

A Phenomenological Study of Turnover and Attrition of High School Principals in Title I Rural
School Districts in South Georgia

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ABSTRACT

Principal turnover is on the rise in U.S. public schools (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). Furthermore, Grissom et al. (2021) illustrated how school principal turnover can negatively impact student achievement. Approximately 25% of principals leave their schools every year, with 50% of new principals quitting within their third year (Alenezi, 2020). This phenomenological study explored the factors that contribute to turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in South Georgia. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select participants who were current or past principals of a Title I rural school for 3 to 5 years. Burnout and resource scarcity are factors of turnover and attrition; thus, the theoretical framework was the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Conservation of Resource theory (Beausaert et al., 2016; Hobfoll et al., 2018; Maness, 2021; Maslach et al., 1997). The data collection methods included a demographic survey along with items from the MBI for Educators Survey (MBI-ES) and a virtual one-on-one interview (Maslach et al., 1997). Data analysis consisted of a three-iteration coding process: 1) research questions, 2) theories, and 3) components of theories. Key findings such as professional departure factors and educational occupation experience highlighted factors of turnover and attrition. Additionally, participants emphasized administrative support systems and resilience as factors of retention. The study's findings yielded several implications for district leadership, principals, professional leadership organizations, parents, and community leaders. District leadership may consider ways in which to provide administrative support, while principals may seek healthy coping strategies to relieve stress and avoid burnout.

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Each and every success requires a village.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Isiah and Kathy Andrews, my brother, Raja Andrews, and my daughter, Gianna Andrews. My brother and parents, I miss you dearly. Within our family, iron has always sharpened iron. Thank you for serving as the standard setting the bar.

Chapter I

Introduction

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (2017) studied the impact of the frequent turnover of effective principals on school progress. Principal turnover can result in higher teacher turnover and lower gains in student achievement (NASSP, 2017). In a revised position statement regarding principal shortages, the NASSP (2017) indicated that school systems across the nation spent an additional \$36,850 to \$303,000 for principal recruitment and ongoing development. Additionally, the NASSP (2017) reported that only one out of two principals remained in their roles beyond their third year. The cost of replacing a principal was considerable (Levin & Bradley, 2019). According to research, the principal turnover rate not only adversely affected student achievement but also generated a loss of resources allocated for principal recruitment, selection, and development (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Rangel, 2018).

In 2019, the relationship between principal turnover and declines in student outcomes is stronger in high-poverty, low-achieving schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019). According to Levin and Bradley (2019), at-risk students relied on education for their future success. Principal turnover increased nationally by 16% by the end of the 2021-22 school year, while teacher turnover increased 10% nationwide (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Similarly to principal turnover, poor teacher retention negatively impacted students' educational achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Additionally, principal turnover influenced student learning through a direct impact on school conditions, teacher quality, teacher placement, and instructional quality (Xu, 2018). Furthermore, principal turnover generally had an indirect relationship with student

achievement gains or progress over the years (Xu, 2018). While highly effective principals can initiate significant change each year, it takes an average of 5 years to fully establish a mobilizing vision, improve the teaching staff, and design and implement practices that positively impact the school's performance (Reitman & Karge, 2019).

According to Goldman (1966) and Rousmaniere (2013), principals in early public schools were mainly responsible for bookkeeping and clerical duties. The role of a modern-day principal has undergone significant transformation, making it nearly unrecognizable to principals from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Chan et al., 2022; Loewenberg, 2016; Stevenson, 1995). The concept of the principal as a building manager has given way to a model where the principal is an aspirational leader, a team builder, a coach, and an agent of visionary change (Alvoid & Black, W, 2014). (The shifting roles of the principal are further explained in Chapter two.)

Williamson et al. (2018) utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to assess burnout. The researchers classified occupational burnout as “long-term, unresolvable job stress,” defining it as a combination of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal achievement (Williamson et al., 2018, para. 1). Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) described Principal Burnout as mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. Maintaining high achievement test scores, extensive after-school hours, and managing multiple budgets can all contribute to principal burnout. Principal burnout is also caused by managing the social/emotional well-being of staff and students (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Maslach et al. (1997) defined emotional exhaustion as the depletion of emotional resources wherein “workers feel they are no longer able to give of themselves” (Maslach et al., 1997, p. 192). Exhaustion may be described as a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from excessive work, personal demands, or continuous stress (Wright, 1998). The second phase of burnout, depersonalization, has evolved

into detachment, disengagement, or disconnection from people and purpose (Maslach et al., 1997). Depersonalization often leads to negative attitudes and cynicism concerning an individual's occupation and those whom they serve (Maslach et al., 1997). In this study, depersonalization refers to the disconnection between principals and individuals or purposes related to their occupation. In recent studies, personal achievement and personal accomplishment have been used interchangeably; however, it should be noted that the MBI assesses the reduction in personal accomplishments. Additionally, Maslach et al. (1997) referred to personal accomplishments as "the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively, particularly with regard to one's work" (Maslach et al., 1997, p. 192). As a principal, the priority is the call to serve and improve a school and the community. When failure to do so arises, it critically impacts a principal professionally and personally. Thus, the ability to evaluate personal accomplishments is an element of principal burnout.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education was established in 1981 to analyze and report on the quality of American education. The resulting document, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, was presented to the Secretary of Education in 1983. The primary goal of the commission was to identify the problems plaguing the American education system. A secondary purpose of the commission was to provide recommendations for educational improvements. The report highlighted many ills of the educational systems that persist today. However, the scope of this study highlighted the following concerning educational systems:

Our schools are called on to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems that the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve. We must understand

that these demands on our schools and colleges often exact an educational cost as well as a financial one. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 2)

The educational costs outlined in *A Nation at Risk* include diminishing student achievement and lack of college and career readiness. The financial cost to the nation includes unprepared students who lack 21st-century skills. Essentially, this created difficulty in meeting the current and impending demands of our technologically driven society. Managing the demands and responsibilities associated with these costs may contribute to principals experiencing occupational burnout.

Statement of the Problem

Principal turnover rates have been on the rise in U.S. public schools (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). High school principal turnover or ineffective leadership can negatively impact student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021). Additionally, attritional behavior, such as resignations and retirements of principals, is more prevalent in high-poverty districts and rural areas (Superville, 2023). Alenezi (2020) noted that 25% of principals left their schools every year, and 50% of new principals quit their jobs during the third year. Principals who exit the position for various reasons, voluntarily or involuntarily, such as non-renewal, retirement, and resignation, are primary examples of attrition (Castro Lopes et al., 2017). There are several factors that lead to voluntary principal attrition, including the lack of autonomy and support (Rangel, 2018). Principal turnover is a result of experiential factors and issues, such as the lack of support, poor working conditions, and low compensation (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Stress and factors of burnout are critical components of attrition and turnover (Maslach et al., 1997; Steiner et al., 2022). The components of principal burnout include an extensive workload, small reward, and minimal community support (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principal's experience increased

amounts of stress and burnout with minimal resources to prepare for their duties and responsibilities (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Levin & Bradley, 2019; Steiner et al., 2022).

Purpose Statement

This study's purpose involved the examination of factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia. The determining factors were based on the perceptions of those identified principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I high schools. The high schools pertaining to the study were located in rural South Georgia.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?
- Research Question 2: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?
- Research Question 3: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?

Significance of Study

This study developed from two critical ideas: the idea of principals' conservation of resources and the high potential for occupational burnout. The National Association of Secondary School Principals may find the study's results beneficial for enhancing job readiness resources and knowledge. The Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) and local school districts may use the findings to determine the ability to provide resources, preparation programs, and professional development. Additionally, potential high school principals could utilize the study's results to prepare them for the challenges and barriers associated with principal burnout, turnover, or attrition (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Maslach et al., 1997). Educational leadership program providers at the university and college level, Regional Education Service Agencies, state certification agencies, and state boards of education may find the results helpful in improving standards and programs for leadership degrees and certificates. The goal is to assist future leaders in achieving success and effectively utilizing resources to reduce stress and burnout.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the factors of principal burnout, turnover, and attrition, the theoretical framework for the study included the Maslach Burnout Inventory and Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Maslach et al., 1997). Data collection involved the Maslach Burnout Inventory to assess principal burnout in the following categories: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). The components of the COR Theory consist of three types of resources: personal, social, and structural (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Also, the Maslach Burnout Inventory scale and COR Theory helped determine how participants manage stress and deal with challenges. COR Theory is utilized to promote well-being while conserving, protecting, and building the three types of

resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Maslach et al., 1997). The Theory Matrix in Table 1 illustrates how the Maslach Burnout Inventory Scales, the steps in COR Theory, the COR resource components, and the research questions of the study are related.

Summary of Methodology

This study incorporated a two-phase phenomenological research design. This design allowed the researcher to capture descriptions from participants about their lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The data collection included surveys (Phase 1) and interviews (Phase 2) (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013). The researcher was also an instrument of data collection and facilitated this through the use of memos and a procedural audit trail. The accessible population for the proposed study consisted of high school principals currently serving or who have previously served in rural Title I schools in South Georgia. The study sample was drawn from a combination of criterion and purposive sampling methods within rural school districts in South Georgia (Ary et al., 2014). The data analysis included the six steps outlined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019):

1. Preparing and organizing the data,
2. Exploring and coding the datasets,
3. Describing findings and forming themes,
4. Representing and reporting findings,
5. Interpreting the meaning of the findings, and
6. Validating the accuracy of findings.

The data analysis process began after all the interviews were transcribed and verified. Verification took place through member checking. Chapter three provides more details about data collection and data analysis.

Table 1*Theory Matrix*

Research Question	Maslach Burnout Inventory Scale	Processes of Conservation of Resources Theory	Domains or type of Resources
<i>Research Question 1.</i> What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in South Georgia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional exhaustion • Depersonalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage Stress • Cope with Adversity • Promote well-being • Protect resources • Build resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal • Social • Structural
<i>Research Question 2.</i> What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in South Georgia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional exhaustion • Depersonalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage Stress • Cope with Adversity • Promote well-being • Converse resources • Protect resources • Build resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal • Social • Structural
<i>Research Question 3.</i> What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in South Georgia?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional exhaustion • Depersonalization • Personal accomplishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage Stress • Cope with Adversity • Promote well-being • Converse resources • Protect resources • Build resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal • Social • Structural

Note. The Theory Matrix includes the components of COR Theory as well as the components of Maslach Burnout Inventory

Limitations

This research design for this phenomenological study was limited by generalizability, researcher bias, and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2018). The reduced sample size and selection of rural school districts limited the generalizability of the proposed research findings. Generalizability is the extension of the study sample's research results, conclusions, or participant accounts to a broader population not directly related to the study (Maxwell, 2013). The data's validity for the proposed phenomenological study was limited by researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, the researcher was aware of and addressed issues of bias and reactivity so as not to unduly influence data collection, research analysis, or study validity (Maxwell, 2013).

Definition of Terms

The following terminology was utilized throughout the study:

- *Attrition* - An exit, voluntarily or involuntarily, from an individual's workforce due to multiple reasons considered essential rationales within the labor market that influence government employment retention rates (Castro Lopes et al., 2017).
- *Conservation of Resources (COR)* - This theory emphasizes objective elements of threat and loss, as well as common appraisals held jointly by people who share biology and culture. This places central emphasis on objective reality and greater focus on circumstances where clear stressors are occurring, rather than a focus on personal appraisal (Hobfoll et al., 2018).
- *Depersonalization* - Negative or cynical attitudes towards work and others (Maslach et al., 1997).

- *District Leadership* - A local board of education and each governing board of other local units of administration that adopts a training program for members of such boards that includes training programs and requirements established by the State Board of Education (GADOE, 2025)
- *Emotional Exhaustion* - A phenomenon that affects professionals with negative consequences on job satisfaction. Also, it is a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from excessive work, personal demands, or ongoing stress (Wright, 1998).
- *Fatigue* - Feeling tiredness and/or constant lack of energy regardless of rest.
- *Job Stress* - Demands at the workplace that tax or exceed an individual's resources (Maslach et al., 1997).
- *Maslach Burnout Inventory* - A psychological assessment instrument comprising 22 items pertaining to occupational burnout (Maslach et al., 1997).
- *Personal Achievement* - An element of Maslach's Burnout Inventory measuring feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work (Maslach et al., 1997).
- *Professional Learning Community (PLC)* - A group of educators who meet regularly, share expertise, and work collaboratively in improving teaching skills and the academic performance of students (Hord, 2009).
- *Rural Education Community* - Defined by the GADOE Office of Rural Education and Innovation (REI) as addressing the unique challenges faced by rural communities for all students, families, and educators (GADOE, 2025).
- *Title I Schools* – Approved educational facilities that have Title I assistance. Title I federal funding is provided to local educational agencies and schools with high numbers

or high percentages of children from low-income families with significant issues such as high poverty rates, low literacy rates, and geographical barriers to necessary resources and infrastructures. Approximately 17% of Georgia's population is rural, with 16.5% of rural residents not completing high school and 19.4% living in poverty (GADOE, 2025).

- *Turnover* - Occurrence of principals leaving a position, school, school district, or state (Levin & Bradley, 2019)

Summary

According to research, factors of attrition and turnover include poor workplace conditions, low compensation, lack of professional development, insufficient support, and lack of autonomy (Ciemenski, 2018; Rangel, 2018; Ross, 2022). The purpose of the study involved examining the factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in South Georgia based on the perceptions of those identified principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I high schools located in rural South Georgia. The study used a detailed phenomenological study approach that looked at multiple cases, along with specific methods for selecting participants, to gather information. The data collection included surveys and interviews to ascertain participant experiences (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019; Yin, 2018). The data analysis included the five steps of Yin (2018): organizing, comparing, displaying, calculating, and reporting data in chronological order. Suggestions from Creswell and Guetterman (2019) were also utilized to check for accuracy in data reporting.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The NASSP (2017) emphasized that only half of principals remained in their position for more than 3 years, and extensive costs to recruit and develop principals were mismanaged and inappropriately utilized. Such turnover has led to increased teacher turnover and decreased student achievement (NASSP, 2017). Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated principal turnover increased by 16%, and leader to teacher turnover increased by 10% at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. High rates of turnover have been evident in poverty-stricken areas with schools that have been in the bottom tier of performing schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The principal position has revolutionized over time, expanding duties and responsibilities administratively from clerical to visionary leadership (Chan et al., 2022; Loewenberg, 2016; Stevenson, 1995). However, the demand of the principal position to maintain high achievement and student safety, mentally and emotionally, has served as one of many stressors leading to principal burnout (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022; Williamson et al., 2018). A primary stressor for principals has been the challenge of decreased student success and no curriculum for workforce readiness within schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Principal turnover has been an underlying, ongoing, and steady issue creating gaps in leadership, primarily in rural and poverty communities with low educator recruitment (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022; Superville, 2023). Principals have often been susceptible to factors such as minimal support from stakeholders, difficult working dynamics, and an unstable professional environment

leading to burnout (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Maslach et al., 1997; Rangel, 2018; Steiner et al., 2022). The imbalance and lack of appreciation for managing an extensive workload and lack of support have resulted in overwhelming stress and burnout for a principal in such an environment (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia. These factors were based on the perceptions of principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I high schools located in rural South Georgia. Additionally, the study's secondary purpose was to examine the relationship between attrition, turnover, and burnout among Title I high school principals in rural South Georgia.

The following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?
- Research Question 2: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?
- Research Question 3: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?

This study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of high school principals, stressors that lead to burnout, the impact on turnover and attrition, and potential improvements to the retention rates of high school principals. To bridge the opportunity gap, schools have required principals who are driven to endure the challenges of their role and remain in their positions long enough to see a significant change and genuinely make an impact (Gacherieu, 2023). Out of the six participants in this study, four have been current high school principals, and two have retired. Despite the challenges and struggles throughout their leadership journey, each participant has remained steadfast to their professional and personal commitments to education and student learning.

This chapter includes a comprehensive literature review on the history of the principalship, the evolution of the principalship, the impacts of principal burnout, and the factors that lead to principal turnover. The literature contains an examination of the roles and effects of high school principals, the concept of principal turnover, and some of its major causes. Additionally, this chapter contains literature about the strategies previously used to prevent principal turnover. The chapter concludes by highlighting the conceptual framework used to support the research.

History and Job Description: Pre-Principal Days

Rousmaniere (2013) and Stevenson (1995) presented a historical perspective on principalship by providing contextual purposes for the office of the principal, starting with head teachers, preceptors, and principal teachers. Additionally, within the account, Rousmaniere sought to depict principals as more than one-dimensional characters within the bureaucracy of education. Historically, there were not many studies on principalship; however, studies of African American principals were the exception and provided an example for which to conduct a

study of the principalship for all principals regardless of race (Rousmaniere, 2013). Largely, Rousmaniere believed that the principal had not been documented, as principals have been depicted in an unfavorable light, mostly associated as disciplinary, building manager, or chief administrator. However, Rousmaniere stated that the principalship is much more complex and nuanced as the principal is “the administrative director of state educational policy and a building manager, both an advocate for school change and the protector of bureaucratic stability” (p. 2).

As previously mentioned, Rousmaniere (2013) stated that the following roles preceded the principalship: preceptor, head teacher, and principal teacher. Historically, one teacher was responsible for teaching from the Bible and an educational curriculum. Additionally, the teacher was responsible for the discipline and classroom behavior management of students. As communities grew, they employed a lead administrator known as: “preceptor, schoolmaster, head teacher, or principal. The early school leader was a teacher and a school manager combined in one who symbolized and enacted the cultural authority of the school in the way that the individual teacher could not” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 9)

Head Teacher

Rousmaniere (2013) described the reformation of the education system and how it impacted the requirements and qualifications of teachers. Initially, teachers were selected based on their moral standing with the community more so than their academic aptitude or experience. Schools had no standardization of policies or practices for either students or teachers. As previously mentioned, teachers’ main curriculum was the Bible and “McGuffey readers” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 8). Typically, teachers worked alone and were responsible for overseeing the entire school. Rousmaniere provided a description here:

Untrained and poorly supervised in this work, drawing on little more than their own understandings of the purpose of education and their own personal strengths, these early teachers monitored enrollment, maintained the building, disciplined children, abided by school board regulations and expectations, and taught whatever curriculum could be gathered and approved by the local community. (pp. 8-9)

Rousmaniere's (2013) description of the treatment of early teachers was not favorable as they were often categorized as misfits or inapt for physical labor. They were retained in their positions because they were cheap. As school systems became more established, the installation of head administrators who taught and managed the school was customary (Rousmaniere, 2013). Over time, this changed as the teaching profession acquired a level of prestige that was later described within the preceptor role.

Rousmaniere (2013) provided a description of a head teacher, which was described as a supervising teacher or teaching principal. Often the head teacher was assigned to one class and served as the authority and disciplinarian with supervisory responsibilities. Rousmaniere described the importance of system uniformity as communities elected community members to serve and move the education systems to a place of centralization between districts. The community members were then responsible for appointing professionals to train and inform principals of educational policies (Rousmaniere, 2013). The evolution of these communities' governance is the birthplace of school boards and other governing positions such as principals and superintendents. Rousmaniere stated that Boston superintendent John Philbrick believed that the head teacher role needed to evolve since there was a need for "a master mind who could connect all these disparate parts" (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, he proposed the idea of a supervising principal who would be "vested with sufficient authority to manage school

planning and to keep all subordinates in their proper place and at their assigned tasks” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 20). Overall, Philbrick was interested in cultured men obtaining the principalship and so “the principal would thus be transformed from a head teacher – a teacher with additional administrative responsibilities – to a professional principal – an administrator with authority over teachers” (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 21). Rousmaniere continued her discussion of the evolution of the principalship as she described roles such as the preceptor and head teacher.

Preceptor

As school systems stabilized, communities employed a lead administrator called a preceptor, also called a schoolmaster, head teacher, or principal (Rousmaniere, 2013). Preceptors taught and managed the school. Rousmaniere (2013) often utilized the terms preceptor and principal interchangeably and noted that they were often installed within private academies. Hiring such authoritative leaders was symbolic of stability and high esteem. Rousmaniere utilized “boosterism” to categorize the phenomena of the ties between institutional stability and the principalship; additionally, she provided the example of Caledonia Grammar School in Peacham, Vermont. The role of the preceptor has evolved to where the principalship and elements of the preceptor have been adapted to new roles within education.

Within the American Education system, the preceptor role would now be categorized as an instructional coach. Makibbin and Sprague (1993) stated that the instructional coach role resulted from a shift towards peer-led professional development to enhance instructional practices and teacher growth. Unlike preceptors, instructional coaches focus on continuous, non-evaluative feedback to foster teacher improvement and student achievement (Makibbin &

Sprague, 1993). The instructional coach’s role emphasizes collaboration, practical feedback, and sustained professional relationships. (Makibbin & Sprague, 1993).

Principal Teacher

Stevenson (1995) completed a study on the history of the roles and responsibilities of the principal. Her study was central to Chicago and outlined the time period of 1854 to 1945. She provided a definition of the principal teacher. During the early 1800s, the individual serving in the role of principal teacher would have the most teaching experience but would also be expected to carry out administrative duties (Stevenson, 1995). The administrative duties may include serving in a clerical role, engaging in custodial duties, and maintaining structural operations of school (Stevenson, 1995). Table 2 lists an expansion of the principal duties, which was described in Stevenson (1995). Expanded principal’s duties included budgetary oversight as well as supervisory responsibilities. Additionally, the principals were responsible for the professional development and training of staff members.

