well as the entire school staff. With the depletion of the Deliverology team members, coupled with school closures and health restrictions, the SIT team support plan was modified from face-to-face support meetings to online meetings with individual SIT members at times when school and district employees were both healthy and available. The Deliverology team was unable to collectively review the initial surveys provided to the school improvement team. Several Deliverology team members were able to collaborate on the survey data to help provide strategic supports throughout the professional learning cycle. It was the initial desire to study the collective engagement of the Deliverology team and school improvement team as support mechanisms were built and implemented with the target to grow each SIT member from emergent to proficient. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic misaligned the defined structures that may have yielded a greater outcome otherwise.

### **Overview of Findings Regarding Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 in the study asked, “To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?” The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) survey yielded data to support elements of strong distributed leadership. The Focus on Learning domain had a 75% confidence rating, with the subdomain 1.2 (Formal leaders are recognized as instructional leaders) posting a 4.25, which was the highest rating within the domain and the entire CALL survey. The administrator rating of 4.63 in subdomain 1.2 was the highest rating among this domain of all participating respondents. I believe this is a result of veteran leadership, a principal with greater than 20 years of experience who has hired highly

qualified professional educators who desire to grow in teaching and learning. The principal's ability to act as a facilitator and team member on the school improvement team promoted distributed leadership among the teachers and support staff.

The CALL survey results also showed distributed leadership throughout the professional learning cycle as subdomain 1.3 (Integrated instructional design) was rated a 4.21 by teachers. This is a key point of reference as the modified professional learning cycle focused on content-specific professional development throughout the nine-week cycle period. The ability of individual school improvement team members to review student-generated data, identify a targeted instructional area, and engage in content-specific professional development is a result of the distributed leadership of the school improvement team.

### **Summary**

The study was aligned to three research questions related to the professional growth of school improvement teams. My analysis has produced valuable insight into the advancement of school improvement team behaviors through the implementation of a professional learning cycle. In reviewing research questions 1 and 3, my analysis suggests that school improvement team behaviors change through the implementation and influence of a successfully executed professional learning cycle. The professional growth observed from the initial school improvement team survey to the final survey suggests the potential for greater gains in a non-COVID-19 pandemic setting. In reviewing research question 2, it is with great belief that a Deliverology team approach is applicable to the advancement of school improvement team behaviors. It is unfortunate that the global pandemic provided such a significant barrier to this portion of the research study.

In the following chapter, I will provide insight and reflections regarding the significant learning from conducting the research study based on the literature and data collected, and I will share the challenges, hardships, and barriers I encountered in implementing this study during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will provide several recommendations that could influence the implementation of professional learning cycles in a school setting to achieve professional growth among all school improvement team members.

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY**

Coastal Carolina High School (CCHS) has earned a performance letter grade of a “C” or “D” since 2014 on the NC School Report Card. The principal acknowledged that there was no emphasis on developing the school improvement team (SIT) with professional development or leadership training. The CCHS SIT was managed as an extension of the faculty but not viewed as a school transformation entity. Deep conversations regarding professional research and learning to improve instructional practices were essentially non-existent, which may have contributed to school-wide low performance.

As of January 2019, 100% of the principals at Eastern Carolina County Schools reported having no experience with high-yielding school transformation processes. The specific problem was systemic across the entire school system, including CCHS. The purpose of the action research study at CCHS was to implement professional learning cycles that were tied directly to intentional systemic professional development. Changing the school improvement team (SIT) behaviors was critical to advancing professional growth and achieving the desired student outcomes for CCHS. The research study engaged the CCHS SIT in professional learning cycles with a focus on research-based instructional practices that were warranted by the site-based student-generated data. The SIT changed its traditional team practices to a collaborative approach that required new professional learning and behaviors aligned to impacting student achievement.

The research study was conducted at CCHS, which contained 404 students and 30 educators. This action research study was guided by one overarching research question with three secondary questions:

1. How does a uniquely designed school improvement team process supported by an innovative model of support impact the beliefs, skills, and practice of school educators?
  - To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?
  - To what extent does the utilization of a "Deliverology" model provide support for the school improvement team?
  - To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?

### **Summary of the Findings**

Question 1 in this study asked, "To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?" The initial SIT survey results for the Conditions for Team Success prior to the nine-week professional learning cycle indicated that one-third of the elements were ranked as "Emergent," and two-thirds of the elements were ranked as "Developing." I was not surprised that zero of the elements were ranked as "Proficient," as the concept of the school improvement team-leading school transformation was new for the team. The three elements that were identified as "Emergent" included Team Purpose, Roles & Responsibilities, and Equity of Voice & Use of Protocols. As the professional learning cycle initiated, it was clear that the SIT members had limited to no experience in serving on a transformational team.