Table 2

Expansion of Principal Duties

Categories	Description of Duties
Student/Data Record Account.	Classify students by grade levels, identifying them by level of math assessment.
Professional Development	Collaboration with other schools for visitation to learn processes & procedures
Create Daily/Weekly Sch.	Determine effective beginning/ending school times, effective instructional times w/appropriate recess times
Budgeting & Finance Report.	Reporting any/all essential costs and purchased items to Board members. Provide monthly reports to Board members of purchased items

Personnel Leave & Salary	Provide salaries and reported leave times of employees to clerks each month
Facility Maintenance	Issue a detailed a report to clerk of damages and updates of the school including items that needs fixing and removed
Structural Landscaping Opera.	Create an inventory of landscaping including the grass cutting, shrubbery that needs cutting, and outside lawn maintenance.

Note. Descriptions of expanded principal duties. Adapted from *The History of the Role and Responsibility of the Principal in Chicago, 1854-1945* by V. L. Stevenson, 1995, 5(1), p. 37-39.

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Additionally, Stevenson (1995) explained how the terminology of educators changed throughout the history of education. For instance, the term master was removed and replaced with a teacher (Stevenson, 1995). Stevenson (1995) listed several terms that were used when identifying an educator: “tutor, professor, professor-principal, principal-tutor, tutor governess, instructor, and preceptor” (p. 46). Stevenson (1995) further discussed how the terms evolved and eventually led to the combination of principal with the term teacher (principal teacher) to identify the primary instructor of the school. William Harvey Wells, second Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, adopted the fact that all administrators were called principals, leading to the removal of teacher in the principal teacher’s title (Stevenson, 1995).

Overall, Rousmaniere (2013) and Stevenson (1995) described the evolution of the principal role from an individual teacher role to the expanded roles of head teacher, preceptor, and principal teacher. As the community came to see the value of education and reforms for centralization occurred, the roles and responsibilities of the supervising personnel changed. Early on, as described by Rousmaniere (2013), the role of the head teacher held little prestige. As the role was elevated, the preceptor and principal teacher roles were highly esteemed. Boston

superintendent Philbrick continued to delineate the separation of the teacher's position from the administrative duties of a principal by establishing the role and term of principal (Rousmaniere, 2013). Philbrick also designated the person (cultured men) who should serve in this position while also excluding others (women and minorities).

Impact of Principal (Elementary, Middle, and High School)

This section provides an extensive overview of a principal's significance in elementary, middle, and high school. Furthermore, the literature contains an examination of the principal's impact on school culture and climate. The section also includes the importance of the principal's role in fostering relationships with faculty, staff, and students.

Elementary School Principal

Loewenberg (2016) worked in collaboration with the New America's Education Policy Program, conducting research on educational issues and proposing ideas to educators and policymakers. In 2016, Loewenberg published *Why Elementary School Principals Matter*; the report examined the role of the elementary school principal and principals' perceptions of their impact within pre-K and early grades. Loewenberg (2016) described principals as central to providing support in creating conducive environments for quality teaching and learning. Additionally, Loewenberg (2016) stated that elementary school principals serve as instructional and operational leaders as they evaluate teaching staff and are responsible for ensuring a school culture that aids in retention. Marzano et al. (2005) reported that principals have a significant impact on students' learning and achievement, and Loewenberg (2016) noted that highly effective principals can "raise student achievement by an additional two to seven months of learning per school year" (p. 2).

In noting other areas of impact of elementary school principals, Loewenberg (2016) also explored the impact of education on the quality of life by indicating research that shows the short- and long-term benefits for children from low-income families, including but not limited to English as a Second Language (ESL) students. As reported by Loewenberg (2016), the research shows that students who have quality education experiences are “less likely to repeat grades, need special education services, or become incarcerated later in life, and are more likely to graduate from high school, own a home, and have higher lifetime earnings” (p. 3). Other impacts that are more specific to elementary school principals and related to student learning include the benefits of pre-k programs; students attending pre-k programs are better prepared for kindergarten (Loewenberg, 2016). Also, students participating in pre-K programs have an academic and social-emotional level of preparedness that serves them in their academic and home lives (Loewenberg, 2016). Pre-K and elementary school serve as the foundation for subsequent academic success, highlighting the importance and impact of leadership within those environments. Principals act as catalysts for school success by balancing instructional leadership with administrative tasks, fostering an environment of trust and collaboration, and aligning resources to strategic goals (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017).

Loewenberg (2016) stated that elementary school principals are at the forefront of implementing any policy or educational reform and have increasing responsibilities related to student learning assessments and staff evaluation duties. Along with their student and staff responsibilities, principals are also responsible for building relationships with families and other early education providers (Loewenberg, 2016). The elementary principal’s role is pivotal in shaping a vision for student achievement, fostering a positive and safe environment for young

children, and supporting teachers in creating developmentally appropriate instructional strategies (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). In developing relationships with other early education providers, principals and staff members can ensure that children have a smoother transition. Additionally, Loewenberg (2016) indicated that school and parental partnerships can positively impact students' academic performance. Elementary school principals may lack sufficient instructional experience to efficiently recognize and coordinate K-3rd learning experiences (Loewenberg, 2016). Thus, Loewenberg (2016) suggested that elementary school principals develop a "deep understanding of early childhood development, PreK-3rd grade content, and appropriate instructional practices and learning environments" (p. 8).

Overall, as the literature points out, elementary school principals play a significant role in developing the foundational learning blocks for students, empowering educators, creating retentive cultures, conducting curriculum and staff evaluations, and spearheading reforms that support the previously mentioned functions. Also, elementary school principals establish positive relationships with early education providers and parents to help ensure a smooth transition between learning environments. As a core leader, elementary school principals are also challenged to continually seek to grow knowledge to be impactful for students and staff.

Middle School Principal

Impactful leadership in middle schools balances administrative tasks with instructional support, guided teachers to adapt curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners during a crucial developmental stage (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). Clark and Clark (2004) indicated middle school principals must implement a vision and mission for students and faculty.

Chan et al. (2022) established that middle school principals are responsible for defining the school mission and setting clear educational goals. Middle school principals maintained supervision and evaluated instructional programs, ensured teaching and learning are effectively implemented and aligned with educational standards (Chan et al., 2022). By setting standards and a clear mission for students, a positive behavioral learning environment with minimal disciplinary infractions created a safe space for students in school (Hanushek et al., 2024). Chan et al. (2022) noted that middle school principals focused on vertical and horizontal alignment. Middle school principals are impactful when students have been molded and prepared to select career pathways for high school and post-secondary occupations (Hanushek et al., 2024). Middle school principals leaned on a departmental approach and managed school curriculum issues (Chan et al., 2022). Chan et al. (2022) indicated that middle school principals offered many local program initiatives requiring community collaboration and activity outside the school. Oftentimes, middle school principals are busy attending meetings of local organizations such as school councils, parent-teacher organizations, and citizen advisory councils (Chan et al., 2022). Chan et al. (2022) indicated middle school principals recruited volunteers, primarily parents and community leaders, who supported the school curriculum to share how the school has served the community. Middle school leadership is a balance of nurturing and rigor in instruction that is more pronounced than in high schools (Wilkey, 2013). Middle and high school principals are expected to share leadership and enable others with expertise in specialized subjects to offer guidance on instruction (Wilkey, 2013). Middle school principals bridged the transition from elementary to high school by setting academic goals, fostering a supportive school environment, and addressing the unique developmental needs of adolescent learners (National Association of

Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017).

Hanushek et al. (2024) discussed how effective leadership of middle school principals has a long-term investment in the post-secondary outcomes of student careers later in life. Middle school principals have a direct or indirect impact on students' college attendance and persistence, level of employability, and involvement in or interaction with the criminal justice system (Hanushek et al., 2024). Hanushek et al. described the concept of principal value-added where principals impact both cognitive and non-cognitive skill development. Effective middle school principals enhanced students' cognitive abilities, increased their chances of being productive in college, persevered through challenges, and struggled with employability (Hanushek et al., 2024). Hanushek et al. sought to discover the principal value-added cognitive impact on the labor market; as such, they utilized information on employment for someone working minimum wage for at least four hours a week (p. 7). Hanushek et al. also found a strong correlation between strong engagement and employment for 8 quarters and a "strong effect of achievement value-added" (p. 19). Middle school principals' value-added impact on non-cognitive development indirectly influences students' involvement in the criminal justice system (Hanushek et al., 2024). Hanushek et al. stated that there is a relationship between out-of-school suspensions and arrest for males. The fact that there are positive correlations between principal effects on achievement and those on absences and suspensions suggested that principals who are better at improving cognitive skills may also be better at improving non-cognitive skills that are more strongly linked to participation in productive activities (Hanushek et al., 2024).

Overall, as the literature pointed out, middle school principals provided vision for students and faculty while also impacting curriculum, discipline, and staff evaluation. Also, as

highlighted by Hanushek et al. (2024), middle school principals directly or indirectly impacted the cognitive and non-cognitive development of students. As a result, middle school principals impacted college attendance, employability, and engagement with or in the criminal justice system.

High School Principal

In describing high school principals, Chan et al. (2022) noted the difficulty of managing and balancing local, state, and federal funds. Traditionally, the duties of high school principals extend to managing organizational processes such as budgets, facilities, and policy compliance, while also cultivating leadership among staff to ensure continuous school improvement (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). By empowering teachers to take on leadership roles, high school principals create a culture of shared responsibility and accountability that strengthens the school's overall effectiveness (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). Additionally, Chan et al. indicated high school principals divide resources among multiple departments and acquire highly certified faculty and staff.

Wilkey (2013) emphasized fostering relationships to build trust among all stakeholders enhances an effective climate, internally and externally. Leadership among staff flourishes when high school principals provide opportunities for collaboration, professional development, and decision-making, enabling teachers to take ownership of instructional and organizational goals (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). High school principal's active in the daily school schedule's instructional processes and consistency positively impact student learning (Wilkey, 2013). Wilkey emphasized high school principals who support change and inspire others to create an

atmosphere of positivity in the lives of students. High school principals are tasked with creating a vision for academic excellence while managing the complexities of preparing students for college, careers, and adulthood (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). High school principals also create a safe and orderly environment conducive to learning for all students and promote a consistent, fair climate and culture (Chan et al., 2022). Wilkey discussed how principals create a supportive culture for students by hiring and selecting highly qualified teachers to provide instruction and grow students academically. A high school principal's ability to make precise, prompt decisions with fidelity ensures effectiveness and efficiency when developing school culture (Chan et al., 2022). Chan et al. (2022) highlighted that high school principals focused more on the educational path to graduation. Effective high school principals prioritize student success by analyzing data to identify areas for growth, promoting equity, and implementing programs that support both academic and extracurricular engagement (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2017). The engagement and interaction of high school principals are important and require more interaction with the communities (Chan et al., 2022). Ultimately, Wilkey stated that an effective high school principal has an impactful significance on a student's success in life. High school principals prepare students for graduation, post-secondary, and career readiness opportunities beyond high school. High school principals grow and develop faculty through professional development, career advancement, behavior, and staff evaluation.

Responsible for the Climate and Culture

Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) stated that another significant challenge is maintaining a positive school culture and climate. Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) described a positive school culture as one in which students feel safe and have a sense of belonging. A factor of safety includes “relational trust,” which “prevails—improves academic achievement, test scores, grades, and engagement and helps reduce the negative effects of poverty on academic achievement” (p. 7). As a result, principals have been tasked with fostering an environment where students feel supported and safe (Hanushek et al., 2024). The responsibility for safety and school climate has also been extended to faculty and staff.

Fostering Relationship with Staff

Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) indicated school staff such as teachers, school leaders, and paraprofessionals play an essential role in the functioning of school relationships. Nguyen et al. (2019) stated that school personnel provided essential support services that routinely contribute to the general well-being and the success of students. The principal’s role is crucial in the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment for staff (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). At the same time, it is vital to note that school staff are not immune to the challenges that contribute to workplace attrition.

Cook et al. (2022) reasoned that retention of school staff is essential in guaranteeing the continuity of support services vital to student success. The principals cited the example of school counselors who play an essential role in addressing the academic, emotional, and social needs of students (Cook et al., 2022). This means that in most instances, their departure can often leave a significant gap in the support system (Cook et al., 2022). Another example is that of school nurses, critical in managing student health issues (Cook et al., 2022). Just like counselors, their absence can often influence the general safety and health of the school community (Cook et al.,

2022). In most cases, the retention strategies that are often adopted involve enhancing the working conditions, offering competitive salaries, and providing them with opportunities and platforms for professional growth (Cook et al., 2022).

Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) indicated another phrase for Interdisciplinary teaming and co-teaching is termed collaborative planning. Collaborative planning builds teacher morale by promoting consistency, assuring expectations and norms are alike throughout the school (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). During collaborative time, Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) suggested cohesive staff building ensures positive school climate by common instructional practices, peer observations evaluations, and best practices for assessment uses. Wilkey (2013) identified cultivating leadership in others and creating a climate hospitable to education as key responsibilities of principals in their community engagement efforts.

Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) believed that fostering an effective relationship with students is critical. By creating a relationship, teachers have a well-managed classroom environment. Beginning with consistency and supervision of students, understanding the expectations and non-negotiables is essential to effective classroom management (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Darling-Hammond and DePaoli suggested that establishing seating charts, having cell phone collection, and following the student handbook are successful in classroom design, setting the instructional culture and tone to promote an environment appropriate for learning.

Fostering Relationships with Students

Principals are responsible for establishing environments that foster both students' learning and safety. Maslowski (2021) outlined the safety factors for mental health, providing context for principals to understand the biological and environmental factors that impact

students' mental health. Emotional, psychological, and social well-being comprise students' mental health (Maslowski, 2021). Critically, one in three high school students reported feelings of sadness and hopelessness (Maslowski, 2021). Of those one in three, half were female students (Maslowski, 2021). Additionally, the Maslowski's, 2021 Office of U.S. Surgeon General 2021 report showed a significant 40% increase in feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness since the last study in 2009.

Buckman (2021) described how principals have an indirect role to play in ensuring student achievement and the success of teachers. Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) outlined ways in which principals can create a positive environment: developing supportive relationships with students and staff and creating or maintaining small learning environments. Small learning environments allow educators and students to develop a greater bond and develop a classroom community (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Principals use structural components such as advisory systems, block scheduling, looping, reduced class sizes, and longer grade spans to create safe environments that are most conducive to learning, as outlined by Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020). Further benefits of the structural components used by principals to empower students include more in-depth teaching and learning, as well as the ability to provide consistent support to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Furthermore, there are some cognitive, social, and emotional components used by principals to support teachers and students. Those include the following: stronger family connections, restorative discipline practices, and social-emotional learning (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Enactment of the cognitive/social-emotional components yields stronger partnerships between school and parents, promoting self/social awareness, empathy, reduction in misbehavior and stress, development of confidence, resilience, and growth mindset (Darling-

Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Students increase their ability to self-regulate and mediate or prevent conflict (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020).

Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) also proposed that principals can help prepare teachers through training and development in the areas of child development, trauma and social identity threat, cultural competence, social and emotional learning, wellness, and self-efficacy. Teachers who are well-versed in understanding trauma and social identity threats can assist students who may be experiencing childhood stress, adversity, and trauma (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Educators who understand Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) will adopt an approach that is more therapeutic than punitive when faced with disruptive behaviors (Center for Disease Control, 2024). Moreover, educators trained for trauma may also be attentive to student involvement and ways in which they can affirm and support their students (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Cultural competence and social-emotional learning significantly influence curriculum development and delivery, necessitating teachers to model these concepts for students to acquire intrinsic knowledge (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Lastly, wellness is also a concept that teachers must model for students. Teachers' well-being can directly or indirectly impact their students, especially if they are experiencing stress and burnout (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Therefore, principals' understanding of wellness for teachers serves as an indirect initiative to support the health of their students.

Shifting Roles of a Principal

The shifting roles of a principal showcase the evolution of the principal role from Rousmaniere's (2013) and Stevenson's (1995) depictions. Previously, descriptions of principals included personnel oversight and evaluation, facility management, and chief disciplinary officers. As the needs of students and staff have evolved, so has the role of principals, who now

serve as both instructional and operational leaders. This section reviews research that operationalizes the definitions of instructional (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017) and operational leadership (Glanz, 2005). The examination also includes how principals have acted as instructional and operational leaders in the past, along with suggestions for improving their effectiveness in these roles (Ezzani, 2019).

Instructional Leader

Hoyer and Sparks (2017) categorized the principal's role as an instructional leader, one who serves as a facilitator of teaching and learning within his or her school. The principal performs their instructional role alongside various other responsibilities. These include internal administration tasks, such as managing human resources, handling personnel issues, adhering to regulations, preparing reports, and overseeing the school budget. Additionally, the principal is involved in curriculum and teaching activities, which encompass teaching classes, preparing lesson plans, conducting classroom observations, and mentoring teachers. Principals also interacted with students, providing both disciplinary guidance and academic support, as well as engaging with parents through both formal and informal interactions. Hoyer and Sparks (2017) examined research findings that suggested that principals spend a larger portion of time on student interactions and internal administration and less time on instructional and curricular activities.

Hoyer and Sparks (2017) utilized data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and Public and Private School Principal Data Files. The information central to this report pertained to the following question: "On average throughout the school year, what percentage of time do you estimate that you spend on the following tasks in this school (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017, p. 2). The task choices included the overarching categories of internal administration, curriculum and

teaching, student interactions, parent interactions, and others. The key finding was that there was no measurable difference between the public and private principals' reported time for curriculum and teaching tasks (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017). Principals in larger cities spend more time on instructional tasks while their colleagues in rural, suburban areas spend more time on administrative tasks (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017). Hoyer and Sparks (2017) also reported that principals with bachelor's degrees are less likely to focus on instructional tasks than principals with higher degrees. Within the private sector, more time was spent on instructional tasks by private, rural principals than city or suburban principals (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017). Like public principals, private school principals with a bachelor's degree spent less time on instructional tasks than private school principals with higher degrees (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017).

According to Ezzani (2019), principals operated as instructional leaders by sharing lead responsibilities with teacher leaders throughout the school to demonstrate priority and commitment to student achievement. Principals in smaller school districts extend effort with fewer resources while serving in both instructional and operational roles (Jordan, 2020). Ezzani indicated that principals create instructional leadership teams to assist in shared decision-making and create a cohesive, strong culture between principals and teachers. Furthermore, instructional leadership teams offer support to teachers and acknowledge their input. As instructional leaders, principals require all teachers to set professional learning goals by monitoring lesson plans, allocating resources through federal and state budgeting as well as conducting ongoing observation assessments (Ezzani, 2019). The purpose of the study was to examine school climate with core beliefs led by effective instruction by highly qualified leaders and teachers creating a culture for learning, achievement, and improvement (Ezzani, 2019). Ezzani built upon a district study of nine principals by implementing a case study. Ezzani selected one assistant principal

and one principal from the previous study as participants. For 5 months, the candidates participated in 60-to-120-minute interviews, examining the impacts of professional learning on data-driven professional developments in instruction (Ezzani, 2019).

The study's main finding is that schools can benefit from having a culture where choices are based on data-driven, well-informed choices (Ezzani, 2019). This can help with opportunity gaps, professional learning communities, and shared leadership for social justice (Ezzani, 2019). A second key finding revealed that principals and teachers engaged in a continuous culture of learning, focusing on student data and equity to solve practice problems (Ezzani, 2019). Ezzani (2019) posed several recommendations for principals and teachers as instructional leaders (see Table 3).

Successful principals prioritize instructional leadership by ensuring teachers use effective teaching strategies, set clear expectations for student engagement, use effective instructional methods and bell-to-bell instruction, and consistently monitor multiple assessments (Ramel, 2019). Student success and achievement create a positive school culture where quality instruction is the top priority and students are given the freedom to learn (Ezzani, 2019). Studies on superintendent leadership have found that increasing the instructional leadership capacity of principals is linked to higher student achievement (Ramel, 2019).

Principals understand data drive instruction, and student achievement is a direct result of instruction (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023). Much like Ezzani (2019), Barbosa and Coneway (2023) also believe that principals must create an environment where teachers have a voice in the instructional decision-making process.

Table 3

Recommendations for Principal-Teacher Instructional Leadership

Recommendations	Principals as Instructional Leaders	Teachers as Instructional Leaders
<i>Data-Informed Decision Making</i> Utilize data-informed decision-making (quantitative and qualitative) as the impetus for organizational learning vis-à-vis professional learning communities;	X	
<i>District Support</i> Garner support from the school district to allocate time weekly (half a day) for professional learning communities;	X	
<i>Modeling Instructional Leadership</i> Model instructional leadership skills for teachers, e.g., facilitation, total instructional alignment, and development of common formative assessments;	X	
<i>Differentiate Student Learning</i> Carve out weekly response to instruction time to differentiate student learning;		X
<i>Academic Goal Setting and Monitoring</i> train students to set goals, analyze formative assessments, and monitor the progress of their learning;		X
<i>Parental Engagement</i> Engage parents on how principals and teachers work together as an instructional leadership team for the benefit of their students;	X	X
<i>Student Empowerment</i> empower students to goal set, analyze their progress, and take ownership of their learning through collaboration and student led conferences; and		X
<i>Goal Development</i> Set school-wide, grade level, teacher and student goals and celebrate successes	X	

Note. A tabular representation of recommendations for principals and teacher instructional leadership. Adapted from “Principal and Teacher Instructional Leadership: A Cultural Shift,” by

M. D. Ezzani, 2019, *International Journal of Educational Management*, 34(3), 576-585.

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Operations Leader

As operational leaders, principals are responsible for the day-to-day functions of the school while executing and integrating each school improvement initiative consistently (Cranston, 2018). An effective principal is a successful operations leader and a great manager of processes (Cranston, 2018). According to Cranston (2018), a combination of knowledge, skills, and attributes is essential to maintaining a school climate that creates a successful impact on students. As a principal, daily operational functions and duties are fundamental components to the success of the school. Effective principals are consistently engaged with students, personnel, and processes to demonstrate competence in managing school operations (Glanz, 2005). According to Glanz (2005), inefficient and inappropriate scheduling; unsafe, poor day-to-day planning; poor discipline and student behavior; no community support; and lack of resources from classified staff such as custodians are the first indications of poor operational leaders and managers. Twenty years ago, Glanz found these conditions when principals were not good at operational aspects of their jobs.

Principals are responsible for making critical decisions and selecting highly qualified personnel (Glanz, 2005). Additionally, principals are responsible for the recruitment and retention of teachers who they believe are the best suited for the school culture (Ramel, 2019). Principals ensure educators are committed to producing the best student learning outcomes (Ezzani, 2019). Equally important, Hansen (2018) submitted that school principals are essential in resource management and community partnership building. Operational leaders supervise budgeting and financial planning, distribute resources efficiently, and lobby for extra funds as

needed (Davis & Anderson, 2021). Similarly, Davis and Anderson (2021) stated principals also develop connections with parents, local companies, and community groups to improve educational opportunities, get support services, and boost the general welfare of kids.

Glanz (2005) depicted the forms of principal leadership: instructional, school-community, collaborative, strategic, ethical-spiritual, and cultural, for which operational leadership serves as the foundation (p. xiii). Glanz provided a comprehensive list of some of the responsibilities of an operational leader (p. xvi): Organize all school activities; Establish widely known and accepted procedures for conducting business; Coordinate programs and training activities; Evaluate programs and personnel; Prepare and oversee school and programs schedules; Manage physical plant and facilities; Work closely with custodial, cafeteria, and office staff; Prepare financial reports; Assume responsibility for fiscal and budgetary responsibility; Recruit teachers; Monitor Teacher Induction & Mentoring; and Communicating. Throughout *Operational Leadership*, Glanz offered principals guidance on some overarching skills, such as organizing and managing facilities, budgeting school finances, coordinating safety and security, scheduling, overseeing human resources, communicating effectively, and maintaining personal health. Furthermore, Glanz illustrated the interrelationships of overarching skills usage while implementing operational activities (see Figure 1). Principals rarely use overarching skills in isolation but instead use them in conjunction with one another.

Figure 1

Interrelated Operations Activities



Note. A reprint of *A Model of Operational Leadership That Promotes a Safe, Efficient, and Effective Learning Environment*. Reprinted from *What Every Principal Should Know About Operational Leadership* (p. 5), by J. Glanz, 2005, Corwin Press. Copyright 2025 by Corwin Press. Reprinted with permission.

General Attrition

The Bureau of Labor Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Labor, released the Job Openings and Labor Turnover report for December 2024. This report included statistical data on job openings, hires, and total separations across various industries, particularly in the private sector, which encompasses mining and logging, construction, manufacturing, trade, transportation, and utilities, as well as information, financial activities, professional and business services, private education, and leisure and hospitality. Additionally, the report covered job openings, hires, and separations in the governmental sector, including federal, state, and local education and state and local positions outside of education. According to the U.S. Labor Market, separations are defined as “all separations from the payroll during the entire reference

month,” and this is reported by type of separation: quits, layoffs and discharges, and other separations (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2024, p. 5). The category related to voluntary turnover is referred to as “quits,” which includes “employees who left voluntarily, excluding retirements or transfers to other locations” (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2024, p. 5). In December 2024, the U.S. labor market reported 5,269 separations (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Within this, the private education and health services sector accounted for 791 total separations, representing 3% separations. Meanwhile, the state and local education sector had 166 total separations, which was 1.5% of the total (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Seasonal adjustments were part of the data, where separation data were aggregated to reflect the number of job openings, hires, and total separations while further detailing the count of quits, layoffs, discharges, and other separations. However, this aggregation applies only to the private sector, given that there were 4,930 recorded quits in December 2024 (U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The report does not provide information about the factors that may have influenced individuals’ decisions to leave their positions.

Castro et al. (2017) defined attrition as an exit, voluntarily or involuntarily, from an individual’s workforce due to multiple reasons considered essential rationales within the labor market that influence government employment retention rates. Workplace attrition is a complex and multifaceted issue impacting a wide range of professions and industries. Castro et al. (2017) suggested that a significant factor contributing to workplace attrition is job dissatisfaction and noted several other variables including: “work-related problems, such as overwork, uncompetitive pay and career opportunities and lack of effective supervision” (p. 7).

The researchers also noted another factor of attrition: whenever employees feel undervalued or unsupported, their levels of engagement often drop, thereby contributing to a

decrease in productivity and eventually the decision to quit (Gignac et al., 2021). Economic conditions further play an essential role in workplace attrition. Steiner and Grieder (2020) contended that during observed periods of economic downturn, job security routinely became a significant concern for employees. These factors coalesced into direct drivers of turnover and attrition, which we identified as chronic trauma and stress in the workplace, feeling undervalued and unsupported, and lack of fulfillment or sense of purpose (Steiner et al., 2022). At the same time, involuntary turnover may increase as organizations downsize and even restructure (Steiner et al., 2022). In a strong economy, employees are more likely to feel confident in their capacity to find new employment (Steiner & Grieder, 2020). This routinely contributes to higher voluntary turnover rates.

Attrition in Education by Teachers in the United States

As reported by Peck (2025), 51,000 teachers in the United States quit their jobs in 2023. Peck (2025) further stated that approximately 86% of public schools were having difficulty hiring teachers as only two in every ten teachers report being satisfied with their jobs. More than 36,500 teacher positions were vacancies at the time of Peck's reporting (Peck, 2025). Flamini and Wang (2024) developed a report on Georgia's K-12 teacher and leader workforce. During the 2021-2022 school year, teacher retention was 86.3% overall; however, the teacher retention rates for districts had a range of 65.8% to 95.6%.

Attrition in Education by Teachers in Georgia

Within the report, Flamini and Wang (2024) noted several reasons for terminations, including the following: retirement, death, family (including personal illness), advanced study, nonrenewal of contract (including dismissal), acceptance of position in another Georgia school system, reduction in force, failure to meet certification requirements, or resignation. Resignation

is most applicable in understanding attrition; therefore, there is a need to discover why teachers quit. Additionally, Balow (2021) and Nguyen et al. (2019) made a distinction between attrition with “teachers completely leaving the profession” and turnover when teachers switch schools (Balow, 2021, para. 31).

Factors of Teacher Attrition

Bryant et al. (2023) study included more than 1,800 US teachers, school leaders, and school mental health professionals at the end of academic year 2021-2022. At the time of study, approximately one third (or 900,000) of the respondents reported that they were “planning to leave their role before the next school year,” (Bryant et al., 2023, p. 2). In addition, Bryant et al. (2023) reported that more than half of the teachers stated that compensation was the main motivator for their decision to quit; while others cited the “unmanageable workload.” (p. 2). Bryant et al. also included the following factors within the study: expectations, well-being, leadership, and workplace flexibility. The well-being factor for leaving was associated with the expectations related to time and resources at cost to the teachers, which was the cause of great stress.

Peck (2025) cited compensation as a reason along with benefits. Peck (2025) stated how “American teacher weekly salaries have increased just \$29 in 28 years,” when adjusted to account for inflation (Peck, 2025, para. 11). Peck (2025) compared teachers’ salaries to other college graduates and noted that other college graduates’ average weekly salary had increased by \$445 over the last 28 years. Thus, teachers earned 23.5% less than other college graduates with similar degrees and qualifications, which roughly equated to less than “80 cent on the dollar compared to those with a similar college education” (Peck, 2025, para. 13).

Harris et al. (2019) also provided some context to reasons why teachers quit, such as working conditions, teachers' involvement in decision-making, protection or lack of protection of teacher preparation time, administration's management of student discipline, adequacy of resource availability, the degree of trust and support within the school environment, and general reasonability of teachers' expectations. As previously noted by Flamini and Wang (2024) teachers may decide to leave their position for personal reasons related to health or family; however, it should be noted that Harris et al.'s study seemed to focus more on the administrator and school environment as factors of attrition. Harris et al. (2019) stated general factors of attrition: teacher's expectations, personal factors/life issues, student behavior, work conditions/job satisfaction, school leadership, teaching experience, an environment of trust, professional development, respect/support, and compensation. Bryant et al. (2023) reported that several equity factors impacted teacher departures for teachers of different demographics (pp. 5-6):

- 38% of young teachers (ages 25 to 34) plan to leave as compared to 30% of older teachers;
- 40% of teachers in low-income districts (free or reduced lunch) plan to leave as compared to 25% in districts with fewer than one in four students receiving free or reduced lunch;
- 38% of teachers within school districts with more students of color plan to leave as compared to 30% of teachers within predominately White schools; and
- 37% of teachers working with either younger or older students (Pre-K and high school) plan to leave as compared to 28% of those teachers working with middle school-age students.

It is important to emphasize that management of problematic student behaviors can serve as a factor of attrition or retention as noted by Balow (2021) and Harris et al. (2019). More importantly, 86% of administrators within Harris et al.'s (2019) study believed that they effectively addressed student behaviors. However, only 44% of the teachers believed that administrators were effective in managing student behaviors (Harris et al., 2019). Consequently, a larger number of teachers felt as if administrators did not properly manage student behaviors which serves as an element of environmental support (Hughes et al., 2014). Problematic student behaviors are associated with teacher burnout and anxiety. Will (2022) indicated that greater attention needs to be given to teacher burnout beyond the associated with attrition.

Impact of Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition has a profound impact on student achievement and the overall success of schools. For example, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) stated teacher attrition or turnover impacts school effectiveness and has both academic and financial costs. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond elaborated on how teacher turnover can cause imbalances in the labor market as teachers shift schools, which can also impact future hiring and school improvement plans. Per this report, schools may be forced to hire inexperienced or undertrained teachers in addition to the changes in class sizes and a decrease in course offerings all these potential components will impact the school and the students. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond noted that schools with high turnover rates have a negative relationship with student learning. Bryant et al. (2023) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on teacher attrition as 2020 saw the highest annual separation of state and local educators at an increase of 20 percent. Their study found that “between 2020 and 2022, nine-year-old students had the largest average score decline in reading since 1990 and the first ever score decline in

math” (Bryant et al., 2023, p. 3). Harris et al. (2019) stated that there are financial costs in replacing teachers, and Carrol (2019) reported that within the US the cost to replace an individual teacher ranges between \$4,400 and \$17,900.

Factors of Teacher Retention

The cost and impact of teacher attrition are significant, making it crucial to understand not only why teachers leave but also why they choose to remain in the profession. According to Bryant et al. (2023), key factors that encouraged teachers to stay include meaningful work, supportive colleagues, adequate compensation, and a healthy work-life balance. The study also highlighted differences in retention reasons. Teachers in public charter and private non-religious schools were more likely to cite the quality of their colleagues, leadership, and professional development as reasons for staying. In contrast, teachers in public non-charter schools tended to emphasize compensation, which Bryant et al. (2023) suggested may relate to unionization in those schools.

Balow (2021) identified several factors that influence teacher retention as well, including principal effectiveness, administrative support, and teachers’ perceptions of principal skills, staff demographics, school resources, student characteristics, student behaviors, working conditions, staff accountability, workforce issues, and the teacher pipeline. Notably, principal effectiveness is closely tied to teacher satisfaction, reducing the likelihood of teachers leaving (Balow, 2021). Additionally, teachers’ perceptions of administrative support and principal competence play a crucial role in their decision to remain in the profession. This administrative support can be categorized into emotional, environmental, and instructional types. Emotional support reflects teachers’ levels of trust, while environmental support relates to how the administration addresses

student behaviors (Harris et al., 2019; Hughes et al., 2014). In outlining strategies to positively impact teacher attrition, Balow proposed six key approaches:

1. Improve financial incentives.
2. Create collaborative support systems:
 - A. Provide instructional coaching.
 - B. Develop Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for teachers.
 - C. Ensure that new teachers have access to mentoring.
3. Improve student discipline.
4. Develop high-quality, personalized professional development.
5. Enhance administrative support.
6. Improve the overall climate and working conditions.

As noted by Bryant et al. (2023) and Balow (2021), these factors include financial support, effective leadership, administrative assistance, improved student discipline, meaningful work, and strong relationships with colleagues. The impacts of teacher attrition extend beyond financial costs, significantly affecting students' achievement and learning. Advocating for fair wages, better working conditions, and policies that support teachers' professional and instructional development can contribute to retaining educators in the field.

Attrition by Principals

According to the NCES (2025), principal attrition data were categorized by public and private schools, showing that 11 percent of public-school principals left the profession, while 10 percent of private school principals did the same. However, 63% of former public-school principals and 52% of former private school principals continued to work in K-12 education in roles other than that of principal (NCES, 2025). After serving one year in the position, 80 percent

of public-school principals and 83 percent of private school principals remained at the same school (NCES, 2025). The data indicated that 6% of public-school principals and 2% of private school principals moved to another school. Also, 11% of public-school principals and 10% of private school principals resigned from the principal position (NCES, 2025).

Based on the discovered data, NCES (2025) provided a comparison of the attrition status of public-school principals vs. private school principals. The findings were as follows:

- A higher percentage of private school principals remained at their school (83% vs. 80%)
- A higher percentage of public-school principals left their school (6% vs. 2%)
- The percentage of public-school principals was different from the percentage of private school principals with a student population of 58% White, 16% Black, and 9% Hispanic (NCES, 2025).

Rangel (2018) defined turnover as when principals change to other schools, districts, or positions “as well as exits from the school system altogether” (p. 87). Rangel (2018) indicated that the principal’s sex, race, age, level of experience, education, and level of satisfaction are multiple factors that contribute to principal turnover. Based on the gender of a principal, female principals were 50% less likely than male principals to remain principal 5 years later (Rangel, 2018). Female principals were 60% more likely to have left public education after 5 years and 78% more likely than male principals to have left education after 10 years (Rangel, 2018).

The principal race is more impactful based on geographic locations (Rangel, 2018). In Texas, white principals were 50% more likely to remain principals after 5 years (Rangel, 2018). Nationally, 21% of minority principals were more likely to leave the principalship altogether (Rangel, 2018). White principals were 60% more likely than principals of other races to leave the

principalship and become superintendents (Rangel, 2018). In Delaware, African American principals were 84% less likely than White principals to move to a new position (Rangel, 2018). Flamini and Wang (2024) indicated a 13-point percentage of Black leaders that exceeded Black teachers, while Asian and Hispanic leaders represented 3% of the leader workforce. In Georgia, White leaders in education represent 57.1% of the population, with Black leaders representing 39.3 % of the population (Flamini & Wang, 2024).

Rangel (2018) indicated that a principal's age provided an inconsistent effect on the attrition rate. Rangel stated that while principal experience is related to attrition, it provided inconsistent research and measures across the studies. Rangel provided minimal evidence of principal education having an impact on the attrition rate for principals. Flamini and Wang (2024) stated that most leaders continued to have 21 to 30 years of experience in education. Rangel found that a principal's age has an inconsistent effect on the attrition rate. Although principal experience is related to attrition, the research showed varied results and measures across different studies. Furthermore, Rangel provided minimal evidence that principal education significantly impacts the attrition rate.

Flamini and Wang (2024) reported that most educational leaders have between 21 to 30 years of experience in education before stepping into leadership roles. Their data indicated an increased proportion of leaders with 21 to 30 years of experience during the 2021–2022 school year. In Georgia, 43% of leaders had 21 to 30 years of experience, while 39.6% had between 11 to 20 years of experience (Flamini & Wang, 2024). They also concluded that leaders averaged 8 years of leadership experience at the start of the 2021–2022 school year. Additionally, Flamini and Wang (2024) noted that leaders with 11 to 20 years of leadership experience were less likely to stay at schools with high rates of teachers needing certification.

The percentage of educational leaders holding master's degrees increased by 1.3 percentage points compared to the 2020-2021 school year (Flamini & Wang, 2024). Among leaders in Georgia, 50.6% held a specialist degree, 26.5% had a master's degree, and 17.3% possessed a doctoral degree. However, Flamini and Wang (2024) found a decrease in the number of leaders with specialist and doctoral degrees in the 2021-2022 school year.

Principal satisfaction emerged as a significant factor in the principal attrition rate (Rangel, 2018). Results indicated that principals who felt the job was worth it were 33% less likely to change schools and 47% less likely to leave the profession altogether. Additionally, principals with high morale and enthusiasm were 34% less likely to change schools and 37% less likely to quit their positions (Rangel, 2018). Data indicated an increase in the proportion of leaders with 21 to 30 years of experience in education during the 2021–2022 school year (Flamini & Wang, 2024). In Georgia, 43% of leaders had 21-30 years of experience while 39.6% of leaders had 11-20 years of experience (Flamini & Wang, 2024). Flamini and Wang (2024) concluded leaders averaged 8 years of leadership experience when the study began in 2021-2022. Flamini and Wang (2024) indicated leaders with 11-20 years of leadership experience are less likely to remain at their schools with the highest rates of teachers needing certification.

Educational leaders with master's degrees increased by 1.3 percentage points relative to the 2020-2021 school year (Flamini & Wang, 2024). Data indicated that among leaders in Georgia, 50.6% of leaders have a specialist degree, 26.5% have a master's degree, and 17.3% have a doctoral degree. Flamini and Wang (2024) indicated a decrease in specialist and doctoral degrees among leaders in education in the 2021-2022 school year. Principal satisfaction was a major component in the principal attrition rate (Rangel, 2018). When principals believed the job was worth it, results indicated that 33% were less likely to change schools and 47% were less

likely to leave (Rangel, 2018). Principals with high morale and enthusiasm were 34% less likely to change schools and 37% less likely to leave the principal position (Rangel, 2018).

Factors of Principal Attrition

An extensive amount of research has been conducted to determine what factors contribute to the attrition rate of principals in K-12 education (Rangel, 2018). Many of the factors that lead to principal attrition are the lack of support received from district leadership (Rangel, 2018). The lack of autonomy is a factor that contributes to the principal decision to leave their positions (Rangel, 2018). The duties and responsibilities of a principal evolve yearly, and principals need to feel supported when executing their duties, such as hiring and firing teachers (Rangel, 2018). Principals desire to create and have relationships with their supervisors for support when concerns arise; questions need to be answered, or unfamiliar situations need more experience (Rangel, 2018). Principals who felt supported by their school districts reported more satisfaction and were less likely to leave their positions (Rangel, 2018).

Multiple factors contributed to principal attrition, such as lack of autonomy and support (Rangel, 2018). The demographics of a community, including race and gender, served as determinants of principal attrition (Flamini & Wang, 2024). Principals believed age was a hidden concern during their duration, as many schools preferred older, more experienced principals (Rangel, 2018). Common factors of attrition and turnover were lack of autonomy, minimal independence, and extensive micromanagement (Rangel, 2018). Micro-managing occurs through district site-based management, which increased policy demands for principals (Rangel, 2018).

District leadership has persistently failed to understand the difficulties of consistently managing human resources, school climate, and organization management (Rangel, 2018). If principals receive no support while balancing FTE funding for student records, budgeting on

federal/state/local levels, and scheduling important events with mastery, then attrition increases (Rangel, 2018). Principals spend an extensive amount of time recruiting and hiring good teachers, so it is extremely frustrating when the ability to hire and replace teachers is minimized (Rangel, 2018). Rangel (2018) stated hiring, replacing teachers, and recruiting certified teachers is a primary factor in leaving a school system.

Impact of Principal Attrition

Rangel (2018) argued that principal turnover negatively affects student achievement. Similarly, Ross (2022) noted that frequent changes in leadership create significant disruptions in faculty and staff morale, resulting in lower student performance and potential instability within schools. Principal attrition greatly impacts school culture and climate, particularly in schools with high percentages of subgroups, including minorities, students with disabilities, and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ross, 2022). When a principal departs, the ramifications affect both student achievement and the continuity of faculty and staff (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). Rangel (2018) suggested that high turnover rates can hinder principal effectiveness, as new leaders may require 5 to 7 years to successfully implement changes in school culture and student achievement outcomes. In Georgia, public schools are regulated by the GADOE, with achievement rates measured by the Core Curriculum Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI) (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022).

Pannell and McBrayer (2022) found a direct correlation between principal turnover rates and academic achievement as reflected in CCRPI scores (see Table 4). The negative impact of principal turnover on student success is significant, as diminished school morale reduces the capacity of school leaders (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). This issue is particularly pronounced in school systems experiencing attrition rates of up to 30% in areas with high concentrations of

low-income, low-performing students and diverse demographics (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022).

Therefore, local boards of education, superintendents, and district leaders must prioritize

collaborative efforts to reduce principal turnover (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022).

Table 4

Correlation between Principal Turnover and Academic Factors in Georgia’s High Needs Rural, by School Level

Variables		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Elementary Principal Turnover	-	-	-0.24*	-0.24*	-0.14	-0.08	-0.19	-0.26*
Middle School Principal Turnover	-	-	-0.29**	-	-0.18	-0.17	-0.31**	-0.27**
				0.27**				
High School Principal Turnover	-	-	-0.19	-0.21*	-0.05	-0.03	-0.37**	-0.24*
CCRPI Score	E = - 0.24*	M = - 0.29**	H = - 0.19					
Content Mastery Score	E = - 0.24*	M = - 0.27**	H = - 0.21*					
Progress Score	E = -0.14	M = - 0.18	H = - 0.05					
Closing Gaps Score	E = -0.08	M = - 0.17	H = - 0.03					
Readiness Score	E = -0.19	M = - 0.31**	H = - 0.37**					

Literacy	E = -	M = -	H = -
Score	0.26*	0.27**	0.24*

Note. Adapted from “The relationship between principal attrition and academic factors in Georgia’s high-needs rural schools,” by S. Pannell and J. S. McBrayer, 2022, *National Youth Advocacy and Resilience Journal*, 5(2), 33–49 (<https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2022.050202>).