There was a significant change in behaviors for the SIT members as the typical monthly SIT meetings were restructured with intentionality with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

Upon the conclusion of the professional learning cycle, the final SIT survey results indicated that the initial three elements ranked as “Emergent” converted to “Developing,” resulting in all of the elements ranked as “Developing.” The fact that nearly all of the survey elements for Conditions for Team Success increased in their average ratings from the initial to final survey results demonstrates the influence and impact of the school improvement team’s structured collaboration throughout the professional learning cycle.

The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) survey ratings for subdomain 3.1 (Collaborative school-wide focus on teaching and learning) and subdomain 4.1 (Personnel practices) demonstrate the school improvement team’s newfound ownership in the school transformation process. The collaborative-centered SIT established team purpose, roles and responsibilities, and a school-wide focus on teaching and learning while engaged with the professional learning cycle. The subdomain 4.1 average survey ratings show a high confidence in personnel practices as teachers, administrators, and support staff ratings all independently scored above the CALL average ratings. The data demonstrates that the school improvement team set new expectations and SIT behaviors due to their experiences with the professional learning cycle.

Research Question 2 in the study asked, “To what extent does the utilization of a “Deliverology” model provide support for the school improvement team?” The purpose of Deliverology was to assemble a core group of professionals who exclusively focus on challenging performance standards on engaging the SIT with difficult questions that would generate innovative approaches to the CCHS targeted needs. Each member of the Deliverology team had a particular skill set that would help the school improvement team in moving the goals and strategies forward. The Deliverology team that was assembled to support the school

improvement team's goals at Coastal Carolina High School was composed of 11 district team members.

During the spring semester of 2021, COVID-19 closures and health restrictions significantly impacted the intended design of Deliverology at CCHS. More than half of the Deliverology unit members were quarantined due to a positive test for COVID-19 or identified as a close contact with another person who tested positive for COVID-19. The Deliverology team was unable to provide consistent support from the Chief Academic Officer, Chief Finance Officer, Director of Technology, Director of Student Services, Director of Instructional Technology, and the Director of Career and Technical Education during the entire nine-week professional learning cycle. The Deliverology team was not able to consistently and collectively work together during the nine-week professional learning cycle. With the depletion of the Deliverology team members, coupled with school closures and health restrictions, the SIT support plan was modified from face-to-face support meetings to online meetings with individual SIT members at times when school and district employees were both healthy and available.

The Deliverology team was unable to collectively review the initial surveys provided to the school improvement team. Several Deliverology team members were able to collaborate on the survey data to help provide strategic supports throughout the professional learning cycle. It was the initial desire to study the collective engagement of the Deliverology team and SIT as support mechanisms were built and implemented with the target to grow each SIT member from emergent to proficient. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic misaligned the defined structures that may have yielded a greater outcome otherwise.

Research Question 3 in the study asked, "To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and



progress through the study?” The Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) survey yielded data to support elements of strong distributed leadership. The Focus on Learning domain had a strong confidence rating, with the subdomain 1.2 (Formal leaders are recognized as instructional leaders) posting the highest rating within the domain and the entire CALL survey. The administrator rating in subdomain 1.2 was the highest rating among this domain of all participating respondents. The principal’s veteran leadership, with greater than 20 years of experience, has hired highly qualified educators and staff who desire to professionally grow and advance. The principal’s ability to act as a facilitator and team member on the school improvement team promoted distributed leadership among the teachers and support staff.

The CALL survey results also showed distributed leadership throughout the professional learning cycle as subdomain 1.3 (Integrated instructional design) was rated high by teachers. This is a key outcome as the modified professional learning cycle focused on content-specific professional development throughout the nine-week cycle period. The ability of individual school improvement team members to review student-generated data, identify a targeted instructional area, and engage in content-specific professional development was a result of the distributed leadership of the SIT.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The behavioral interactions among the SIT members can directly impact the trajectory of the desired student outcomes. The Basic Human Needs Theory, according to Barsky (2017), suggests that people engaged in conflict will seek to have their basic needs met as a measure to secure a foundation before higher-level conflict negotiation can occur. DeHaan (2015) cites that ensuring the basic needs of the SIT may mediate any conflict during transformational change that is perceived as top-down, central office compliance while being locally viewed as a moral

victory in conflict resolution. Upon review of the associated data collected for research question 1, “To what extent does the introduction and implementation of a professional learning cycle have on school improvement team behaviors?” the data show that CCHS SIT members had limited to no experience in serving on a transformational team. The CCHS SIT members assembled as a group of educators without much structure or continuous improvement efforts geared toward school-wide transformational change. The data indicate collaborative school-wide efforts on teaching and learning but with minimum coaching and mentoring support. The introduction and implementation of professional learning yielded progress toward improving the conditions and behaviors for SIT success. The CCHS SIT developed a team purpose, established roles and responsibilities, and utilized meeting norms for all team members, which, in turn, improved individual behaviors that established trust among the team. The implementation of the professional learning cycle promoted a team-centered approach, with the SIT taking on the ownership of the school-wide transformation. The transformation included: establishing targeted learning goals over a nine-week professional learning cycle, streamlined improvement with personnel practices, structuring and managing time, and maintaining a school-wide focus on teaching and learning.

Although the literature search yielded few studies that addressed professional learning cycles, my research results align directly with the findings within the published report entitled *Every Child, Every School: Lessons from Chicago’s Partnership for Instructional Leadership* in October 2011, showcasing the 3-year project of Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI), Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and Targeted Leadership Consulting (TLC). The report cites,

Through the work of the Instructional Leadership Teams, teachers were able to lead critical fact-finding and decision-making about the needs of all students in the school and methods for instructional improvement. Their buy-in, openness, and willingness to try new practices in their classrooms, with the support of their principals, were the drivers of the improvements in the schools.

The connection between the CCHS SIT research study and the 3-year project collaboration between BPI, CPS, and TLC is that when school improvement team members are united in the implementation and shared ownership of a site-based Framework for Powerful Results and a Professional Learning Cycle, then their collective accountability for professional learning, collaboration, and desired student outcomes serves as the foundation that drives school transformation.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a significant limitation in answering research question 2, “To what extent does the utilization of a “Deliverology” model provide support for the school improvement team?” The purpose of the Deliverology team was to assemble a core group of professionals to engage the SIT with a six-step performance management cycle that would generate innovative approaches to the CCHS targeted needs. Throughout the research study, the Deliverology team collectively had minimum interactions with the CCHS SIT due to the district team members testing positive or being exposed to a person who tested positive for COVID-19. Although the Deliverology team was not able to meet face-to-face with the SIT members, there were successful outcomes from the direct interaction of the Deliverology team members. The CCHS SIT established nine-week professional learning cycle plans and identified specific instructional practices that the Deliverology team members could support with professional development and coaching. The Deliverology team researched professional readings and specific

training for the SIT for the nine-week professional learning cycle. The Deliverology team approach, without the COVID-19 pandemic, would likely have had a more significant role and impact on the development and advancement of the CCHS SIT. However, based on the research study results and the literature I reviewed, I will encourage the SIT to continue to incorporate Deliverology's "most effective tools – a prioritized set of measurable, ambitious, and time-bound goals – and trajectories, a projected progression toward these goals that creates a tight link between planned interventions and expected outcomes" (Barber et al., 2020).

The research data associated with question 3, "To what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study?" present a positive future for leadership at CCHS. The literature demonstrates that Richard DuFour focused on strong professional learning communities and teams within the school building. DuFour (2004) focused on how all stakeholders would engage with colleagues on a singular focus to build student success and achievement. Establishing a strong, cohesive SIT at CCHS aligns with the literature, specifically DuFour's concepts of distributed leadership and team strategy. Although there may be differences in the cognitive styles of the SIT members, their processes and procedures, including strategic, innovative approaches such as the Framework for Powerful Results and Professional Learning Cycle, may contribute to the overall SIT success. As seen in the CALL survey data, SIT members have a core belief that formal leaders are recognized as instructional leaders at CCHS. Additionally, the CALL survey data represent shared leadership values among SIT members as well as the willingness to build a strong culture of learning through the utilization of a nine-week professional learning cycle. This is a direct correlation to the literature, specifically the work of Nelson and Cudeiro (2009), citing, "...these actions have the potential to move a school a giant

step forward toward coherence and tighter coupling, where what and how students are learning is a matter of common knowledge, and most importantly, leading to a culture where adult learning becomes as common as student learning.”

### **Limitations of the Study**

The most significant research study limitation was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school closures and health restrictions on school improvement team personnel. The initial SIT completion to the CALL research survey participation request was 7.14% within the initial 30-day timeline. Upon multiple requests, the completion rate grew to 57.14%, which was short of the targeted 75% response rate. I met with the CCHS principal to strategize additional methods to increase SIT member participation with the School Improvement Team (SIT) survey. Twelve of the 14 school improvement team members volunteered, resulting in an 85.71% participation rate. However, one volunteer withdrew from the study prior to completing the surveys and matrixes. Overall, the action research study progressed with a 78.57% participation rate.

The parameters of the research study were flexible in adhering to the COVID-19 requirements and guidance from the Department of Health and Human Services, North Carolina General Assembly, Governor Roy Cooper, and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Although the design and implementation of the initial professional learning cycle changed to accommodate the school improvement team’s availability, the generalizability remains strong as a broader population of educators and researchers may find the professional learning cycle replicable and the research results reliable.