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* Correlation is at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

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

Retention Factors of Principals

Principal retention indicated principals hired within school districts with less than 5 years of experience were 70% less likely to be retained than principals with at least 5 years of district experience (Sloan, 2021). Principal retention is essential to teacher retention in schools causing principals to stay longer (Sloan, 2021). Sloan (2021) indicated principal retention increased tremendously when school districts present principals with a succession plan within the school district’s improvement plan. Rural districts create a development plan called “grow your own” allowing principal preparation programs to foster organizational practices and offer best practices to principals for improving the school environment (Sloan, 2021). Principals desire to be internally recruited by district personnel for future positions of self-growth and improvement (Sloan, 2021).

Sloan (2021) indicated school systems implemented district-level aspiring principal training programs to address the leadership shortage and maintain potential leaders within the system. Based on the research, Sloan indicated principal retention is affected by the principal’s salary, economically disadvantaged level of school, and student achievement growth levels.

Sloan mentioned other factors that would increase principal retention including lessening the difficulty of the position, size of the school district, student population, benefits, and salary in comparison to job duties. Sloan indicated that district support and principal succession plans are essential to principal retention.

States and school districts have collaborated with university systems and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission to search for solutions to decrease leadership retention rates (Cieminski, 2018). Cieminski (2018) suggested many strategies to address the high retention rates of principals and leaders. This included making more attractive college and university preparation programs along with the following:

- Offering signing bonuses
- Alternative licensure programs
- Recognition programs
- Increased salary adjustments
- Pay for performance incentives

To lessen the load, school systems have managed the duties and responsibilities by redesigning and reorganizing the principal position (Cieminski, 2018). By doing so, principals can design the position and hire assistant leaders to fulfill various other roles limiting the number of initiatives managed by one individual (Cieminski, 2018). A more supportive strategy to sustain principalship retention is providing effective professional development practices to train current and future leaders in specialized areas of weaknesses (Cieminski, 2018). Cieminski (2018) stated that coaching principals and mentoring them have been found to make a positive difference in student learning and organizational outcomes. It can be a productive response to principal turnover. Upon hiring principals, Cieminski (2018) stated school districts must

establish induction programs with clear goals aligned with administrator standards so that new principals are more successful and stay on the job longer. Cieminski (2018) suggested support for new principals can include well-trained mentors, networking opportunities, and training on leading student achievement. The retention initiatives can combat the factors of principal attrition and can lessen the impact on student achievement, teacher attrition, and school climate.

Principal Turnover

This section contains statistical data on principal turnover, contributing factors of principal turnover, the impact of principal turnover, and strategies for reducing and/or preventing principal turnover. As previously noted, attrition has been defined as principals leaving the profession; turnover is more related to principals leaving a position, school, school district, or state (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Much like principal attrition, principal turnover has a considerable impact on students, teachers, and schools overall. Bartanen et al. (2019) reported that the national principal turnover rate is approximately 18%; Levin and Bradley (2019) agreed and stated that 18% of principals are no longer in the same position after a year. The principal turnover rate is higher in high-poverty schools at a rate of 21% (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Levin and Bradley (2019) developed a review of principal turnover for the National Association of Secondary School Principals in which a review of the contributing factors of principal turnover. According to Levin and Bradley (2019), the “national average tenure of principals in their schools was four years as of 2016-2017.” The researchers observed that only 35% of principals stay at their schools, resulting in 65% not persisting beyond the second year (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Only 11% of principals remain in their schools for 10 or more years (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Factors of Principal Turnover

Levin and Bradley (2019) stated five reasons for turnover: inadequate preparation and professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and high-stakes accountability authority. Dissatisfied principals reported that lack of professional development was a factor in leaving their school (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Levin and Bradley (2019) identified job complexities as a contributing factor to principal turnover, given their responsibility for multiple roles and an excessive workload. Grissom and Bartanen (2019) agreed that factors that contribute to principal turnover are lower compensation, poor working conditions, and little support from the school community. DeMatthews et al. (2021) reported numerous individual and organizational factors contributed to principal turnover, such as a principal's years of service, retirement, working conditions, salary, autonomy, and regional labor market forces. Principals indicated challenging working conditions that create difficulties in evaluating/removing teachers, promoting a positive school climate, addressing high-stakes accountability, mitigating pressures to increase test scores, and managing a lack of decision-making authority (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated that a lack of professional development is a factor of turnover. Principals seek professional development programs that prepare them for challenging schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019). The lack of access to professional development was associated with dissatisfied principals. Additionally, Levin and Bradley reported that principals would like autonomy over their staff's instructional professional development.

Levin and Bradley (2019) stated that working conditions are factors for principal turnover. Working conditions are defined as workload, school-related hours, job complexity, and school environment (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Principals with extensive workload hours, multiple

roles, various responsibilities, high student behavior, poor student attendance, and poor teacher attendance contribute to challenging working conditions (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Levin and Bradley reported that district-level leadership's failure to provide support through school resources, funding, and staff impacts working conditions. Grissom and Bartanen (2019) stated that difficult working conditions for principals can contribute to poor leadership and stability in school environments. Furthermore, Grissom and Bartanen (2019) found that difficult working situations contribute to high turnover in schools. Cieminski and Asmus (2023) reported that a district leader expressed concern, stating, "He worried that what leaders in other school districts framed as independence may translate into a lack of support and being afraid to call for help" (p. 36). Principals seek to foster a supportive school climate by cultivating relationships with students, families, teachers, and district administrators (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Principal supervisors must establish positive working relationships with principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023).

Levin and Bradley (2019) stated salaries are factors for principals in selecting and remaining in schools. Studies indicated principal turnover and compensation are determining factors for principals seeking positions with higher salaries (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Grissom and Bartanen (2019) found that salaries play a significant role in principal turnover, particularly when principals work in high-poverty and low-achieving schools. Levin and Bradley (2019) stated that principals' salaries can be lower than those of experienced teachers. Salaries can increase only so much, but district leaders need to monitor the workload of building leaders (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019).

Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated decision-making autonomy is an issue principals face. Principals desired guidance but sought to maintain control of the school and support in

decision-making with budget spending, teacher hiring, evaluation, and discipline (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Levin and Bradley stated principals wanted more autonomy over personnel decisions and disciplinary policies.

Moreover, Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated high-stakes accountability policies as a common turnover factor for principals. Principals avoid schools with high-stakes standardization policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), due to the stresses and pressures applied to principals from district leadership (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Principal turnover is higher in areas of poverty, economic disadvantage, and low-achieving schools. School systems that fall in these subgroups rely heavily on education for future success (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Impact of Principal Turnover

Principal turnover can result in significant financial costs for the district. Levin and Bradley (2019) reported an estimated principal replacement cost of \$75,000. This amount encompasses the expenses related to principal preparation programs, hiring, signing, internship, mentorship, and continuing education (p. 9). Bartanen et al. (2019) noted that principal turnover affects student achievement, teacher turnover, and overall school performance. The researchers hypothesized that turnover impacts school performance through both disruptive and replacement effects. Bartanen et al. (2019) explained that disruptive effects arise when principal transitions weaken essential channels through which principals influence school outcomes (p. 352). Examples include the effects of principals on school culture and climate, which subsequently impact expectations, staff, structure, disciplinary procedures, and instructional practices (Cook et al., 2022; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). Bartanen et al. (2019) characterized replacement effects as those related to the effectiveness of the new principal compared to the outgoing one (p. 352). The researchers indicated that the replacement effect has a negative impact if the new

principal is less effective. Both effects are detrimental in the short term, yet they may offer potential benefits for the school in the medium to long term (Bartanen et al., 2019).

Cornelius et al. (2024) highlighted the connection between principal turnover and teacher turnover. Teacher turnover rises following a principal transition year (Bartanen et al., 2019). Bartanen et al. (2019) stated that principal transitions can hinder efforts to recruit highly qualified teachers. They also observed that principal and teacher turnover influences student achievement and future school performance. School performance fluctuates during transition periods. Principal turnover impacts leadership stability and student performance, particularly in large schools located in low-income areas (Yan, 2020). Principal turnover and school performance maintain a reciprocal relationship, where school performance may influence a principal's decision to leave, while a principal's departure can also lead to a decline in school performance (Bartanen et al., 2019).

Retention Strategies for Principals

Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated principals seek preparation and practice. Levin and Bradley further stated principals believe serving in an internship and having a mentor as a guide are less stressful. District leaders are responsible for the growth and improvement of principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Professional learning and mentoring from veteran principals enhance leader satisfaction, development, and retention (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principal strategies are more successful when succession plans are created to recruit, develop, aspire to, and attract new leaders within the district by supporting their growth and preparation (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Leadership induction programs prepare new principals for responsibilities in administration and supervision for incoming leaders (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). District leaders have taken on a new responsibility of nurturing the professional growth of principals

through addressing specific needs and facilitating professional learning for principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principals reported finding satisfaction in the guidance they received from effective mentoring and coaching programs (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Principals are motivated by opportunities for continued growth and are lifelong learners with an intrinsic desire to continue growing as principals (Gacherieu, 2023).

School districts that supported and developed principals reduced turnover (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Cieminski and Asmus (2023) stated that schools must improve working conditions to ensure employees know that leadership encourages growth and development by establishing positive working relationships. The most motivating interpersonal relationships were those with teachers, parents, students, and principal colleagues (Gacherieu, 2023). Principals shared that interpersonal relationships brought them immense joy and were satisfying and recharging, serving as the real reward of the job and the primary reason for remaining in the position (Gacherieu, 2023). Cieminski and Asmus suggested principal supervisors spend time at schools and strengthen the principal-supervisor relationship. The creation of a positive principal-supervisor relationship clearly focuses on instructional leadership and professional growth (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). By establishing clear expectations, effective communication, and team goals, principal turnover decreases (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Cieminski and Asmus reported that multiple principal supervisors believe that principal retention is a combination of relationships and support. Cieminski and Asmus reported that one supervisor said, “Principals need to know if the supervisor has their back and can get them the resources they need to be successful in a timely manner” (p. 36). Gacherieu (2023) indicated principals want to know that district leaders support them through their availability by simply answering the phone when called or visiting the campus for support, not only for evaluations. Cieminski and Asmus further

reported that principal supervisor availability and accessibility to resources reduce principal frustration and increase job satisfaction.

Principals with increased decision-making autonomy are likely to remain in their schools (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principal supervisors assist with decision-making authority, impacting staff and students but providing solutions based on experience that address specific needs (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). District leaders should consider increasing the level of autonomy for experienced principals (Gacherieu, 2023). Cieminski and Asmus (2023) reported principalship changes with daily challenges yet to be experienced due to the evolution of technology since the pandemic. One principal reported that principal supervisors must focus on providing solutions to help principals think about possible consequences and strategies, assisting in their decisions for the school community. This builds mastery of sound decision-making (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Autonomy does not mean leaving principals to believe that they are on their island or that asking for help is a sign of weakness (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Effective principal supervisors encourage their principals to ask for support rather than go it alone and get themselves stuck (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023).

Often, principals have desired sufficient compensation and manageable workloads (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Salary is an essential component of principals (Gacherieu, 2023). Gacherieu (2023) stated that the principal's reported salary increase was a primary motivation for entering a principal position. Compensation was a reason some principals remained in the principal positions rather than returning to teaching positions (Gacherieu, 2023). Principal supervisors have minimal influence on monetary compensation for the principals but maximize their value and worth (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). District leaders influence the workload and responsibilities of principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). The duties and responsibilities of

principals can be reduced by the number of requirements, calendared workdays, or new initiatives (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023).

Principals are evaluated and assessed based on high-stakes accountability measures (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principal supervisors must focus more on the level of support and success acquired by the principal and less on criticizing the principal (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Principal supervisors reported that districts focusing on policy, instructional frameworks, or communication were more successful in retaining principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Effective supervisors maintain a consistent, supportive evaluation process focused on goal setting, formative feedback, modeling, and coaching for principals (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023). Supervisors utilize coaching and modeling as strategies to improve principals by asking reflective questions to grow them (Cieminski & Asmus, 2023).

Principal Burnout

As Maslach and Jackson (1981) indicated, burnout has three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction in personal achievement. Maslach and Jackson (1981) describe emotional exhaustion as feelings of emotional depletion and the inability to “give themselves” (p. 192). Additionally, depersonalization occurs when an individual develops negative or cynical attitudes toward those they are serving (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The final element of burnout is a reduction in personal accomplishments, which manifests as a negative self-evaluation (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Steiner et al. (2022) conducted a study to examine educators’ well-being using survey data from 1,540 respondents (39%). Participants were provided information regarding their well-being, working conditions, and intentions to either remain at or leave their employment at the time of the study. Steiner et al. (2022) noted that twice as many teachers and principals reported job-related stress (see Table 5). Principals

reported the highest level of job-related stress at 85% and the second-highest level of burnout at 48% (Steiner et al., 2022). According to Steiner et al. (2022), teachers reported the highest levels of burnout at 59% and the second-highest levels of job-related stress at 73%. In addition, some principals and teachers struggled with depression, inadequate coping mechanisms for job-related stress, and decreased levels of resilience to persevere (Steiner et al., 2022). It should be noted that other working adults reported higher levels of resilience at 80%, lower levels of depression at 17%, and an increased ability to cope with job-related stress at 88% (Steiner et al., 2022).

Table 5

Well-Being of Teachers, Principals, and Working Adults in January 2022

Factors	Teachers	Principals	Other Working Adults
Frequent Job-Related Stress	73	85	35
Burnout	59	48	44
Symptoms of Depression	28	28	17
Not Coping Well with Job-Related Stress	24	19	12
Resilience	46	67	80

Note. Descriptions of expanded principal duties. Adapted from *Restoring Teachers and Principal Well-Being Is an Essential Step for Rebuilding Schools* by E. D. Steiner, S. Doan, A. Woo, A. D. Gittens, R. A. Lawrence, L. Berdie, R. L. Wolfe, L. Greer, and H. L. Schwartz, 2022, p. 5.

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Additionally, the demographic data by Steiner et al. (2022) indicated that respondents experiencing burnout included persons of color (61%), Black or African American (60%), and Hispanic or Latino (63%), who reported the highest rates of burnout. Across all racial demographic categories, respondents reported burnout rates exceeding 50%. Furthermore, 61% of female respondents reported burnout at a slightly higher rate than 54% of their male

counterparts (Steiner et al., 2022). Similarly, the number of years educators had served affected their burnout levels; the lowest reported burnout rate (57%) was among respondents who had served 21 years or more (Steiner et al., 2022). Respondents who served 6 to 10 years reported the highest level of burnout at 65% (Steiner et al., 2022). Among those serving 1 to 5 years, 58% reported burnout, while 59% of those serving 11 to 20 years reported experiences of burnout.

Factors of Principal Burnout

DeMatthews et al. (2021) indicated that burnout and stress are factors of everyday work life for principals. Six factors of burnout were identified: extensive workload, lack of autonomy, small reward (e.g., monetary, social, or intrinsic), little recognition or support from colleagues/supervisors, minimal community support, advancement without pay, and misalignment between an individual's and organizational values (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Besides DeMatthews et al. (2021), Rogers et al. (2025) reported school climate, teacher burnout, and student misbehavior as factors of burnout. There are four categories of burnout: environmental, professional, organizational, and personal factors (Rogers et al., 2025). Principal burnout is related to individual, school, and district factors involving school size, community-principal relationships, mentoring, and support (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principals also manage stressors such as high workload, time pressure, and interpersonal conflict with students, families, and teachers (Rogers et al., 2025).

Additional factors of burnout are the lack of principal experience and guidance (DeMatthews et al., 2021). According to DeMatthews et al. (2021), negative experiences such as teacher resistance, student trauma, or community disconnection can also lead to principal burnout. Furthermore, principals who struggle with the prioritization of duties and

responsibilities vs. external expectations from district administrators, teachers, and families often experience burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Compassion and emotion drive principals as leaders (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

DeMatthews et al. (2021) indicated that secondary traumatic stress is defined as “the emotional duress that results when an individual experiences first-hand trauma” (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p. 162). Compassion fatigue is defined as “stress resulting from helping a traumatized or suffering person” (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p. 163). Principals who assist colleagues, teachers, staff, and students with unexpected loss often experience compassion of fatigue and secondary traumatic stress. For instance, this can occur when the school community experiences the loss of a student or teacher.

It is important to note that among the various stressors in the education field, teachers and principals of color have been two to three times more likely to report experiencing racial discrimination compared to their White peers (Steiner et al., 2022, p. 10). Specifically, 70% of principals noted that sources of discrimination included students’ parents and family members, while 56% of teachers reported facing discrimination from fellow staff members (Steiner et al., 2022, p. 10). As a result, discrimination may be a factor contributing to burnout and may explain the higher rates observed among persons of color, Black or African American, and Hispanic or Latino individuals (Steiner et al., 2022).

Impact of Principal Burnout

According to Beusaert et al. (2016), principal burnout led to schools with reduced performance, reduced initiative, loss of creativity, and increased dropout and absenteeism. Burned-out principals find difficulty increasing student achievement and ensuring the school had appropriate equitable policies for all students (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principal priorities can

impact school safety and balance (Maness, 2021). High rates of principal burnout limit the impact of principal leadership and can threaten school stability (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Ultimately, principal burnout disturbs the perceptions of one's ability to influence decisions that impact their work (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principal burnout and its impact on schools, teachers, students, and families necessitate a shift in thinking among district leaders, other principals, and all school staff.

School administrators experience stressors that not only impact job performance but also their well-being (Maness, 2021). Principals encountering emotional exhaustion suffer from weight gain, high blood pressure, absenteeism, and even substance abuse (Maness, 2021). Principal burnout leads to the acceptance of responsibility for conflicts, misunderstandings, and mistakes, resulting in pressure from the community and school administrators (Maness, 2021).

Strategies to Prevent Principal Burnout

Maness (2021) suggested that engaging in physical activity through exercise, incorporating humor through positive laughter, using journaling as therapy writing, and practicing mindful meditation are effective methods to prevent burnout. Increased efforts to reduce workloads, foster coping skills, enhance time management, and improve conflict resolution are essential to principal stability (Maness, 2021). By enhancing overall health through balanced lifestyle choices, healthy nutrition, and consistent exercise, district leaders create relationships to understand a principal's personality and needs, which are crucial components (Maness, 2021).

DeMatthews et al. (2021) indicated that investing in training principals in all aspects of their role can help mitigate principal burnout. Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) emphasized that school districts should also focus on training principal supervisors in positive intervention

strategies. Maness (2021) noted that university preparation programs and school districts play a crucial role in equipping school leaders with the tools necessary to effectively lead their campuses while maintaining a healthy balance to prevent burnout, both professionally and personally. Research suggests that providing principals with guided support systems, professional development opportunities, and mental health resources can alleviate many of the stressors associated with their role (Sibisanu et al., 2024). It is essential for district leadership to foster relationships between mentors and principals, allowing them to discuss the challenging aspects of the principalship (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Further, Su-Keene and DeMatthews highlighted that principal coaching, which emphasizes achieving small goals and “little wins,” can enhance principals’ self-efficacy. During mentor meetings, principals can reflect on their progress and setbacks as part of a coaching process, which helps build self-regulation and resilience (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Importantly, principals are looking for a process that focuses on effort and helps build a positive self-identity (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022).

Principal supervisors must be equipped with the essential skills to manage principal burnout and self-care strategies (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principal supervisors have served in the role of principals and must promote self-care to principals (DeMatthews et al., 2021). One principal-supervisor reported in her supervisory meetings that she conducts one-on-one check-ins and asks questions about her principal’s well-being (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Principals require an established space to collaborate with district leadership about conflict resolution without judgment (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) stated that the relationship between the principal supervisor and the principal can foster a sense of hearing and value. Principal supervisors aligned workload conditions by supporting shared leadership duties

and responsibilities (DeMatthews et al., 2021). By delegating leadership duties and responsibilities, DeMatthews et al. (2021) indicated principals maintained a healthy work-life balance. Principal supervisors established opportunities to celebrate principal successes (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

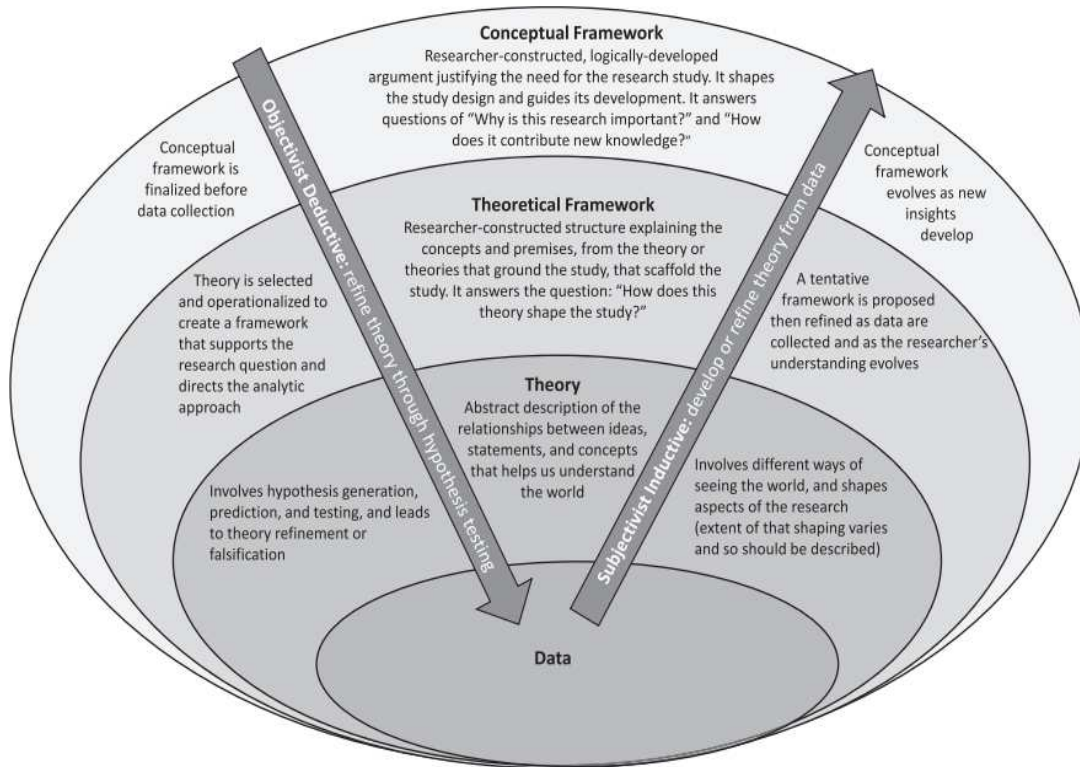
Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Varpio et al. (2020) defined a theoretical framework as a united set of ideas. The theories utilized by researchers in a study comprise a theoretical framework (Varpio et al., 2020; see Figure 2). Within a theoretical framework, researchers define the concepts, which grounds the research and makes “logical connections” (Varpio et al., 2020, p. 990). Varpio et al., however, defined a conceptual framework as the justification for conducting the study. Typically, a conceptual framework describes the knowledge of known identifiers, the gap in understanding, and an outline of the research methods (Varpio et al., 2020).