## **Implications of the Findings for Practice**

The research study conducted at CCHS has clear implications for practice. The research supports the continuing emphasis on developing the SIT as an important means of conducting transformational change. Although continuing effort should be invested in refining the most effective and meaningful instructional practices across all classrooms, the main challenge is to provide the SIT with the district support and site-based resources to enable them to lead the essential change as defined by student-generated data. The CALL survey showed substantial variation in the perceptions of CCHS teachers, administrators, and support staff related to what needs to be done for administering school improvement. The nine-week professional learning cycle was effective in engaging all SIT members and identifying areas of improvement through the research findings. Although there may be a few, if any, dissertations written using the Framework for Powerful Results, schools may considerably benefit from utilizing the nine-week professional learning cycle.

Adopting the Framework for Powerful Results and Professional Learning Cycle has provided CCHS with a mechanism to establish a culture of teacher leadership which may result in site-based transformational change. The Professional Learning Cycle is designed with specific elements intended to create a well-rounded SIT that focus on professional practices that suit the student learners throughout the school. The benefits for CCHS include frequent analysis of student work, classroom observations, professional readings, teacher reflections, and collaboration across a community of teachers and learners. Sharing this process and research findings with other schools and districts could be beneficial to other school improvement teams and boost the district's ability to establish Deliverology supports for all schools.

Building a collaborative SIT using the Framework for Powerful Results leads to positive changes in teacher communication, data examination, identifying targeted instructional areas, identifying and developing powerful instructional practices, and establishing and implementing targeted professional development. As the research findings suggest, teachers, administrators, and support staff desire to be part of the process of transformational change, including, but not limited to, changes in curriculum, school procedures, and potential policy changes. A broader collaboration among school improvement teams across an entire district may strengthen the process, increase the impact of a Deliverology approach, and produce greater student achievement.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

While this research study has generated strong results regarding the performance of the SIT at CCHS, there are recommendations for continuous improvement through the implementation of the Framework for Powerful Results and the Professional Learning Cycle. The recommendations for practice are (1) establish a consistent SIT membership, (2) establish a 2-year cycle for the SIT Chair leadership position, (3) implement quarterly professional learning cycles, and (4) design targeted collaboration among teachers, administrators, and support staff.

#### **Recommendation One**

The State of North Carolina requires public schools to have a Board of Education approved school improvement plan annually. In an effort to effectively implement the school improvement plan action items with fidelity, the SIT should have consistent teacher leader membership. The collaboration among teacher leaders on the SIT will strengthen the continuous improvement efforts that are aligned with the initiatives documented in the school improvement

plan. Additionally, the consistency of teacher leaders on the SIT will provide a strong structure and implementation of the quarterly professional learning cycles.

### **Recommendation Two**

The establishment of a two-year cycle for the SIT chair leadership position will provide leadership coherence among the team. The 24-month term will provide direct leadership and oversight to the implementation of two Board of Education approved school improvement plans and eight quarterly professional learning cycles. The SIT chair's experience will provide team stability as team membership may change from year-to-year. The SIT chair's leadership will maintain the established culture of collaboration and continuous improvement.

### **Recommendation Three**

The design and implementation of four professional learning cycles, one per quarter, create a high yield of professional learning for all shareholders within the school. "By using a targeted professional learning plan, schools can increase the likelihood of student success by using cycles of learning to incorporate professional development lessons into daily school and classroom rhythms. The repetition of professional learning cycles is linked with supports such as observation and coaching, professional readings, looking at student work, peer observations, and walk-throughs. Taken together, these actions have the potential to move a school a giant step forward toward coherence and tighter coupling, where what and how students are learning is a matter of common knowledge, and most importantly, leading to a culture where adult learning becomes as common as student learning."

### **Recommendation Four**

As transformational change drives continuous improvement, it is essential that the SIT design targeted collaboration among teachers, administrators, and support staff. The SIT can



drive organizational behavior by establishing collaborative environments where teachers, administrators, and support staff build their collective learning capacities with regard to the research-based best practices that benefit students in all classrooms. This approach provides investment and ownership of school transformation and continuous improvement in the hands of all stakeholders within the school.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

The degree of both instructional leadership and teacher leadership in schools is strongly related to the overall academic performance of the school (Ingersoll et al., 2018). At CCHS, the CALL survey data suggests an imbalance between the teacher and administrator perceptions in the areas of 3.2 Professional Learning, 4.3 School Resources Are Focused On Student Learning, and 1.2 Formal Leaders Are Recognized As Instructional Leaders. One recommendation for future study would be to explore more strategies to support the alignment between teachers and principals when establishing a nine-week professional learning cycle. Establishing a nine-week professional learning cycle with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, as well as identifying the desired student-generated outcomes or targets, will aid in balancing the SIT.

For the high school teacher-leaders who felt somewhat confident in their ability to lead the SIT, additional professional learning in the form of individual coaching would be a possible source for future study as teacher leadership is strongly related to student achievement (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Every SIT member should respond to new leadership opportunities and develop personal abilities, so the SIT continues to think, grow, and learn at every level, not just in the administrator or facilitator position (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011).

At the district level, a recommendation would be to establish targeted professional learning for developing principals, assistant principals, and key district personnel on how to

implement the Framework for Powerful Results with a supporting nine-week Professional Learning Cycle. Constructing a strong district Deliverology team that can manage and monitor the implementation of SIT activities may have a significant impact on achieving the site-based desired student outcomes (Barber et al., 2020).

One additional recommendation would be to provide the SIT with uncommon experiences and engagement activities. Implement district-wide targeted learning walks for SIT members. Establish transformational leadership practices where the culture within the school and district moves from one of distrust and isolation to one of collaboration and openness. Bring the SIT teams from all schools together to engage in a deep analysis of their instructional practices as it relates to improving student achievement (Nelson & Cudeiro, 2009).

### **Conclusions**

The North Carolina General Assembly, in 2013, mandated that the state use test scores, academic growth measures, and other outcome-based measures to create an A-F performance grading system for all public schools in North Carolina. The North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.27 (n.d.) spotlights the School Improvement Team (SIT) as the influential body that impacts student performance and takes into consideration the annual performance goals as set by the State Board of Education under General Statute 115C-105.35 (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). The SIT is tasked with the development and implementation of a school improvement plan that includes “clear, unambiguous targets, explicit indicators and actual measures, and expeditious time frames for meeting the measurement standards” to improve student performance (Retrieved from [www.ncleg.gov](http://www.ncleg.gov)). Conversely, the CCHS SIT had been operating under the mindset that “because we have always done it this way...” was the acceptable way of conducting school business. As a result, administrators and SIT members did

not emphasize the role of the SIT as an agent of transformative change. Thus, CCHS experienced very little growth over a long period.

The influential work of Jeff Nelson and Amalia Cudeiro has proven that the intentional engagement of professional learning cycles will advance the SIT's professional growth and impact the desired student outcomes. Coupled with the Framework for Powerful Results and the Instructional Core, as researched by Dr. Richard Elmore, the conglomerate serves as a blueprint for professional growth and student achievement. Engaging the SIT members in the development of the school improvement plan, as defined by the North Carolina General Statutes, promotes greater ownership of the student-generated data and prompts the need for professional growth throughout the school. Utilizing a professional learning cycle, SIT members identify and implement research-based instructional practices that are monitored over nine weeks. The value and impact of the SIT are as deep as the training and professional development that guides the work.

As the study concluded, CCHS and the SIT were still experiencing the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. An increasing population of students and employees were cycling to and from the CCHS campus due to increased health quarantines. COVID-19 protocols and mitigation efforts were in full force, including masks, temperature checks, isolation rooms, and quarantining procedures. The SIT was emerging and developing into a proficient entity that would implement specific models of transformative actions.

### **Advancing Equity and Social Justice**

Social Equity Theory (SET) focuses on the social processes that contribute to racial achievement gaps as examined through performance differences by students of different racial-ethnic groups. SET explains factors that together create between-group differences in school

readiness and achievement. SET makes specific commitments about the social processes that are relevant to understanding the achievement gap (McKown, 2013). The Career and College Ready (CCR) Proficiency and Grade Level Proficiency (GLP), as seen in Table 10, show significant achievement gaps among multiple racial-ethnic groups of students at CCHS. The percentages of students who are identified as CCR are significantly low including 8 of 118 (6.80%) Black, 10 of 50 (20.00%) Hispanic, 44 of 167 (26.30%) White, and 1 of 17 (5.9%) Mutli. The percentages of students who are identified as GLP fars a bit better than CCR is 19 of 118 (16.10%) Black, 17 of 50 (34.00%) Hispanic, 91 of 167 (54.50%) White, and 1 of 17 (5.9%) Multi. Through the implementation of the Framework for Powerful Results and the Professional Learning Cycle, the SIT may address the achievement inequities across all racial-ethnicities at CCHS by making specific commitments to the social processes that are relevant to understanding the achievement gaps.

### **Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership**

The journey through conducting this research study has been met with every type of potential barrier that one could face over a three-year period. On three separate occasions, I was personally ready to walk away from it, defeated, short of the goal of concluding the research study and dissertation. I rationalized that the COVID-19 pandemic would absolve me of failure with friends and professional colleagues gradually and ultimately not asking about my research study progress. There were many moments that I recognized I had a serious case of impostor syndrome, which, in turn, I self-diagnosed it as the “disease of me” as I was solely looking internally at my own hardships. I had a serious misalignment of attitude, which was impacting my aptitude. Exhausted from my professional responsibilities throughout the pandemic, I

Table 10

*CCR & GLP Proficiencies*

All Subjects	All	Female	Male	Black	Hispanic	White	Multi
Number of Students	354	162	192	118	50	167	17
Number of Students CCR Proficient	63	26	37	8	10	44	1
Career and College Ready (Levels 4 & 5): Pct (%)	17.80	16.00	19.30	6.80	20.00	26.30	5.9
Number of Students GLP Proficient	128	65	63	19	17	91	1
Grade Level Proficient (Levels 3, 4, & 5): Pct (%)	36.20	40.10	32.80	16.10	34.00	54.50	5.9

struggled to maintain personal purpose and intent. Working as a superintendent, especially during a pandemic, has been extremely lonely.