Varpio et al. (2020) makes a distinction between a theoretical framework and a conceptual framework. For this study, the theoretical framework consists of Maslach Burnout and COR theories (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The conceptual framing of the study is that high school principals who experience burnout are more likely to leave the profession; additionally, there are several factors that contribute to the retention of principals. For principals who persist in the profession, how do they utilize or prioritize their resources to prevent burnout? The Theory Matrix in Chapter 1 informed the data analysis for which to examine the components of each theory and their relationships to the research questions. Figure 2 from Varpio et al. (2020) illustrates how data, theories, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual frameworks interact (p. 991).

Figure 2

Visual depiction of the similarities and differences between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework



Note. Duplication of Visual depiction of the similarities and differences between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework across objectivist deductive and subjectivist inductive approaches to research. Reprinted from "The Distinctions between Theory, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework" by L. Varpio, E. Paradis, S. Uijtdehaage, and M. Young, 2020, *Academic Medicine*, 95(7), p. 991 (<https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000003075>). Copyright 2020 by the Association of American Medical Colleges. Reprinted with permission.

Maslach's Burnout Inventory

In the early 1970s, Herbert Freudenberger, an American psychologist, was the first to use burnout as a clinical term (Maslach et al., 1997). However, Christina Maslach developed an instrument to measure the three elements of burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction in personal achievement (Maslach et al., 1997). Maslach et al. (1997) used the terms of job burnout and burnout syndrome interchangeably, as a condition most associated with helping professionals. Helping professionals, as described by Maslach, are those who consistently work with clients, patients, children, or prisoners. Additionally, the work is emotionally driven, as clients may share uncomfortable information, which causes the exchange to be emotional for both the client and the professional (Maslach et al., 1997).

Over time, helping professionals may lose their capacity for care or empathy as they experience emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 1997). Maslach et al. (1997) provides some examples of emotional exhaustion here: “I don't care anymore, I don't have any feelings left, I have nothing left to give, I'm drained, I'm exhausted, I'm burned out” (p. 56). Therefore, the loss of empathy and emotional exhaustion are two of the elements of burnout. In contrast, Maslach stated that burnout is not a loss of creativity, boredom, or general job stress. Maslach et al. (1997) defined burnout as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal job stressors, which are often displayed as exhaustion, cynicism, or inefficacy.

Maslach et al. (1997) developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory to measure the three components of burnout syndrome: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments. The instrument consists of 22 items, and service providers are the typical respondents. Maslach et al. (1997) expanded the MBI into three other specialized

instruments: MBI-HSS (MBI-Human Services Survey), MBI-Educators Survey (MBI-ES), and MBI-General Survey (MBI-GS).

For this study, the MBI-ES is the most suitable instrument to measure the impact of burnout on principal attrition and turnover. Educational research prompted Maslach et al. (1997) to expand the general MBI. According to Maslach et al., education is the largest and most visible workforce in the United States. As previous research has outlined, those working within education incur an increased pressure to resolve societal issues, including but not limited to alcohol, drugs, and sexual abuse (Maslach et al., 1997; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Educators equip students with skills and knowledge to address challenges. Furthermore, educators are charged with assisting students in their academic, moral, and ethical development (Maslach et al., 1997). As noted in attrition, turnover, and burnout research, educators are leaving the profession, resulting in shortages that impact school culture and student achievement (Rangel, 2018). Maslach et al. attributed high levels of attrition in part to burnout, hence the development of the MBI-ES in 1986.

The instrument was developed to measure the three core components of burnout, such as emotional exhaustion, which is associated with emotional fatigue and withdrawal (Maslach et al., 1997). Maslach et al. (1997) stated that when educators are engaged in emotional withdrawal or the inability to give themselves emotionally, it leads to depersonalization of their students. In the depersonalization phase, educators may showcase feelings of indifference or negativity towards their students and begin “tuning out” or engaging in “psychological withdrawal” (Maslach et al., 1997, p. 206). The last phase or measure of burnout is a reduction of feelings of personal accomplishments, which for educators are tied to their ability to assist students (Maslach et al., 1997). During the last phase, when educators feel they can no longer assist students, they may

seek other opportunities to gain rewards or feelings of accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). Overall, the MBI-ES is measured by three components based upon teacher-student interactions (Maslach et al., 1997).

Previous educational research using the MBI-ES has reported associations of burnout as predictors of emotional exhaustion for younger teachers (Maslach et al., 1997). Additionally, males score higher than females within the Depersonalization scale. Furthermore, high school educators reported lower levels on the Personal Accomplishment Scale compared to elementary or junior high school educators (Maslach et al., 1997). Pandey (2020) and Russo (2022) examined the impact of burnout on educators using the MBI-ES. In Pandey's burnout matrix, school teachers were high on burnout due to the frequency and intensity of interpersonal contact. Pandey attributed burnout to heavy workloads and poor working conditions or environment, which resulted in stress. Private and public teachers experienced burnout at varying levels (Pandey, 2020). Russo utilized the MBI-ES to determine the predictive nature of high principals' leadership style and burnout levels as turnover factors. The findings indicated that the leadership style was not a predictor. However, for this study, the researcher seeks to understand principals' level of burnout and the use of resources (COR) as factors for attrition or intentions to leave education.

Conservation of Resources Theory

COR Theory is a fundamental baseline for assessing stress, resilience, and motivation in individuals and organizations (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Over the past three decades, conservation of resources has become one of the most utilized theories in organizations and in examining organizational behaviors (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Many professions have adopted the COR theory to examine stress, burnout, and trauma (Hobfoll et al., 2018). COR theory provided useful

insights into how individuals respond to difficulties and opportunities in their lives. Additionally, COR allows for an examination of conservation, acquisition, and depletion of resources that impact individuals' resilience and well-being (Wang et al., 2021). The COR theory has been extensively applied to study many subjects, such as the elements, along with coping techniques and health effects (Hobfoll et al., 2018). COR has become the foundation for work-specific theory of organizational stress, particularly the workplace demand-resource model (Hobfoll et al., 2018). A primary advantage of COR theory is the opportunity to make a wide range of hypotheses for which to examine or test the specific variables of COR—stress, burnout, and trauma (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Hobfoll et al., (2018) indicated COR theory began with individuals desiring to obtain, retain, foster, and protect their most valued assets. According to Hobfoll et al., (2018), COR examines resources and impacting factors such as objects, conditions, and personal characteristics. Hobfoll et al., (2018) reported other factors such as qualifications, experience, self-esteem, education, and support. COR theory emphasizes the need for addressing factors impacting individuals through resource management rather than identifying causes of difficulties (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Furthermore, Hobfoll et al. (2018) highlighted that resources are developed to sustain and promote the organization and are not personalized for the individuals within it. Organizations must invest more resources to prevent ongoing, consistent loss and investment in individuals (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The COR theory fosters a nurturing and adaptable relationship between individuals and the environment through the cultivation and nourishing of resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Stress resulting from the threat or loss of key resources led to the creation of the COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The failure to receive support after significant effort is considered a

contributing factor to COR (Hobfoll et al., 2018). COR is defined as a motivational theory related to human behavior essential to acquiring and conserving resources for survival (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The COR is essential for understanding stress in organizations (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Furthermore, COR theory addresses family, self-esteem, health, well-being, and feelings of “direction and significance” in life (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Additionally, COR theory provides individuals and organizations with resources to manage personally and professionally difficult situations (Hobfoll et al., 2018). For this study, COR is suitable for assessing the factors for attrition, turnover, and burnout.

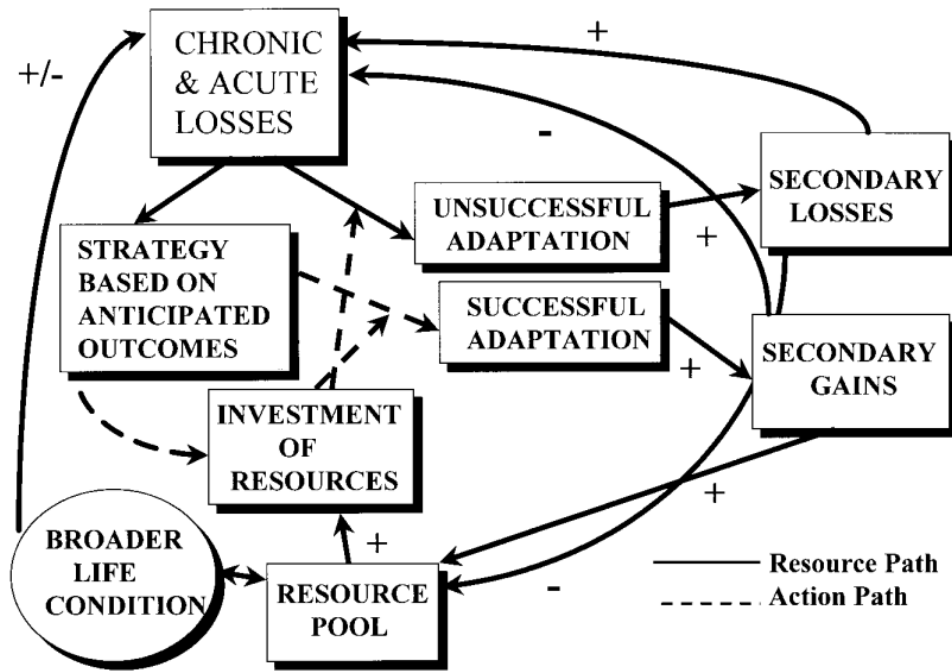
According to the COR Model (see Figure 3), individuals are motivated to utilize their resources for benefits such as job satisfaction, support, and personal gratification (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Individuals impacted by stress and burnout are fearful when resource depletion creates an inability to manage difficulties and challenges (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The COR shields individuals from mental challenges caused by resource depletion (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Furthermore, COR prevents the negative impact of resource depletion on individuals’ well-being and emotional functioning (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The COR theory outlines phases like overwhelm, exhaustion, and disengagement, which can lead to stress, burnout, and mental discomfort (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Hobfoll et al., (2018) indicated resource conservation is a product of life conditions (see Figure 3). When individuals experience loss, the natural response is to conserve and expend the resources for a successful turnaround (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The adjustment to loss and stress creates new resources, allowing individuals to gain new resources in preparation for future problems (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Individuals who fail to adapt to resource loss experience stressful outcomes, including low functioning and diminished resource investment (Hobfoll et

al., 2018). Further inconsistencies create ongoing, consistent circumstances and weaken an individual's resource pool (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Figure 3

Conservation Resource Theory Model



Note. Depiction of the Conservation Resources Theory Model Reprinted from “Conservation of Resources in the Organizational Context: The Reality of Resources and Their Consequences” by S. E. Hobfoll, J. Halbesleben, J. P. Neveu, M. Westman, 2018, *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 5(1), p. 358 (<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104640>). Copyright 2018 by Annual Reviews. Reprinted with permission.

The COR provides strategies to help school leaders avoid burnout by giving them more control over their work, offering rewards, lessening heavy workloads, providing training, giving organizational support, and having mentors (Sundram & Kumareswaran, 2024). The COR Theory is designed to reduce the factors of burnout and enhance employee well-being by

examining personal characteristics such as experience, family demands, and organizational culture (Sundram & Kumareswaran, 2024). COR Theory reduces symptoms of burnout, improves physical and mental health, enhances job performance, and improves the overall workplace environment (Sundram & Kumareswaran, 2024). Furthermore, it allows for long-term impact and sustainability within organizational and personal alignment practices (Sundram & Kumareswaran, 2024).

Summary

Principals are critical to the success of all schools, and the role becomes increasingly demanding and difficult (Flamini & Wang, 2024). Developing a greater understanding of the increase in principal attrition, turnover, and burnout creates a deeper sense of value by identifying the factors, impacts, and retention strategies. Principal burnout is believed to be a leading cause of principal attrition and turnover, with multiple factors contributing. This chapter provided extensive research on principals and outlined strategies to measure and define burnout. Throughout the literature, research identified the factors of principal attrition, turnover, and burnout; however, findings limit what can be inferred about principal burnout. Chapter 3, Methodology explains how the researcher has added to the study of principal turnover, retention, and burnout.

Chapter III

Methodology

The NASSP (2017) emphasized that only half of principals remained in their position for more than 3 years, and extensive costs to recruit and develop principals were mismanaged and inappropriately utilized. Such turnover has led to increased teacher turnover and decreased student achievement (NASSP, 2017). Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated principal turnover increased by 16%, and leader to teacher turnover increased by 10% at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. High rates of turnover have been evident in poverty-stricken areas with schools that have been in the bottom tier of performing schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The principal position has revolutionized over time, expanding duties and responsibilities administratively from clerical to visionary leadership (Chan et al., 2022; Loewenberg, 2016; Stevenson, 1995). However, the demand of the principal position to maintain high achievement and student safety, mentally and emotionally, has served as one of many stressors leading to principal burnout (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022; Williamson et al., 2018). A primary stressor for principals has been the challenge of decreased student success and no curriculum for workforce readiness within schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Principal turnover has been an underlying, ongoing, and steady issue creating gaps in leadership, primarily in rural and poverty communities with low educator recruitment (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022; Superville, 2023). Principals have often been susceptible to factors such as minimal support from stakeholders, difficult working dynamics, and an unstable professional environment

leading to burnout (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Maslach et al., 1997; Rangel, 2018; Steiner et al., 2022). The imbalance and lack of appreciation for managing an extensive workload and lack of support have resulted in overwhelming stress and burnout for a principal in such an environment (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia. These factors were based on the perceptions of principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I high schools located in rural South Georgia. Additionally, the study's secondary purpose was to examine the relationship between attrition, turnover, and burnout among Title I high school principals in rural South Georgia.

This study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of high school principals, stressors that lead to burnout, the impact on turnover and attrition, and potential improvements to the retention rates of high school principals. To bridge the opportunity gap, schools have required principals who are driven to endure the challenges of their role and remain in their positions long enough to see a significant change and genuinely make an impact (Gacherieu, 2023). Out of the six participants in this study, four have been current high school principals and two have retired. In spite of the challenges and struggles throughout their leadership journey, each participant has remained steadfast to their professional and personal commitments to education and student learning.

This chapter contains detailed information about the methodology for the study. This study's purpose involved the examination of factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia. The determining factors were based on the perceptions of those identified principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in

Title I high schools. The high schools pertaining to the study were located in rural South Georgia. Additionally, a secondary purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between attrition, turnover, and burnout of Title I high school principals in rural, South Georgia. The chapter provides an overview of the research design and rationale, the setting, participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, issues of trustworthiness, the role of the researcher, and ethical considerations.

The following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?
- Research Question 2: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?
- Research Question 3: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?

Research Design

Constructivism, or social constructivism, is an approach to qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Social constructivists believe that people desire to understand “the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). Additionally, people create meanings of experiences, ideas, or objects (Creswell, 2014). The constructivist worldview enables the researcher to

explore the multi-faceted nature of participants' meaning (Creswell, 2014). As such, the researcher must rely on the participants' perspective of the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

Human beings construct meanings with interpretation (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative researchers tend to use open-ended questions, encouraging participants to share their views (Creswell, 2014). Open-ended questioning is better as the researcher listens to individuals indicate what they say or do in their life settings (Creswell, 2014). Through interactions with others, historical and cultural norms influence individual lives and shape the processes of interaction among them (Creswell, 2014). Constructivist researchers focus on understanding the contexts of people's backgrounds in order to acknowledge the influences of individuals' personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2014). The researcher's intent is to make sense of the meaning others have about the world (Creswell, 2014). Constructivist researchers can generate or develop a theory or pattern rather than initiate research with a set theory (Creswell, 2014). The constructivist worldview is well-suited for qualitative research, as noted by Creswell (2014) and Patton (2002), as it enables researchers to balance subjectivity and objectivity when exploring a phenomenon.

Research allows for the examination of a phenomenon to determine the true meaning of the experience as described by those who have lived it (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2019). One research design that can be used within a constructivist paradigm is phenomenology.

According to Patton (2002), phenomenology is the essential meaning of individual experience, the social construction of group reality, and the language and structure of communication, respectively. Patton (2015) described the approach as follows: "Phenomenology aims at deeper comprehension of the nature of our everyday experiences" (p. 115). The phenomenological

research design allows researchers to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences both individually and collectively, creating opportunities for shared meaning (Maxwell 2013; Patton 2002). This is essential to have for the study's purpose, approach, and research questions. Ary et al. (2014) defined phenomenology as a qualitative research approach that allows researchers to understand "how participants experience and give meaning to an event, concept, or phenomenon" (p. 680). An individual's understanding of discovering a phenomenon derives from their sensory experience and ability to describe, explain, and interpret that experience (Patton, 2002). Similar to Patton (2002) and Ary et al. (2014), Maxwell (2013) emphasized the value of phenomenological research designs in enabling participants to share their lived experiences through interviews. Patton (2002) reported that a phenomenon is considered a reflection or retrospection of the lived experience, which can include emotions such as loneliness, jealousy, or anger that arise from relationships, marriage, job relocations, and other life events. However, Patton (2002) indicated that a person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through it.

It is through the accumulation of the participants' descriptions about a specific phenomenon that researchers glean their shared meaning. In conducting phenomenological research, researchers must be intentional when capturing participants experiences; thus, they must be aware of "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The interview allows researchers to capture first-hand knowledge of the lived experiences (Patton, 2002). Given the nature of the research questions, first-hand interviewing allows for interaction and active construction not available from secondary sources. The researcher can be the interviewer, a participant, and an instrument simultaneously, discovering more of what is essential about each mentioned

experience. Seidman (2019) also noted that phenomenological interviewing allows researchers to capture the lived experiences of participants, which are bound by time, what “will be,” what “is,” and what “was” (Seidman, 2019, p. 16). Each individual possesses lived experiences that they consider to be truth, which periodically dictate their behavior (Patton, 2002). Researchers use a phenomenological approach when asking participants to search again for the essence of their lived experiences” (Seidman, 2019, p. 17). Additionally, Seidman indicated that phenomenology emphasizes how an individual’s journey transitions from one experience to another, moving from future possibilities to current realities. The phenomenological approach enables the researcher to center on the participant’s current or past experiences (Seidman, 2019). When interviewing the participant, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of their lived experiences (Seidman, 2019). The goal of the researcher during the interview is to remain as close as possible to the true meaning of the participant’s lived experience (Seidman, 2019). Ultimately, phenomenology allows for the collection of primary participant data in a way that takes into account practical needs and required data to sufficiently determine the stipulated information concerning current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in the South Georgia region.

Settings

Rauschenberg (2017) from The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (2022) reported the district size and the number of principals and assistant principals within each category (see Table 6). In addition, the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement distinguishes school districts by metro, rural, and suburban areas. Rural school districts are described as an area less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster (Governor’s Office of Student Achievements, 2022).

Table 6*District Size and Population of Principals and Assistant Principals*

Size	Number of Districts	Number of Principals and Assistant Principals
Small	76	Fewer than 10 principals and assistant principals
Midsized	79	10-50 principals and assistant principals
Large	11	51-100 principals and assistant principals
Very Large	13	More than 100 principals and assistant principals

Furthermore, a rural area is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster (Governor’s Office of Student Achievements, 2022). Lastly, a rural area is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (Governor’s Office of Student Achievements, 2022). A town is an area inside an urban cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an urbanized area (Governor’s Office of Student Achievements, 2022). A town is a territory within an urban cluster that is either (a) more than 10 miles and up to 35 miles from an urbanized area or (b) more than 35 miles from an urbanized area (Governor’s Office of Student Achievements, 2022).

A city or metro area is a large territory in an urbanized area consisting of a population estimated at 250,000 or more (Governor’s Office of Student Achievements, 2022). This city, the metro area, is known as a midsize region with a population of less than 250,000, greater than or equal to 100,000, and less than 100,000 (Governor’s Office of Student Achievements, 2022). According to the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (2022), a suburban area is a large territory located outside a principal city and within an urbanized area, with a population of 250,000 or more. Suburban areas are considered midsize territories outside a principal city and

inside an urbanized area. The population size of suburban areas is greater than or equal to 100,000 and less than 250,000 (Governor's Office of Student Achievements, 2022).

Population, Sampling, and Sample

Rauschenberg (2017) stated that there were 2,176 principals employed during the academic school year of 2016-2017. As noted by Rauschenberg (2017), 896 principals had a minimum of 3 years of experience. There were reported 1,012 principals who had a range of 4–10 years of experience, 261 principals who had 11–20 years of experience, and only 7 principals who had 21 or more years of experience. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2025), Georgia had 402 public high schools; thus, the population of high school principals during the 2023-2024 academic school year was 402. The sample for this study was acquired from the population of high school principals who are serving or have served in a Title I rural school district in South Georgia.