I experienced a sudden mindset shift one evening while reading a book written by Admiral William H. McRaven entitled, *Make Your Bed*. The book narrative focuses on the United States military SEAL training. Admiral McRaven explains that the military students undergo the most intense training and instruction over six months. Most of the 150 military students in the annual training never finish as they individually choose to quit the program. Admiral McRaven addressed the SEAL class, “I will harass you unmercifully. I will embarrass you in front of your teammates. I will push you beyond your limits. And there will be pain. Lots and lots of pain. But if you don’t like the pain, if you don’t like all of the harassment, then there is an easy way out. All you have to do to quit is ring this bell three times. Ring the bell and you won’t have to get up early. Ring the bell, and you won’t have to do the long runs, the cold swims, or the obstacle course. Ring the bell, and you can avoid all this pain. But let me tell you something, if you quit, you will regret it for the rest of your life. Quitting never makes anything easier.” The message was intentional and authentic, a real-world application to the soldiers he addressed. Admiral McRaven continued, “Life is full of difficult times. But someone out there always has it worse than you do. If you fill your days with pity, sorrowful for the way you have been treated, bemoaning your lot in life, blaming your circumstances on someone or something else, then life will be long and hard. If, on the other hand, you refuse to give up on your dreams, stand tall and strong against the odds-then life will be what you make of it and you can make it great. Never, ever, ring the bell!”

Upon reading the book written by Admiral McRaven, I refocused my lens. No longer did I feel unmercifully harassed, embarrassed in front of my teammates, or pushed beyond my limits.

My mindset shifted, resulting in a resiliency approach which improved my attitude and increased the probability of a greater aptitude. Certainly, I was not going to ring the bell three times. I turned to Stephen Covey's book, *The Speed of Trust*, as a foundation piece to strengthen my professional growth throughout the research study, as working with school improvement team members requires significant trust. The key trust concepts acquired from this literature are worth sharing with fellow leaders and colleagues as the entire research study experience personifies important issues we are dealing with when we talk about intentional actions and desired outcomes of the school improvement team. The concepts (Covey & Merrill, 2018) include

- Intent matters,
- Intent grows out of character,
- While we tend to judge ourselves by intent, we tend to judge others by their behavior,
- Our perception of intent has a huge impact on trust,
- People often distrust us because of the conclusions they draw about what we do, and
- It is important for us to actively influence the conclusions others draw by “declaring our intent.”

As superintendent, working with the SIT required significant time to build trust and time to knock down individual barriers including suspicion. Professionally, I tried to develop trust through consistently demonstrating care toward the SIT members, caring about purposes, and caring about the quality of what we were doing together. Through this approach, the SIT members recognized that the motive behind the research study was authentic toward their professional growth as a means of generating greater student outcomes. I focused on The Principle of Behavior (Covey & Merrill, 2018) as a method to build relationship trust. Listed

below are the 13 behaviors Stephen Covey showcases that leaders should use to interact with others in ways that increase trust and avoid interacting in ways that destroy it.

- Straight talk
- Demonstrate respect
- Create transparency
- Right wrongs
- Show loyalty
- Deliver results
- Get better
- Confront reality
- Clarify expectations
- Practice accountability
- Listen first
- Keep commitments
- Extend trust

The behaviors are common to high-trust leaders and people throughout the world (Covey & Merrill, 2018). These behaviors are based on principles that govern trusting relationships, they are based on personal credibility, they are actionable, and the behaviors are universal and can be applied to any relationship.

Over the course of three academic years, coupled with the research study, I have professionally grown as a superintendent and as an educational leader in North Carolina. During the time span of the research study, I was selected as the Northeast Regional Education Service Alliance (NERESA) – Region 1 – Superintendent of the Year. Additionally, I was one of eight



finalists for the 2022 North Carolina Superintendent of the Year. It is my aspiration that the learning and professional growth throughout the research study will be influential and impactful on SIT and educators for years to come.