Ary et al. (2014) described 15 different types of purposeful or purposive sampling methods. Purposive or purposeful sampling allows researchers to select participants who can provide the “maximum insight and understanding” about the studied phenomenon (Ary et al., 2014, p. 456). As noted by Ary et al., there is no general rule for the number of participants that should be selected for a qualitative study; however, the researcher must be aware and seek to achieve data saturation. Data saturation is defined as when participants offer no new information (Ary et al., 2014). The proposed sample size is $n = 6$. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) stated that purposeful sampling applies to both sites and participants. As noted above, the setting or sites included principals who work or have worked in Title I rural school districts. The sampling method that was most suitable for this study is criterion (Ary et al., 2014) sampling. Ary et al. (2014) defined criterion sampling as a form of sampling wherein the researcher decides or sets a

criterion for participants to include all individuals that fit the parameters as outlined by the criterion. Thus, the criterion for participation in this study included a current or past principal of a Title I rural school for 3 to 5 years. The sample contained six individuals who met the criterion, either currently or formerly serving as principals from a Title I rural school district in South Georgia.

Gatekeepers

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined a gatekeeper as an individual in a specific position at a particular location who possesses crucial information that assists researchers in gathering data, finding study sites, and facilitating identifications. In this study, officials from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement and the Georgia Department of Education acted as gatekeepers by maintaining reports that contained certified personnel information about high school principals (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). GOSA and GADOE officials collect CPI reports three times a year in October, March, and July on certified personnel positions such as principals and teachers (GADOE, 2023). To obtain this information, a gatekeeper would provide access to an individual to analyze the CPI data using personnel codes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher contacted GOSA officials to gain access to active principals, and the rural setting was determined by the local Regional Educational Service Agency of the high school principal. GOSA representatives, acting as gatekeepers, created the High Needs Rural Schools map to provide public knowledge and familiarize individuals with rural school districts in Georgia (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher contacted each high school principal participant based on the map and area the principal served at the time.

Data Collection

The researcher engaged in five steps of data collection as outlined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019): identify participants and sites, gain access, and determine the types of data to collect, identify the procedures for recording qualitative data, recognize field issues, and address ethical considerations throughout data collection. This section discusses the types of data collected, including descriptions about the instruments' development as well as the usage, storage, and management of data. Lastly, the section includes how the research addresses ethical issues within the study. Creswell and Guetterman place qualitative data in the following categories: observations, interviews and questionnaires, documents, and audiovisual materials. For this study, surveys and interviews were most suitable to explore the factors of principal turnover and attrition.

Survey

Surveys can function as tools for gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) outlined several types of measures obtained through surveys and testing, including measures of an individual's performance, measures of an individual's attitude, observation of individual behavior, and factual measures. The most applicable measure for this study is the measurement of an individual's attitude. Creswell and Guetterman defined an attitudinal measure as an assessment seeking to capture individuals' affect or feelings towards educational topics. As noted in Chapter 2, burnout serves as a contributing factor for both turnover and attrition (Maslach et al., 1997). The researcher sought to understand participants' attitudes toward their work within an educational environment, including the variables of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction in personal achievement

(Maslach et al., 1997). Creswell and Guetterman provided an example of an attitudinal measure that includes a Likert scale with variables associated with each of the questions.

The researcher gave participants the Maslach Burnout Inventory Survey (MBI-ES) (Maslach et al., 1997) to complete. The researcher acquired relevant permissions to administer the instrument to participants, after which the researcher utilized Qualtrics to recreate the survey (see Appendices A and B). Informed consent was addressed within the first question of the survey. The researcher sent each potential participant a unique participant code to render their data confidential. The researcher also collected demographic data within the first section of the survey, labeled Demographic Information (see Appendix A). The researcher created demographic questions about race, gender, education, the number of years served as a principal, the number of years in the current role, whether an individual has left the profession, when they left if applicable, and what profession they transitioned to at the time of the survey. The second section of the survey had 22 items of the MBI-ES (Maslach et al., 1997).

The MBI-ES was developed by Maslach and Schwab in 1996; the instrument measures the three dimensions of burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction in personal achievement) (Maslach et al., 1997). The survey developers used two studies to establish the instrument's validity and reliability. Both studies had sample sizes with over 400 people. The first study, conducted by Iwankicki and Schwab (1981), reported Cronbach alpha estimates of “.90 for emotional exhaustion, .76 for depersonalization, and .76 for personal accomplishments” (Maslach et al., 1997, p. 206). Additionally, the second study conducted by Gold also reported .88 for emotional exhaustion, .74 for depersonalization, and .72 for personal accomplishments (Maslach et al., 1997). Maslach et al. (1997) pointed out that the MBI-ES has been used to discover possible issues in a school district, but the survey developers warned

researchers to be careful not to make the mistake of assuming the data represent the organization instead of the individual experiences of the participants (Maslach et al., 1997). Therefore, the researcher did not use the survey data to draw conclusions about a specific school district or organization. The researcher used the data to guide the development of the interview instrument, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Interview

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined an interview as a researcher asking one or more individuals open-ended questions and documenting each response. The researcher records transcriptions in preparation for data analysis (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Open-ended questions are most appropriate for qualitative research to allow the participant to have the most natural, credible experience without any restraint from the researcher (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). To elaborate, "an open-ended response follows, allowing the participant the option to respond" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 218). Creswell and Guetterman indicated the advantages and disadvantages of conducting interviews in qualitative research. Often, the interviews provide detailed, specific information that is very useful for the study, as the researcher asks guided questions to receive essential information (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). However, interviews may lead to misconstrued information due to errors in the researcher's transcription (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). During the interview, participants may be uncomfortable with the interviewer or recording devices; multiple elements may alter the participant's responses, which is known as reactivity (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Maxwell, 2013). The researcher provided a comfortable environment as recommended by Creswell and Guetterman to ensure that participants were able to articulate their responses to each interview question.

Table 7*Conducting Interviews*

Step	Researcher Execution
1. Identify the interviewees	The researcher sought access to active high principal information from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement and select participants through purposive-criterion sampling.
2. Determine the type of interview.	One-on-One recorded interviews allowed each participant to be comfortable providing the most articulate lived experiences.
3. During the interview, gather audio/video recordings of questions and responses.	The researcher conducted the interviews in Microsoft Teams and accessed video recording/transcripts.
4. Take brief notes during the interview.	The researcher recorded and documented written notes throughout the interviews.
5. Locate a quiet, suitable place conducive to conducting an interview.	The researcher determined a locale that was quiet and conducive to conducting virtual interviews.
6. Obtain informed voluntary consent from the interviewee to participate in the study.	The researcher obtained informed voluntary consent before the first question of the interview and any subsequent interviews throughout the data collection process.
7. Have a flexible plan.	The researcher utilized interview protocol and scheduled interviews at times that were convenient for the participants but also flexible should the need to reschedule arise.
8. Use probes to obtain additional information.	Sub-questions were set in place to assist participants who may have needed to elaborate on a point of view essential for the researcher to glean for the study. The researcher used probes to guide the participant to dig deeper into the lived experience.
9. Be courteous and professional when the interview is over.	At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher professionally indicated appreciation and gratitude for participation. The researcher informed participants of the results once the study was completed.

Note. Adapted from *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research* by J. W. Creswell and T. C. Guetterman, 2019, p. 221-222. Copyright 2022 by Pearson Higher Ed. Adapted with permission.

Moreover, the researcher developed an interview protocol to reflect Seidman's (2019) three interview series (see Appendix C) and Creswell and Guetterman's (2019) nine steps for conducting interviews (see Table 7). The three-interview series provides structure for phenomenological interviewing. The first interview focuses on the life history of participants; the second interview helps researchers gather more information of the participants' lived experience; and the third interview provides participants an opportunity to reflect on the meaning that they make of their lived experience (Seidman, 2019). Since this study included survey data, an adaptation was made to Seidman's three interview series. The researcher conducted two virtual interviews in Microsoft Teams. Each interview was approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The first interview included questions related to the history and lived experiences, and the second interview provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on the meaning of their lived experiences. Seidman does allow for alteration to the three (90 minute) interview structure, and he advises researchers to conduct "one long interview or perhaps two interviews, combining one and two, or two and three" (Seidman, 2019, p. 25). As noted above, the researcher combined one and two of the interview series. The researcher informed participants of the recorded interview and removed identifiable information from the transcripts. The researcher replaced identifiable information with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized the six steps for analyzing data as outlined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019): organizing the data, examining and coding the data, using the codes to create

descriptions and themes, reporting on the findings, interpreting the findings, and checking the accuracy of the researcher's results. This data analysis section includes a discussion on the processes of organizing the data in preparation for analysis, as well as the phases of data analysis of the transcribed interview transcripts. The section also includes the processes of data representation and dataset interpretation. Lastly, the discussion involves the researcher's assurances related to issues of trustworthiness along with the researcher's positionality (role of the researcher).

Preparing and Organizing the Data

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) suggested creating a chart or document to aid the researcher in organizing data. The extensive amount of data collected from interviews, surveys, and other data collection methods may be sorted by pertinent categories (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For organization purposes, the researcher maintained multiple documents of data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher protected participant privacy rights by saving data to an external storage with security rights (i.e., password) to be provided only by the researcher.

Transcribing the Data

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) defined transcription as transforming audio or video documentation into worded notes for data collection. The researcher gathers information through interviews or surveys from participants, documenting the data during observation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Creswell and Guetterman recommended adopting a transference program to convert recorded voice to word text for transcriptive data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The adoption of the program provides the researcher the opportunity to save time by converting participants' voices to a note data file (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Creswell and Guetterman

described the process of transcription as an extremely extensive process that requires a focused, timely manner. Whether using a transcriptionist or self-transcribing, external artifacts such as software programs, microphones, and/or headphones are essential to ensure the process runs smoothly (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Transcription programs are available for researchers to review audio, video, and documentation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this study, the researcher used Microsoft Teams to record and review audio, video, and transcriptions. The transcripts were stored on a password-protected OneDrive.

Analysis Procedures

The preliminary exploratory analysis is defined as reviewing the entire data to initiate a review of the data, planning the organization of the data, and determining if additional data is essential for the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) suggested the researcher create notes alongside the transcripts while reviewing the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). An extended component of the analysis procedure is analyzing text, which is part of the coding process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The objective of the coding process is to “make sense of text data,” dissect the data into text, label the text in categories with codes, inspect each code for redundancy, and generalize the codes into overall themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 243). The coding process allows the researchers to categorize the data by themes, used and unusable (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Multiple steps are provided by Creswell and Guetterman to assist with coding data, including proofreading each transcription for a natural experience, selecting the interview with more intriguing information that provides the most detailed participant feedback, and initiating the process of coding the document (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher may create text segment codes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Text segment codes are defined as labels to use to describe a segment of text

(Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Creswell and Guetterman indicated codes examine areas such as settings, participant ideas, methods, and interactions. Creswell and Guetterman suggested two methods of coding: vivo and lean coding (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher utilizes vivo codes as substitutes for the participant's direct words (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

The researcher employs lean coding in the original transcript and assigns a minimum code (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). By doing so, Creswell and Guetterman (2019) emphasized the researcher minimizes coding to expand the thematization of data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). An entire transcription may require 40-60 codes, but the objective is to proofread a reduction resulting in 20-30 codes as a manageable number of themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). From the reduced list, the researcher creates 5-7 themes for the participants and descriptions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Descriptions are referred to as individuals, locations, or activities in an environment utilized for research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher's focus in describing and developing themes is directed towards responding to the study's research questions and formalizing a perception of the phenomena and thematic development (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Themes assist with preventing redundancies and are categorized as ordinary, unexpected, hard-to-classify, and major/minor themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). When interviewing participants, multiple perspectives offer many points of view from each participant conveying a phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Contrary evidence, saturation, layering, and interconnecting themes potentially have a role in the analysis process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Contrary evidence is defined as inaccurate information that is not credible or credentialed about a theme (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Saturation is reaching the point of major themes without any added information (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Layering themes is an added feature to assist in

organizing themes in layers by foundations to more detailed layers (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher utilizes interrelating themes to chronologically connect the participant’s experiences by the time in which the events occurred (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained that data analysis is conducted by hand or through computer analysis. Hand analysis consists of dividing the data into parts and using color codes to mark or indicate themes and patterns (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Computer analysis allows the researcher to store, analyze, sort, and represent the data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this study, the researcher used a computer analysis program, Intellectus Qualitative (Intellectus Qualitative, 2025). The program allowed the researcher to conduct three iterations of coding: first iteration for research questions, second iteration for theories, and third iteration for components of theories. The three iterations of coding allowed for the discovery of themes and patterns. Examples of three-iteration coding and thematization are available in Table 8.

Table 8

Three Iteration Coding and Thematization Process

Interview Questions	1st Iteration RQ	2nd Iteration Theory	3rd Iteration Components of Theories	Discovery of Themes and Patterns
1. For the purpose of this question, burnout is defined as “complete mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion that results from an inability to effectively cope with stressors over a period of time.” Based on this definition, have you ever experienced stress to the point of burnout? If so, when did it begin?	RQ 2	MBI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Exhaustion • Depersonalization • Reduction in Personal Accomplishment 	The three iteration of coding allowed for the discovery of themes and patterns.

2. How would you rate exercise, humor, journaling, meditation, spirituality/religion as a method that you use to help cope with stress?	RQ 3	COR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage Stress • Cope with Adversity • Promote well-being • Converse resources • Protect resources • Build resources 	The three iteration of coding allowed for the discovery of themes and patterns.
3. How would you rate exercise, humor, journaling, meditation, spirituality/religion as a method that you use to help cope with stress?	RQ 3	COR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage Stress • Cope with Adversity • Promote well-being • Converse resources • Protect resources • Build resources 	The three iteration of coding allowed for the discovery of themes and patterns.
4. What types of resources (time, staffing, mental health, and training) are provided to help you manage your responsibilities?	RQ1	COR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage Stress • Cope with Adversity • Promote well-being • Converse resources • Protect resources • Build resources 	The three iteration of coding allowed for the discovery of themes and patterns.

Representing the Findings

Researchers have multiple options to represent findings of data, such as creating a comparison table, developing a hierarchical tree diagram, drawing a map, creating a demographic table, and presenting figures (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher dissected the data by theme and represented the findings for the reader to distinguish between each participant. For this study, the researcher utilized demographic tables and other tables and figures to represent the data.

Reporting the Findings

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) indicated that the most appropriate form of reporting findings is a narrative discussion. A narrative discussion is defined as a noted document in which the researcher details the results of the analyzed data collected (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Throughout the narrative discussion, questions may arise, assumptions are possible, and participant inquiries become concerning during the research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The purpose of the research and the type of data analyzed help determine the form utilized for report findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Interpretation is the final section of the report findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher creates an expanded definition of a phenomenon based on the participant's lived experiences, comparisons with past interactions, and natural senses of occurrences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this study, the researcher created participant profiles and utilized discussion and excerpt support for themes and patterns, as well as engaged in cross-comparison analysis of themes and patterns.

Validating the Findings

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) indicated findings of data collection and analysis process must be validated (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher established the precision and integrity of the findings through methods such as member checking or triangulation. Member checking is defined as a procedure requiring each participant to proofread the exactness of their background (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Accuracy and credibility of the findings are essential to the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) reported that authors Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) provided confirmation of trustworthiness and validity in four ways in a qualitative study (see Table 9). Credibility is certified utilizing various methods to determine the fidelity of the data and interpretation of the participants within the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Transferability is indicated by providing detailed information about the processes and documenting findings supported by evidence (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Dependability permits the researcher to duplicate the processes of the study by extending the strategies and descriptions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). According to the researcher, confirmability is established through the admission of biases from seeking pertinent information from participants for the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Table 9

Components of Trustworthiness, Actions, and Researcher Implementation

Component of Trustworthiness	Descriptions	Actions	Researcher Implementation
Credibility	Determining the accuracy;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members Checking Triangulation Prolonged Engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) 	<p>The researcher triangulated the survey data with the interview data.</p> <p>The researcher conducted 2 (60-90) minute interviews.</p>
Transferability	Detailed descriptions, writing findings, and establishing the context of study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thick or Rich Descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) 	<p>The researcher provided detailed accounts within the methodology and results chapters that explained depth of participants' understanding as well as cross-analysis of themes and patterns.</p>
Dependability	Use overlapping methods and in-depth methodological descriptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audit Trail (Ary et al., 2014) Coding agreement (Ary et al., 2014). 	<p>The researcher saved password-protected transcribe data.</p> <p>3-iteration coding system.</p>

Confirmability	Admitting biases and assumptions, acknowledging limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflexivity (Ary et al., 2014) • Negative Case Sampling (Ary et al., 2014). 	The researcher took notes and maintained documentation/journaling.
	Researcher's documentation thinking processes throughout the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)		

Note: Components of Trustworthiness as discussed by (Ary et al., 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher has an invested purpose in the qualitative, phenomenological study from exploring the burnout of high school principals, the factors, the impacts causing turnover and attrition, and the coping strategies used to manage stress and prevent burnout. The researcher served as an instrument for data collection and analysis. The study emphasized an understanding of the participants lived experiences regarding the stressors faced and coping strategies used to manage stress and prevent burnout. A two-phase phenomenology-based approach was the appropriate research design.

The researcher's personal and professional background as a high school principal builds stronger connectivity and relatability to the study. The researcher has experienced many of the factors of burnout that lead to attrition and turnover. Additionally, the researcher has personal motivation and goals associated with the study.

Maxwell (2013) indicated that researchers must identify and take accountability for their personal goals that relate to the research. Negating personal goals and concerns from the research design is impossible (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher's position can serve as a potential bias, as

noted by Maxwell. Researchers' bias, along with reactivity, are potential validity threats. Thus, the researcher is committed to understanding critical subjectivity so that he does not impose his assumptions and values on the research (Maxwell, 2013). As outlined in Table 9, the researcher adhered to a number of validity checks, which ensured the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis processes.

Ethical Issues

Patton (2015) outlined a number of ethical elements that researchers must consider when conducting qualitative research: assessment of risk, confidentiality, informed consent, data access, and ownership. The researcher completed the CITI Training Program certification to understand the guidelines for conducting human research (CITI Training Program, 2025, see Appendix D). After receiving Institutional Review Board approval (VSU IRB, 2025; See Appendix E), the researcher started the data collection process with an invitation for potential participants to complete the survey (see Appendices A and F). The researcher informed potential participants about potential risks (minimum), informed consent, and duration of participation (see Appendix C).

The survey instrument did not collect any identifiable information from the participants; each participant was given a participant code within the invitation email to keep their identity confidential. As previously emphasized in this chapter, informed consent was the first question of the survey. Participants were also asked to enter the participant code as indicated within the invitation email. For the interview process, the researcher informed the participants that the interviews were recorded and also reminded the participants of informed consent at each of the interviews. Throughout the interview process, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to each participant to ensure that the transcript data did not contain identifiable information. The

researcher saved all survey and interview data on password-protected drives. Lastly, the researcher will store the data for 3 years prior to destroying it according to research guidelines (VSU IRB, 2025).

Summary

For this study, the researcher utilized a two-phase phenomenological design from a constructive worldview lens. The research design was important for capturing the meaning of the participants' lived experiences as they relate to burnout, turnover, and attrition. The data collection instruments consisted of a survey that collected participants' demographic information along with their completion of the MBI-ES (Maslach et al., 1997). The data collection process also utilized two interviews for each participant, each lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. The survey and interview transcripts were saved on a password-protected OneDrive. The data analysis involved three iterations of coding to discover the themes and patterns related to research questions, theories, and components of the theories. The researcher used Intellectus Qualitative for data analysis (Intellectus Qualitative, 2025). The researcher reported and presented the findings using tables and figures. The researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis processes through the outlined validity checks. Lastly, to ensure the protection of the participants and their data, the researcher used a unique participant code within the survey and pseudonyms for the interview data.

Chapters 4-6 will provide details of the results of the study. Chapter 4 contains the Participants Profiles.

Chapter IV

Participant Profiles

The NASSP (2017) emphasized that only half of principals remained in their position for more than 3 years, and extensive costs to recruit and develop principals were mismanaged and inappropriately utilized. Such turnover has led to increased teacher turnover and decreased student achievement (NASSP, 2017). Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated principal turnover increased by 16%, and leader to teacher turnover increased by 10% at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. High rates of turnover have been evident in poverty-stricken areas with schools that have been in the bottom tier of performing schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The principal position has revolutionized over time, expanding duties and responsibilities administratively from clerical to visionary leadership (Chan et al., 2022; Loewenberg, 2016; Stevenson, 1995). However, the demand of the principal position to maintain high achievement and student safety, mentally and emotionally, has served as one of many stressors leading to principal burnout (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022; Williamson et al., 2018). A primary stressor for principals has been the challenge of decreased student success and no curriculum for workforce readiness within schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Principal turnover has been an underlying, ongoing, and steady issue creating gaps in leadership, primarily in rural and poverty communities with low educator recruitment (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022; Superville, 2023). Principals have often been susceptible to factors such as minimal support from stakeholders, difficult working dynamics, and an unstable professional

environment leading to burnout (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Maslach et al., 1997; Rangel, 2018; Steiner et al., 2022). The imbalance and lack of appreciation for managing an extensive workload and lack of support have resulted in overwhelming stress and burnout for a principal in such an environment (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia. These factors were based on the perceptions of principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I high schools located in rural South Georgia. Additionally, the study's secondary purpose was to examine the relationship between attrition, turnover, and burnout among Title I high school principals in rural South Georgia.

The following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in South Georgia?
- Research Question 2: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in South Georgia?
- Research Question 3: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in South Georgia?

This study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of high school principals, stressors that lead to burnout, the impact on turnover and attrition, and potential improvements to the retention rates of high school principals. To bridge the opportunity gap, schools have required principals who are driven to endure the challenges of their role and remain in their positions long enough to see a significant change and genuinely make an impact (Gacherieu, 2023). Out of the six participants in this study, four have been current high school principals and two have retired. In spite of the challenges and struggles throughout their leadership journey, each participant has remained steadfast to their professional and personal commitments to education and student learning.

The interviewing process allows researchers to create a deeper understanding of the participants and their experiences, perspectives, and ideas (Seidman, 2019). For this study, the researcher invited six participants to provide detailed information about their lived experiences and perceptions of being a high school principal in a Title I, rural school district in South Georgia. Additionally, their experiences provided for a greater depth in understanding how principals experienced attrition or turnover as a result of stress and burnout. The criteria were for selecting interview participants based on the following specifications:

1. Participants must be currently serving or formerly served in a Title I and Rural school system as a high school principal in South Georgia.

The researcher learned about the participants' growth processes and change development, as well as their understanding of possible error; however, they had to remain adaptable and flexible in making adjustments. Participants lived experiences served as the basis for understanding their perceptions and stressors in being a high school principal in a Title I, rural high school district in South Georgia. Each participant's interview provided an in-depth

understanding of stress, burnout, attrition, and turnover. The name of each participant was changed to a random pseudonym name, strictly for privacy and confidentiality to protect the identities of the interviewees (see Table 10).

Table 10

Demographics Table

Name	Status	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Degrees	Number of Principal Roles	Number of Years in Education	Type of School
Dorothy	Retired	54	Female	African American	Ed.S.	2	30	Rural
Terrell	Currently serving	57	Male	African American	Ed.D.	4	34	Town or Small City
Bob	Currently serving	42	Male	Caucasian	Ed.D.	3	19	Rural
Cliff	Currently serving	46	Male	Caucasian	Ed.D.	1	24	Rural
Bill	Currently serving	47	Male	African American	Ed.S.	2	15	Rural
Warner	Retired	57	Male	African American	Ed.D.	3	34	Rural

Narrative Profile Summaries

The participants’ profiles provided narratives in support of RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in Southeast Georgia? Additionally, the participants’ profiles included narratives detailing their responses to various interview questions about burnout identification and experience, available support and resources, and the impact of burnout on various

components of the workplace (i.e., professional commitment, school culture, students, and staff, as well as advice or recommendations for reducing burnout, attrition, and turnover among school principals). Lastly, the profiles provided insight on how each participant experienced and mitigated stress and burnout as well as identified factors of attrition and turnover.

Participant Profile 1: Dorothy

Dorothy scheduled the interview for the late morning of a busy workday. Dorothy retired as a high school principal but accepted a 49% position as an education consultant in the field of special education. Initially, it was difficult to contact her, but she was adamant about participating. She was extremely informative, focused, and open to assisting with anything needed to get the process moving. She even mentioned, “I’m glad we were able to get this interview scheduled this week because I am going on a 10-day cruise with my husband, and we are leaving next week.” The researcher later learned in the interview that Dorothy had a strong, intrinsic motivation for helping others accomplish goals and spending time with her family, as her husband was an individual who heavily supported her throughout her leadership journey.

Dorothy self-identified as a retired African American female principal with 30 years’ experience within education and 6 years as a principal. She spoke at length about how being a woman in a high school principal role was crucial to her. She was the first African American woman at the high school in its history. The opening of the conversation with Dorothy was very pleasant. She was thrilled to discuss her journey from a different perspective rather than engaging in daily duties. Dorothy logged into TEAMS on time, ready to begin promptly by indicating each day. She remembered her job typically started early and ended late. She served as the assistant principal at her school and was promoted to the principal role, so a relationship with the staff and students was already developed. Dorothy viewed her role as a mother figure,

ensuring each student arrived at school safely. At her school, students reported directly to the cafeteria and were released to class at 7:45 a.m. Based on her personality and welcoming demeanor to me, it was not a surprise observing her expressions as she discussed how important it was to walk around the school, ensuring everything was running smoothly. Teachers were at their assigned duty location, and she had conversations with students in the hallways.

Dorothy felt it essential to be personable with students, saying, “So I always tried to, you know, whenever I was staying in the hallway, greet my students, make eye contact with them, speak to them, and just kind of be around drop-in classrooms.” Dorothy’s strong presence and motherly vibe, she admitted, were often conveyed through morning announcements as a mother preparing her children for school. She believed it was crucial for students and staff to hear her voice. She stated, “I wanted them to hear my voice first thing in the morning.” Throughout the entire interview, she answered questions with conversation and discussion responses, but some questions were direct with an ending as if she were ready for the next question. Therefore, it was intriguing to hear her as she recanted a stance of always being prepared for the unexpected and unforeseen and adaptable to change at any moment throughout the day. She highlighted enjoying variance in the day-to-day work as a principal, stating, “I liked having variety in my day.” The variety meant delegating classroom observations to assistant principals, and she managed lunch duty throughout breaks so as to ensure transitions between lunch and other classes. She walked around the building and later engaged in administrative responsibilities.

Dorothy stated that on a scale from 1 to 10 of stress and stress levels, some days were an 8 and some were a 10: “And so yeah, I definitely would say it definitely is at least an 8 on that scale. Some days a 10, you know, it depends on the days.” However, she said that the stress averaged out as there were days with limited stress. She indicated that an intriguing characteristic

of her personality was being an introvert in an extroverted occupation. Therefore, time at home for her was therapeutic and complete relaxation. With a calm demeanor, Dorothy exuded her compassion, reading and watching her favorite shows when she needed to decompress from stressful times or indulge in self-care moments. She admitted that it was difficult to genuinely find self-care time while balancing her professional responsibilities and personal life with children at home. I observed a sense of relief as she spoke of her kids being in college. She discussed running a school while attending activities as a principal and mother. Dorothy admitted her husband was a major advocate and support on many stressful weeks for her, taking her on mini-vacations and liking to engage in rest and relaxation. “I like to rest and relax. I love the beach. And quick trips. You know, I love those kinds of things. But if I’m taking time for myself, I’m probably reading a book, you know, trying to get to a beach somewhere.” She indicated he would schedule massages once a month and time to do things for self-care.

Dorothy stated that she believed all principals should uphold certain values. She openly admitted that her faith was important, and she frequented church and prayed. She raised both hands, spoke on how important her faith was to her, and said that many days were confusing and hectic. She relied on her faith to guide her through challenges. She indicated her church family was an avid supporter of her. She stated, “I’m big on my faith, so prayer is constant for me. Not necessarily meditation, but prayer with me, my husband, my church family, and going to church on Sundays.” Observing Dorothy, it was obvious that many moments throughout her leadership were stressful, and oftentimes no solution may have been provided, but faith and prayer guided her through the difficult times: “In general, you know, I love those kinds of things. But if I’m taking time for myself, I’m probably reading a book, you know, trying to travel to a beach somewhere.”

In discussing the impact of stress and burnout on school culture, students, and staff, Dorothy explained that stress and burnout “definitely have an effect on your staff.” She suggested that it likely affected staff, as those who experienced burnout tended to be more short-tempered and had a reduced capacity for patience. Dorothy also explained how stress and burnout over time could make one lose patience.

Ultimately, her experience led to a strong desire for support and potential consideration of leaving the position. Dorothy believed principals needed more support in the building from district leaders. An example she provided was asking the superintendent for an instructional coach or additional assistant principals. She indicated for the longest time, the school did not have an instructional coach, but the school may have 1,300 kids. District leadership and state legislation have been increasing accountability measures. Therefore, there needed to be an assistant principal of curriculum and instruction, an assistant principal of discipline and operations, and an instructional coach to manage such a large capacity. Dorothy, with irritability in her voice, explained having to debate her superintendent “down to the wire” on why she needed this support in her school. She admitted that it was 2 years later before the support was granted. She indicated district-level support made the job so much easier with adequate support and backing. Dorothy, who is currently in a consulting special education position, is enjoying retirement. During the interview, she admitted that the opportunity for financial compensation made people consider remaining in a position longer, but she would have considered a district-level position. She was most excited about opportunities to grow and develop, in turn helping students and the school system that has invested so much in her. She indicated that her passion was within curriculum and instruction, and she found it exciting to create professional development programs aimed at helping teachers grow in the classroom. She believed the

availability of the position offered played a determination in whether she remained in the profession longer. Dorothy indicated she never intended to be in education. She majored in psychology and wanted to be a counselor. Her initial intention once she graduated college was to attend graduate school to obtain her master's degree in counseling. During her time of being home, she attended a local high school football game and had a conversation with the superintendent, her former principal. He encouraged her to become a school teacher and at the time, there was an Emotional Behavior Disorder class that needed a teacher. He believed that with her degree, she was well-suited to teach the class. Dorothy accepted the position, and her teaching career flourished as a result. She taught the following lesson to her students: "Never choose a job, but select a career, something you are passionate about." She garnered success as a teacher due to hard work and dedication; it led her to leadership as a principal. She believed her next goal, if she had not retired, was the district office, but she does not regret anything.

Dorothy agreed that leadership perseverance was a key component during challenges and struggles when adversity was extremely intense. As previously mentioned, her faith and prayers carried her through many struggles. She admitted having a deeper passion for African American students, but she wanted her Caucasian students to recognize the model they set also, as that was the first time many of the students had a Black teacher and a Black principal. Dorothy stated, "My district never had a Black administrator. They never saw a Black person of any kind in the position. My teachers never had to take direction from a Black person." She admitted that leaving her students was the most difficult part of leaving.

Dorothy thoroughly enjoyed the interview and highlighted that if she had to provide advice for future principals, she would begin by telling them to truly research and understand what all the position entails. She continued by emphasizing self-care time and focusing on

coping strategies to help relieve stress. She offered a stress management strategy she felt was extremely successful: delegation. Dorothy has advised both new and current administrators to delegate duties as much as possible, as this practice helps develop new leaders. She emphasized, “Your role is to mentor and develop new leaders, so it’s crucial to delegate.”

Participant Profile 2: Terrell

Terrell scheduled the interview in the morning of a busy workday. Terrell has served as a high school principal in various locations and has been successful at each. Terrell was willing and excited for the opportunity to serve as a participant in this study. He believed this study could be extremely beneficial and was curious about the interview questions. He was participating, informative, focused, and open to assisting with anything needed to get the process moving. There was a challenge to get the interview scheduled. Terrell apologized, stating, “It has been really busy here lately and at home with so much going on.” He had a sick family member at the time, and during the interview, the school had homecoming festivities. Terrell was a different leader, an alpha motivator ensuring everyone under his leadership was growing and developing: each student, teacher, staff, assistant principal, and coach. Throughout the interview, his selfless mantra was highlighted and stood out immensely as he has done so much for others to help them accomplish their goals and be recognized for their efforts.

Terrell agreed that the first meeting would be conducted using an interview board. As such, Terrell had to have his media center specialist download Microsoft TEAMS to do the interview. In the background of his camera view, his office had degrees and quotes hanging on the wall and a bookshelf with educational works. This interview took place during the school day, while homecoming week was taking place, so it was extremely busy at the time. During the interview, there were three times someone approached his door, and he politely told me, “Excuse

me,” managed the matter, and explained that he was in a meeting. The intriguing part was that he added the interruptions to the interview, indicating the job was ongoing and never-ending, but he did not detract from the interview in any way and never missed a beat.

Regardless of their location, principals share a common experience of managing daily stressors and are indispensable. With the interruptions, questions were asked about budgeting and finances, referencing how money should be collected and who to report it to. Terrell opened his desk drawer with a key, pulled out a money box that was secure, handed the box to his assistant principal, and told her to have the bookkeeper sign a document before taking up money and then proceed. Witnessing that experience at the start of the interview seemed minor, but it became significant in the larger context if the procedure was not followed correctly. Throughout the interview, Terrell’s experiences as a high school principal quickly came to life.

Once the interview began uninterrupted, Terrell relaxed and confidently stated that a typical day for a high school principal was never the same. He was an open communicator who enjoyed greeting students in the morning, speaking with teachers to gauge their well-being, and igniting the morale and climate of the school. Terrell’s approach as a head coach was that he genuinely wanted everyone in his team to improve and have outstanding practice each day. He desired to position himself at a common location that served as the primary point of the school, where most of the students entered the building. His comfort with this area of the school was evident in his relaxed posture and the way he explained that many students saw him first thing in the morning. He explained that being visible to everyone was a priority for him every day as everyone entered the building. He emphasized that his presence was not only for observation but also to help students understand his active fostering of relationships and supporting teachers with classroom and behavior management.

One of the elements that Terrell was excited about was discussing the morning meeting with this administration team. The interesting thing about this meeting was that it could take place at any location throughout the school, but it always occurred after the first bell to discuss the agenda for the day, ensuring the agreement of each administrative member. Terrell added, “We talk about any and all issues, making sure we’re all on the same page and checking all areas of the school to see where our weaknesses are from all standpoints.” Terrell further stated, “We accomplished a lot during our morning stand-up meeting by understanding the expectations of the day and focusing on getting into the classrooms that need our presence.”

Terrell added often that being visible throughout the day informed students that the high school principal was out there in the building, and students were always receptive to that thought. Our interview did take a different path when Terrell discussed the daily meetings he has had with his financial bookkeeper. He indicated the importance of budgeting and fiscal reporting, especially with high school principals, due to the number of activities that take place. He met with his bookkeeper multiple times to ensure purchase orders were approved, checks were signed, the correct coding was appropriate, and the bookkeeper was making sure protocols were followed with all parties who served as account holders. Once Terrell concluded the meeting with his bookkeeper, his demeanor in the interview continued with open-mindedness, suggesting “be prepared for anything” as he met with his secretary. During this time, he addressed overlooked voicemails, missed calls, parent complaints, district notifications, or community stakeholder contacts. During this time, we were interrupted by the administration managing homecoming festivities regarding a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) activity ticket sale.

Terrell believed that was one thing high school principals must do—take advantage of each opportunity given. Terrell quoted, “That’s the number one thing, to build a relationship, ensure everything is in order, and do everything possible to make sure that our kids are safe and that they’re learning.” Terrell discussed that towards the end of the day, he ensured all discipline issues were managed, followed up with his assistant principals, and received a debriefing from his instructional coaches to get a detailed report from an instructional perspective. He indicated stress did not impact him as it did other principals. He maintained his stress levels, kept them down, practiced transparency on the job, and worked with a positive staff. He stated, “So that really keeps my stress level down because of the people who I’m surrounding myself with.” He indicated that his greatest stressor was accountability measures to ensure that his students succeed academically. He stated, “I stress making sure that we’re always doing what we need to do academically to grow our kids. You know, am I doing everything I can do to facilitate that process?”

Terrell, in a bold stance, proudly acknowledged his faith and spirituality as coping strategies that served as his purpose and resilience in many challenging struggles. These strategies gave both strength and purpose as he considered them work ministry. He “wants to change the lives, especially those lives that cannot be changed.” This ministry has involved talking to God, attending church, and praying. While observing Terrell, it was evident that his passion showed Christ’s significant involvement in his leadership journey, and there was a clear correlation between his leadership practices and his spiritual practices. Terrell conveyed that he had a spiritual life of faith, being a disciple, but it did not necessarily bring the kids to Christ. However, he desired to change children’s lives by serving as a role model and encouraging all children. Terrell indicated he never saw anyone who looked like him, Black/male/educated, until

he reached the 6th or 7th grade. He desired to be someone for all males, especially young Black males. He aspired to be a strong role model for others. Terrell stated that the ability to change students' lives kept him excited and energized: "It motivates me to wake up each day with enthusiasm about what the next task will be. You know, who is the next person?" Terrell did engage in recreational activities to distress but stayed away from yard work: "I go to games; I do something like that . . . I'm not going to do any yard work. Overall, Terrell preferred to rest and unwind at home: "I plan to stay indoors and watch college football and football."

When discussing the impact of stress and burnout on school culture, students, and staff, Terrell stated that stress and burnout can have an impact on professional commitment, school culture, students, and staff. He expressed that initially, zoning in and out may serve as an indicator of stress and burnout. Additionally, stress and burnout impacted interactions, and "that affects the culture of the school." By Terrell's estimation, principals who experienced stress and burnout exhibited energy, excitement, or a positive disposition for being on the job. Principals who experienced burnout may actually have conveyed the message that "that's somewhere you really don't want to be." Terrell described this phenomenon as a cycle: the more the feelings of not wanting to be there grow, the higher the likelihood of becoming more "stressed out about being there." He asserted that the absence of leadership could have negatively impacted visibility and affected students and staff. As principals grow more distant, he stated that the student body and staff started to display unwanted characteristics. Students engaged in fighting while teachers lost some of the standards of professionalism, accountability, and effective communication. Essentially, those things stopped happening because there was lack of focus on making them happen: "You're not intentional about expectations, and so all of that affects the primary culture of the school."

Leading up to the topic of burnout, Terrell had a unique approach to reducing burnout, which was not a surprise. Throughout the entire interview, his responses were distinctive. He utilized the realistic approach of a Head Coach in a rural setting. Simply, as a principal, every year was not a great, successful year. There were years when challenges and struggles outweighed successes, but it has been important to learn and overcome each adversity to set oneself in a preventative mode to ensure it does not occur twice. He indicated burnout occurred when principals failed to acknowledge that perfection did not exist and that mistakes were going to occur, often. Terrell stated that when the focus was on doing what was right and most important for students, everything took care of itself. He continued by saying, “You will burn yourself out trying to satisfy people by doing things that you wouldn’t normally be doing. Be honest and do what you think is best for the kids so they can trust you.”

Terrell indicated the primary factor that encouraged him to remain in his position long-term was the relationships he built with students. He highlighted that each year brought new relationships, deepening existing connections, and forming closer bonds, which ultimately defined the school climate and culture within the building and district. Terrell expressed a renewed desire each year to graduate the incoming freshman class. However, he understood that this goal was not entirely achievable; instead, he aimed to prepare the next leader to successfully graduate those students.

Now in his 34th year in education, Terrell mentioned that thoughts of retirement have crossed his mind. Jokingly, he noted that his wife, a head basketball coach, wanted him to retire and become her assistant coach at 49%. Concerning his departure from the position, he mentioned that he does not foresee that happening anytime soon. He genuinely loves his work and believes it would be too easy to walk away from such a fulfilling job. He pointed out that life

without it was likely more challenging. His current job is stress-free, the pay is good, and most importantly he stated, “I love what I am doing.” He also stated, “I am not in a big hurry to retire, nor have I thought about doing anything else.”

Leadership perseverance was crucial for Terrell, especially as he observed many children being deprived of a quality education. His commitment drove his motivation to ensure that all schools provide an appropriate and equitable education, enabling him to overcome various challenges. He also shared that he began his career as a paraprofessional, where he saw how individuals in that role were treated, which fueled his determination to work hard.

Terrell was very passionate about offering advice to future principals. He informed the researcher that his responses might not be the most favorable or professional. For instance, he first advised to always remember that our positions are temporary, that we are often not well-liked, and that people generally care only about what we can do for them. He emphasized the importance of responding to decisions rather than reacting impulsively. His interpretation encouraged reflection—praying about decisions, prioritizing what is right, and then considering the best for students. Finally, he stressed that the primary focus should always be on building and nurturing relationships. He noted that a principal has faced situations requiring collaboration with individuals, even those who are disliked or those who dislike the principal. Regardless of the situations, it has been crucial to act in their best interest.

Participant Profile 3: Bob

Bob was the second individual to schedule his interview. As such, all participants were already notified interview meetings were in Microsoft TEAMS. Bob was prepared for the interview and logged in ready to begin providing the essential components for the study. In the background of his camera view, it was obvious he was a school-spirited individual with a great

deal of school paraphernalia. Bob has been an avid Georgia Bulldog fan as well. His office had degrees, with bookshelves hanging on the wall and a bookshelf with educational works. This interview took place after school, when most of the building was empty, meaning there were no other staff or students present. However, three times during the interview, someone approached his door, and he quickly explained that he was conducting a virtual meeting and would report back to them. Despite these interruptions, the interview remained unaffected, and he maintained his composure throughout. Since school had ended for the day, we briefly discussed various topics including the opening of school, staff, students, the athletic season, GAEL 2025, and a few other items. This discussion of shared professional experiences seemed to put us both at ease before the interview officially began.

Bob humbly began the interview by expressing his appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity to participate. He provided a general, broader description as a principal by detailing an extensive agenda of items, foreseeable and unforeseeable, that he managed, addressed, and even tackled daily. One intriguing commonality I found that Bob stated was that all principal days were never the same. He lived at home with his wife and admitted that his cell phone stayed with him everywhere and was on the charger by his bed. Bob admits he regularly checks his cell phone when he first wakes up. He looks for messages about sick leave, children being ill, community situations, or social media incidents that could affect the school. Bob admitted that he was not an early riser and usually arrived at school later. Therefore, he had administrators who were the opposite, arriving and leaving school earlier than he did. Ironically, he made a point to indicate that he did arrive to work on time, but he and his administration team had their arrival and departure times worked out based on each other's strengths. Initially upon arriving at school, Bob addressed multiple parents and students and handled issues from those wanting to

Bob, grinning, admitted that several days a week during the first half of the day, he met with an upset parent who wanted to discuss something related to their child without providing all the details.

Bob later indicated in the interview that, prior to meeting with anyone upon arriving on campus, he, along with his administration, ensured all kids returned to class on time in a smooth transition with minimal behavior issues. However, he did admit that mornings were typically when many issues occurred, or as he stated, “When craziness happens.” He indicated with each class change, his administration directed students to class, spending an extensive time in transition. Bob indicated a new practice that has become a primary initiative during his daily routine was the implementation of best practices for school safety and security, such as walking the hallways each period, checking for locked doors, and ensuring all doors are not propped open. With a serious look, Bob indicated this was something that had always been a priority to him, but his district office was more involved now.