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## APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board**  
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284  
[rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/](http://rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/)

### Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Matthew Cheeseman](#)  
CC: [Daniel Novey](#)  
Date: 3/23/2021  
Re: [UMCIRB 21-000002](#)  
Changing School Improvement Team Behaviors: The Influence and Impact of Engaging School Improvement Teams in Professional Learning Cycles as a Measure to Achieve Schoolwide Academic Growth

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 3/23/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2c.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
CALL Survey(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Cheeseman_ECU_Dissertation_Proposal 10.27.2020.docx(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Consent Paragraph(0.01)	Consent Forms
Introductory Script(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
SIT Rubric - Cheeseman.xlsx(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
SIT Rubric - Cheeseman.xlsx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT



Beaufort County Schools

**Matthew F. Cheeseman, Superintendent**

321 Smaw Road

Washington, North Carolina 27889

252-946-6593

[www.beaufort.k12.nc.us](http://www.beaufort.k12.nc.us)

You are being invited to participate in a **research** study titled "*Changing School Improvement Team Behaviors: The Influence and Impact of Engaging School Improvement Teams in Professional Learning Cycles as a Measure to Achieve Schoolwide Academic Growth*" being conducted by Matthew Cheeseman, BCS Superintendent and graduate student at East Carolina University in the Educational Leadership department. The goal is to survey the School Improvement Team (SIT) at Southside High School. The survey will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. It is hoped that this information will assist us to better understand to what extent do elements of distributed leadership, as a function of the innovative school improvement team practices, show up and progress through the study. Your responses will be kept confidential and no data will be released or used with your identification attached. Your participation in the research is **voluntary**. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. There is **no penalty for not taking part** in this research study. Please call Matthew Cheeseman at 252-947-1790 for any research related questions or the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

## APPENDIX C: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT TEAM SURVEY

### School Improvement Team (SIT) Rubric

	Element	1 (Emergent)	2 (Developing)	3 (Proficient)
<b>CONDITIONS FOR TEAM SUCCESS</b>	Team Purpose	Few or no team members understand the team's purpose or priorities	Most team members have a common understandings of the team's purpose and priorities	Team members share a common understanding of the team's purpose and priorities
	Meeting Frequency	Meetings take place infrequently and/or irregularly	Meetings take place at least once a month, but not more, and/or last less than an hour	Meetings take place at least twice a month and last a minimum of one hour
	Roles & Responsibilities	Team members are unaware of their responsibilities and do not have assigned roles	Team members are assigned roles and responsibilities, but do not execute consistently	Roles and responsibilities are assigned to team members (permanently or on a rotating basis), who execute their responsibilities consistently
	Norms & Trust	The team may have norms, but inattention to violations make them irrelevant. Interactions may be cordial, but lack of trust prevents team members from fully engaging in discussion.	Team has norms, but norm violations are rarely attended to and/or is only addressed by the principal. Team members are cordial and engage in dialogue, but tough issues are not addressed as trust is still developing.	Team members know and follow established norms to ensure productivity and build trusting relationships. Team members call attention to instances when norms are violated. Team members demonstrate trust in one another and do not hesitate to dive into tough issues.
	Equity of Voice & Use of Protocols	Several team members do not contribute to the meeting, or do so only in superficial ways. Protocols are used superficially, if at all.	The majority of team members contribute to the conversation in meaningful ways. Protocols are attempted, but are not adhered to consistently.	All team members contribute meaningfully to conversation. Protocols are effectively utilized accordingly.
	Agendas & Use of Time	Session lacks an agenda or clear objectives; the meeting frequently loses focus and team members get off-task	An agenda and/or objectives exists, but they are not followed consistently; the meeting occasionally loses focus or is focused on non-instructional matters. Efficiency or effectiveness is compromised.	Each meeting is guided by an agenda with clear objectives that are focused on the school's priorities related to improving instruction and student outcomes. Time is effectively and efficiently utilized.
	Data-Driven Decision-Making	Data is rarely used to inform decisions, or is used to draw conclusions that do not relate to improving instruction.	Data sometimes informs decisions or is only discussed in superficial ways that do help inform decisions.	The team uses data and evidence to inform decisions that improve instruction. Data is relevant, timely, and helps the team better understand an issue.
	Action Items	No action items generated address improvements to the instructional core and/or are outside the SIT's sphere of influence. Action items are assigned without designating an owner and/or do not have deadlines.	Action items sometimes focus on the instructional core; occasionally action items focus on external factors. Most action items have owners, but may not be listed as specific people (e.g., Administration, SIT, Teachers, etc.); action items sometimes have	Action items focus on improvements to the instructional core and are within the SIT's sphere of influence. Each action item has an assigned owner and reasonable due date.



			deadlines or have unrealistic deadlines.	
	Monitoring Process	SIT has no tool or protocol for monitoring the implementation and success of action items generated in meetings	SIT may have a tool for tracking/monitoring action items, but the tool is used inconsistently and/or in an ad hoc or disorganized way	SIT has a systematic way to track action items and consistently monitors both their success and implementation
STRATEGY & GOALS	Goals	Goals are not clear or measurable.	One or more goals are not aligned with scorecard or TIA.	The school has established clear, measurable goals for student achievement aligned with scorecard metrics and school-specific TIA.
	Theory of Action (TOA)	The school has not crafted a TOA, is not explicit in identifying a TIA or powerful practice, or most of the cycle components.	The school's theory of action begins to outline a focus and cycle components, but may be missing components or may be unclear.	The school has established a clear theory of action that outlines the school's TIA and powerful practices and incorporates the professional learning cycle components. TOA is updated during the school year as needed.
	Targeted Instructional Area (TIA)	TIA is not identified, or is identified with little evidence schoolwide.	The school environment reflects the TIA. Professional development is focused on the TIA. Mixed evidence in classrooms of TIA and/or not all staff relate to the TIA.	All teachers and students can relate to and articulate the TIA; the school environment reflects the TIA. Classroom implementation of powerful practices is at a rigorous level.
	Resource Alignment	The school has not yet begun to align resources to its TIA.	The school has aligned some of its resources to focus on its TIA.	The school aligns its resources (time, people, and money) to focus on its TIA.
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CYCLE	Cycle Calendar & Implementation	SIT has implemented less than 1-2 cycles with missing components.	SIT has implemented 1-2 cycles but is missing some components of the cycle.	The SIT is leading the school in at least 1-2 cycles per year, implementing all components of the Cycles of Professional Learning around one or two Powerful Practices. Cycle calendar fully developed and outlines SIT and teacher team activities on a weekly basis.
	Professional Reading	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle	Staff read articles and texts pertaining to effective teaching strategies in the TIA at least once per cycle	Staff read articles and texts pertaining to effective teaching strategies in the TIA at least three times per cycle
	Powerful Practice	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle	Selected practice is not a pedagogical practice, does not connect to TIA, and/or does not integrate higher-level thinking skills.	Selected practice is a pedagogical practice that connects to TIA and integrates higher-level thinking skills into learning (aligned to CCSS)
	Input/Training	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle	Staff trained, but not all staff are targeted or training is of low quality.	Staff understands success criteria for selected powerful practice as a result of SIT-planned training/modeling.

	Observing Colleagues: Learning Walk	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle	The SIT observes classrooms but strays from focus on powerful practice and/or does not use learning walk to identify additional supports.	The SIT observes classrooms focused on the use of the powerful practice, following a period of safe practice. The SIT identifies additional training and supports.
	Observing Colleagues: Peer Observations	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle	Some teachers observe each other.	All teachers observe each other at least once per cycle and learn from each other.
	Receiving Feedback	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle	Only administrators provide feedback and/or feedback is neither timely nor relevant to the powerful practice.	SIT members provide timely and relevant feedback that reinforces teachers' positive actions and suggests specific improvements.
	Looking at Student Work & Data	Practice not systematically incorporated as part of learning cycle	Teachers begin to use data to identify student needs and areas for improvement, but teachers are varied in using this information to change practice.	Teachers use internal/external assessment data and LASW data to inform their practice, craft their own assessments, and address student needs.
TEACHER TEAMS	Teams Established & Meeting	The majority of teachers are not part of a teacher team that meets at least twice a month	Some teachers are not part of a teacher team that meets at least twice a month.	All teachers are members of at least one teacher team that meets at least twice a month (ideally, weekly).
	Support & Coaching	SIT does not provide support for or understand Teacher Team goals, protocols, or action items	SIT has some understanding of Teacher Team goals, protocols, and/or action items but does not track their implementation or effectiveness	SIT supports teacher team through training and coaching and understands all the teams' goals, protocols, and action items as well as their resulting impact on student achievement
COMMUNICATION	Staff & Teacher Teams	SIT does not systematically communicate with the staff, and some teachers are unaware of what the SIT does.	Team meeting calendars are created but not shared widely. SIT activity is shared with all staff sporadically.	SIT & teacher team calendar is shared widely. SIT members communicate SIT activity to the school's faculty members at large after each meeting.
	Parents & Community	Parents and community are unaware of targeted instructional area	Parents and community are aware and understand the targeted instructional area	Parents and community actively support student progress in the targeted instructional area

### District Expectations for Implementing Common Core State Standards

CCSS	Standards Familiarity	Less than half of the teaching staff are familiar with CCSS.	The majority of teachers have been introduced to CCSS.	All staff have been introduced to the CCSS, their structure, and where they came from.
	Unpacking Standards	Less than half of the teaching staff have experience unpacking CCSS standards.	The majority of teachers experience unpacking at least one CCSS standard using a protocol with colleagues.	All teachers have experience unpacking at least two standards using a protocol with colleagues.
	Performance Assessments	Less than half of the teachers can identify the features of a high-quality performance assessment and can articulate the process for developing one.	The majority of teachers can identify the features of a high-quality performance assessment and can articulate the process for developing one.	All teachers can identify the features of a high-quality performance assessment and can articulate the process for developing one.
	Unit Planning	Less than half of the teachers understand the process for developing standards-based units	The majority of teachers understand the process for developing standards-based units	All teachers understand the process for developing standards-based units