Bob’s enjoyment involved entering classrooms, assisting teachers, conducting teacher observations, being more supportive, and helping teachers get better. Bob believed all principals possessed a desire to do what was essential for better teachers and better prepared students. Bob stated, “It’s hard to compare day-to-day activity; you don’t ever know what you’re getting into.”

When discussing the stressors of the position, Bob indicated support was always a factor. Currently, his school system was without a superintendent and was going to employ an interim superintendent soon. He admitted that local politics served as a stressor for him. The look on his face spoke his true feelings of how he felt about it and even the experiences he had encountered with local politics. Undoubtedly, local politics was his primary source of stress. He stated that he has been fortunate and that having a supportive superintendent has benefited him in other school

systems. He stated, “I think having a really good superintendent is a very big help. If you have someone that knows what they are doing and is going to have your back, it’s a lot more helpful, especially someone that’s open and honest.” Bob also indicated that he has always had the opportunity of working with great staff who have made the principal position easier. Bob states, “Having really good people under you and being able to hire a good staff makes your life a whole lot easier.”

Bob has been one to struggle with coping strategies through his leadership career. He openly admitted that he has certainly had his challenges. He currently is in his third principal role at age 42 and mentioned that he has been married three times. He indicated without a doubt he believed the inability to maintain a work-life balance cost him his first two marriages. Bob candidly admitted that he has continued to struggle to maintain a work-life balance; however, this has improved because his third wife is in education. His exercise habits changed over his 9-year tenure as a principal. In his first principal role, he exercised often by distance running to decompress and deal with stress. After his first principal role, the pandemic with COVID-19 interrupted, and running was no longer his outlet. Bob admitted he was so stressed that he developed an alcohol problem where he drank every day to cope with everything. He was adamant about the drinking to cope with the stressors of running a high school, especially through the pandemic. Eventually, he resigned from his second principal position and accepted his third principal position. He believed his challenges and struggles from his two previous experiences prepared him for the success within this third position. With praise on his face, Bob admitted the first thing he did was give up the alcohol and any other addiction that he knew was killing him. He stated, “Faith and spirituality were the only things that had me in the place I was, and I was ready to give up everything to maintain it.” He admitted he struggled at times but also

had an understanding that things will be alright. His faith kept him strong, and he has learned over time how to deal with stress. Bob stated, “You know, this is sort of the path that I’ve taken in life, and I’m more prepared to cope with those stressful times in life now than ever.”

Bob discussed how stress and burnout impacted the school culture, students, and staff. Even when stressed and burned out, “They’re going to come to work. They’re not going to be happy.” As a result, staff were negatively affected because burned-out principals may communicate poorly and support their staff members less than they would if they were not under stress. Likewise, stressed out or burned out principals have not communicated properly with students either. Bob stated that students will “read your body language and your tone no matter what.” Students will notice, as they are very “observing” of how adults feel about them. You know, they’re going to pick that up.” If principals did not communicate effectively with staff and students, the school culture suffered significantly, making it impossible to improve; school culture has been the most important issue to resolve. Bob stated that he worked hard to improve the school culture when he first arrived, saying, “We’re in a good spot.” But I mean, if the school culture is not good.” Essentially, principals must invest in developing a positive school culture, as this is foundational for making school improvements.

Bob strongly advocated for the use of professional development resources to help principals develop strategies to mitigate burnout. He indicated that he would make it a requirement that every school leader attend the Georgia Association of Secondary School Principals (GASSP) conference and create a network of individuals to assist with understanding the stressors that come with the position. He indicated many of the stressors principals encounter were navigated through experience. Having a supportive network to turn to during high-demand challenges and struggles tends to lessen the stress. Bob indicated discussions with professional

affiliates about conducting more professional development sessions at conferences to raise awareness of the duties and responsibilities of being a high school principal.

Bob indicated his desire and ambitions to grow and develop into a superintendent at some point throughout his leadership journey. He had thought about the number of years he remained in education and viewed his journey transitioning from high school principal to superintendent. As previously stated, Bob had been in three principal roles, so the idea of transitioning to a superintendent position was understandable. He appeared to be speaking from a traditional model that was often seen in rural South Georgia school systems. The high school principal, after serving many years in the position, usually transitions to the superintendent position 4 to 5 years prior to retirement. Bob indicated that he was uncertain about the future, but the only foreseeable reason for his departure from the position was a promotion to a district-level role.

Our discussion led to questioning if Bob ever thought about leaving the profession altogether. He added, once his career in education fully commenced, he never considered leaving. However, he thought about leaving for law school many times in the earlier years of his teaching career. He clearly indicated that he loved the job and role that he was serving at the time of the interview. With a display of passion on Bob's face, the interest in what sustained his leadership perseverance was pondered in the interview. When asking Bob about his perseverance, he simply smiled and stated, "Man, I just love it. I love what I do." He indicated there have always been days with challenges and struggles, but he has enjoyed every day at his school. He described the passion he has for people and observed them succeed, grow within their craft, and win at anything they compete in. That was clearly obvious by his willingness to assist with this research study.

Bob passionately provided advice for future principals and remained adamant about ongoing support. He indicated seeking a mentor, supporter, or guide for principal collaboration. Bob talked about individuals within the district who can be the worst people for discussions. He then added that not every decision needed to be made immediately. Many principals, according to Bob, rushed to make decisions and felt compelled to satisfy everyone. He informed people of certain decisions: "Listen, I'm going to think on it. I'll get back with you tomorrow." He indicated the worst thing a principal could do was make an irrational decision. Bob closed with emphasizing the need for support to lean on due to so much of the principal's position being based upon experience.

Participant Profile 4: Cliff

Cliff was the first individual to schedule his interview. All participants were already notified that interviews were within Microsoft Teams, so Cliff was prepared for the interview and logged in ready to begin. In the background of his office, it was obvious he was a school-spirited individual with a great deal of school paraphernalia. Cliff had a large sledgehammer in his office as well, with a slogan that stated, "Bring that Hammer." He said that the motto was used throughout his school and was applied to every challenge faced. Cliff was also an avid Georgia Bulldog fan. Like other principal offices in interviews, Cliff's wall consisted of degrees, with bookshelves hanging on the wall and a bookshelf with educational works. Due to the school year being in place, the interview took place after school, when most of the building was empty and all staff and students were out of it. However, Cliff indicated there were a few activities he had going on that afternoon after the interview, but he explained that he had game managers and supervisors in place to cover. There was one interruption, where his wife entered the office to collect something for his daughter, who was a ninth grader in his school. She actually became a

part of the interview as he made a small joke with her, making life easier as an educator, and he never missed a beat. Regardless of their location, principals shared many common experiences. With school over for the day, Bob discussed various topics, including the opening of school, staff, students, the athletic season, GAEL 2025, and a few other items. This discussion of shared professional experiences seemed to put Bob at ease before the interview officially began.

As we broached about the interview, Cliff raised his arms as if he were waking up early in the morning, indicating before he began any morning. He needed to have coffee, knowing that the day was likely to end well beyond the time that it began. The personal self-care agenda, such as showering and having a conversation with his children and wife, was important to him in the morning. Upon arriving at school, Cliff did a walkthrough of the building to ensure everything was running smoothly and prepared for morning transition. He indicated that he greeted teachers as they began arriving. Then, shortly after, students entered the building for morning transition, which was one of his most enjoyable moments of the morning. The opportunity to build and foster relationships with students as they enter the building, he felt, was essential to the school climate. Cliff highlighted that in years past, he normally conducted the morning announcements, led the pledge, and provided informational updates relevant to both staff and students. However, Cliff said he was allowing students to do many of these duties to initiate leadership initiatives, but he was providing guidance and support as the student read from a prompted script.

Cliff indicated that being on a 7-period day with 50 minutes for each period required consistent hallway duty, which made it difficult to arrange time to meet with teachers. He stated that after each transition to class, he attempted to observe classrooms to evaluate a district strategic plan initiative on teacher goals, placing stronger emphasis on Tier 1 instruction. Therefore, he spent most of his day in classrooms when he was not managing student transitions.

He informed the researcher that 5th period was when the school had lunch and all teachers had free lunch duty. What was impressive was that Cliff, along with his two assistant principals, office personnel, media specialist, counselors, graduation coach, and instructional coach, supervised lunch duty. Jokingly, Cliff stated, “Don’t tell my Title I director, but they do the lunch duties because they’re free.”

Additionally, he stated the same duties applied but intensified because it was the end of the day: being in the hallways, being visible, monitoring student behavior, and being in the classrooms. He purchased his assistant principals and himself mobile office carts with laptops that allowed them to do practically everything they would be able to do in their offices in the hallways since each of them are in the hallways all day. Cliff stated he managed afternoon duty as the last to leave, making sure each student exited the building safely, the building was clear of everyone, and everything was shut down. Sarcastically, he noted that in a high school there was always an after-school event, after-school program, athletic event, or fine arts event and, in some instances, required administrative presence to ensure students behaved and teachers were practicing professional conduct. For example, he provided a breakdown of the week beginning with a volleyball game tomorrow night (JV and varsity game) ending at 8:30 p.m. on Wednesday, with the One Act Play from 5:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. On Thursday at 4:00 p.m., the TNL department from the board office was meeting with the leadership team to discuss the school’s School Improvement Plan for the year and the root cause analysis along with the school initiatives for the year. Thursday evening, there was a J.V. football game ending at 8:30 p.m., and then Friday night, there was a football game.

One interesting component that spoke highly of Cliff was that his athletic director had to be out of town for an emergency, so he had to fill in as athletic director and game manager for

the night with the football team, band, and cheerleaders on the sideline. On Friday night in South Georgia, the athletic director was responsible for ensuring the team exited the visiting campus Friday night safely, ensuring all teams arrived back to the school safely and opened the school up for the team Friday night upon arrival. Therefore, Cliff arrived home around 1:00 a.m.-2:00 a.m. The exchange of energy adjusted from positive, motivating, and inspiring to serious when the energy shifted to stressors. Cliff held a smirk on his face, indicating that student behaviors were common for principals to observe; however, he mentioned that his stress primarily came from adult-related issues. Cliff stated, “My stress comes from adults doing stupid things where I’m looking at them like you’re grown, you should know better.” His frustration levels rose when he had to problem-solve adult issues. He had to take time away from students and address adults about any unnecessary situations. Cliff stressed that budgeting and fiscal reporting were extremely stressful, indicating that a lot of education was headed in that direction. He conveyed a message that high school principals must be trained in budgeting and financing to ensure accounts were managed properly.

Cliff expressed how he coped with stress. He indicated he set time alone and scheduled family time quite often. He continued, with a huge smile on his face, stating, “God is first every day.” He read scripture and daily devotionals as an exercise of his faith, as well as Christian leadership books. He was extremely proud to speak of the teachings he provided for high school-aged kids in his church. Cliff loved to volunteer and provide service in church, adding that he ran the sound board and the cameras. A close second for Cliff was his wife. They both were close to being empty nesters at the time of this interview, so they prioritized their time together. He highlighted that both he and his wife used spousal support as a coping strategy, informing each

other that all work was complete for the night. Lastly, comically, Cliff occasionally enjoyed a drink of whiskey and smoked cigars to relax.

When describing the impact of stress and burnout on school culture, students, and staff, Cliff provided an analogy. He said, “You’re either going to be a thermostat or a thermometer.” In this analogy, the principal had an opportunity to set the temperature or react to it. Cliff discussed how energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it can be transferred; as a result, principals need to be mindful of how their negative energy is transferred to staff and students. Cliff expressed a level of gratitude when entering the workplace; he described his level of joy. He stated that the students reacted in a similar manner: “They’re going to be joyful. They’re going to have a good time.” Similar to students, Cliff stated that stress and burnout trickled down to staff, and in turn, teachers pushed their stress onto students. As a result, the school culture suffered as students engaged in problematic behaviors: “When people get stressed and they get high-strung, that’s when people you have issues and they start nipping at each other and they get defensive and they get mad.” Cliff said that “culture is huge.” He stated that one of his first initiatives was to change the school culture; he believed that his school needed someone with his personality: “jovial, that’s happy, that’s wanting to have a good time, but also work.” Prior to his tenure at the school, students and staff were described as being miserable. “Their faces were forlorn. The teachers look miserable.” He stated that he and his staff changed the culture, and they became a 5-star school 5 years in a row:

We’ve had 90% or more graduation rate like the culture has definitely changed for the positive, but it takes work to maintain it. You can’t just. Relax on your laurels. You’ve got to maintain it and make sure that you don’t allow that stress to trickle down.

He attested to both the positive and negative effects, as there were times when his negativity impacted his team and subsequently affected the teachers. Jokingly, leading into the subject of reducing burnout for high school principals, Cliff suggested the idea of putting a Margarita machine in the teacher's lounge. Cliff acknowledged, "If you could make one change to reduce burnout for school leaders, you can make one change. What would it be?" is a great question. He emphasized taking more time, being patient with decisions, and responding to people rather than reacting. He believed a mentoring program was essential for all incoming principals, primarily in rural districts, due to the vast inexperience. He admitted he needed as much support and guidance in his first year, but there was not anyone in the district he could turn to for help. Cliff relied heavily on his former principals for guidance and leaned on each of them for coaching. He indicated many former and current principals reached out, providing jump drives of information and emailing information, but so much information involving the principal position focused on experiential knowledge. The thought of having a support system, a person to call and ask if you need help or to check on, made a huge difference in reducing stress.

Cliff indicated a few years ago he was feeling a sense of nonfulfillment; he indicated observing his two sons choose their careers, one going to college and the other choosing a technical route and beginning a successful career, sparked a sense of renewed energy. He added that his daughter beginning her freshman year added so much excitement. He stated his daughter informed him "Dad, you can't go anywhere. You got to see me through it. So personally, when you got a daughter that's, you know, kind of bossy." Cliff mentioned the students, who are a great deal of energy and fulfillment. Cliff indicated he had built so many relationships with students and staff in the building that it was difficult to walk away from not being a part of that daily. Cliff indicated another good question being asked in "Have you ever thought about leaving

your position or the profession altogether?” He indicated that the previous year was one of his most difficult years due to an extensive turnover at the district office and his superintendent presenting him potential opportunities.

Self-reflection and assessment were critical for him as he felt like the opportunities were great for growth but not a good fit. He stated, “I see my trajectory, and I know where I want to go, but I got to be patient for it.” However, Cliff highlighted a point indicating that by him not accepting the superintendent invitations, it did not allow him to serve on any interview panels for the vacant district’s positions, and the individuals chosen for positions were leaders who he trained under his tutelage. They were now serving as his supervisors. He indicated the current year had been a smooth transition, pleasurable, and much more enjoyable. Cliff emphasized that the opportunity to attend superintendent preparatory programs and expand on his growth and development was renewing his energy and maintaining his desire to remain where he was at the time of this interview. Following Cliff’s renewed energy and speaking of his prior struggles from the previous year, his leadership perseverance has been critical to success. He contributed a great deal of his perseverance to simply observing the impact of students, and the community has provided a sense of fulfillment. He indicated it is possible receive an anonymous email, get stopped in a store, or see a student randomly, and they begin a conversation about their life. Even though their name may not be remembered, it is a great feeling to know they are doing well.

Cliff quickly provided advice for future principals by emphasizing that all principals must be honest with themselves and know their limits. He encouraged new and current principals to know their strengths and weaknesses and delegate based on the two. The next topic he discussed was the importance of having a “person” to rely on. In simple terms, this means having a “person” who can help you calm down, prevent you from saying something unprofessional, or

manage true feelings. He also emphasized that support can have many various shapes, forms, and sizes. He informed new principals, “Try every support you can until you figure out what works best for you.”

Participant Profile 5: Bill

When trying to schedule Bill’s interview, it was a difficult task. Eventually, it was scheduled at the end of the workday, virtually through Microsoft Teams. Bill was prepared for the interview and logged in, ready to begin providing the research for the study. It was obvious he was a school-spirited individual. Bill was also an avid Bulldog fan, but his school mascot was a bulldog as well. His degrees were hanging on the wall, with books on the shelf. This interview took place after the building was empty, so there were no other staff or students in the building. With the school day over, we briefly discussed the opening of school and various topics for the year, including staff, students, the athletic season, and GAEL 2025. This discussion of shared professional experiences seemed to put us both at ease before the interview officially began.

Bill participated in an interview in which he provided detailed insight into his daily responsibilities and his approach to leadership as a high school principal. He self-identified as an African American male with 15 years of experience in education. Eight of those have served as principal. Bill described his typical day as beginning early in the morning with greeting students, ensuring they received a nutritious breakfast, and then checking in with teachers and staff. He stated that the early morning hours were his preferred time of day, allowing him to gauge the overall tone and energy of the school. Bill shared that visibility has been a critical aspect of his leadership style, stating, “It’s one of the first things I do, even before I step into my office.” Each instructional morning, Bill conducted two separate walkthroughs of the building. The first walkthrough focused on greeting the students and the teachers as they arrived. The second

walkthrough strategically focused on checking on custodians, nutrition staff, and students who arrived late.

Bill believed that these interactions allowed him to properly evaluate school morale and address any potential issues. Following his morning rounds, Bill transitioned to the cafeteria to supervise breakfast and interact with students. He described this time as essential for relationship-building and assessing the school's climate and culture. "You can tell a lot from watching and listening," he explained, noting that students often used this time to engage in informal conversations with him. As students transitioned to their first block classes, Bill accompanied them through the hallways so that teachers remained at their doors to greet students. Bill began the morning with announcements over the intercom. He repeated the school's mission and vision to make sure that everyone, including students and staff, received the same message. The next hour was set out for administrative activities, including answering emails and returning phone calls. This time was set in stone by Bill's secretary unless there was an emergency. This helped him stay focused and on top of things at the beginning of each day.

Every Monday, Bill met with his Teaching and Learning (T&L) team to prepare for the week ahead, look over data, and keep an eye on how well they were doing on the School Improvement Plan (SIP) targets that were set in the summer. He made the agenda for the meeting, looked over the pertinent data ahead of time, and gave team members the job of checking on progress in certain areas. Bill stressed that the purpose of these sessions was not simply to keep track of academic progress but also to help staff members become better leaders. The meetings typically included assistant principals, the instructional coach, consultants, and occasionally the district's curriculum or federal programs director. Late mornings were dedicated

to classroom visits. Bill described a preference for informal observations rather than formal evaluations.

He utilized a tool he designed to conduct brief instructional check-ins. These observations focused on key components of effective instruction, such as structured openings, differentiated learning opportunities, and clearly communicated success criteria. “Sometimes I only stay ten minutes,” he explained. “I might just drop in during the work period.” His goal was to observe half of the faculty each week, while members of his T&L team observed the remaining staff and provided follow-up feedback. When lunchtime began, Bill deliberately cleared his schedule to remain visible and accessible to both students and staff. Although he recognized this period as an opportunity for engagement, he also implemented clear boundaries to maintain instructional focus. “I used to meet with parents or visitors on the spot, but that pulled me away from instruction,” he stated. Currently, non-urgent meetings were scheduled through his office within a 24-hour window to ensure timely yet manageable communication. Bill’s afternoon agenda was typically spent conducting other classroom observations, collaborating with district personnel, and/or meeting with the superintendent and other leaders who may visit the school. He described these interactions as valuable opportunities to share updates and receive feedback regarding operational processes.

The school day ended at 3:10 p.m. with Bill doing the afternoon announcements and student dismissal. Bill typically remained in the building to complete administrative tasks once the building was empty. Bill noted that his workday often extended well beyond the dismissal bell. He used the late afternoon to reflect on the day and to prepare for the following day. “It’s easy to be all over the place as a principal,” he said, highlighting the importance of intentional time management for maintaining focus and productivity. When asked about common

challenges, Bill identified parent relationships as undoubtedly one of the more stressful aspects of his role. He explained that many parents expected immediate responses to concerns. Many often bypassed the chain of command by contacting district leadership directly. “Some parents skip the chain of command and go straight to the superintendent, but mine always sends them back to me,” he stated. He noted that some issues appeared more urgent to parents than they really were and emphasized the importance of investigating matters thoroughly before offering a resolution.

Despite these challenges, Bill described maintaining a positive and supportive environment as a key component of his leadership philosophy. “If you come to work every day and don’t laugh, something’s wrong,” he reflected. He stated that he strived to model optimism and approachability. He felt this fostered a sense of culture where staff and students felt valued. “It starts with me. I like to make people smile,” he said. Bill demonstrated appreciation through recognition and words of encouragement. “You don’t have to do what you do,” he often told his staff, “but I appreciate you.” When discussing his strategies for managing stress, Bill explained that walking served as both exercise and reflection. “I walk all day long. It is exercise and reflection,” he said. “When I’m frustrated, I walk it off. It clears my head and frees my mind.” Overall, Bill’s interview illustrated a leadership style rooted deeply in visibility, connections, and deliberate time management. The emphasis he placed on relationship-building, communication, and appreciation shaped a school culture that valued collaboration, positivity, and continuous improvement.

When describing the impact of stress and burnout on school culture, students, and staff, Bill stated that school culture, students, and staff took on the “characteristics of the principal.” As a result, Bill tried to keep his stress levels low, “because if I get stressed, it’s

going to stress my teachers in turn, which is going to stress them children, which is going to alter the culture of this building.” If he was feeling stress, he withdrew and regulated his energy levels accordingly, and he “shut everything down to realize, hey, is this really as important or do as it require much as your energy as you put into it because it is a domino effect?” Bill was mindful to ensure that it did not spill over to the teachers and then the students and “create . . . a mess in this building.” He stressed the importance of informing his staff about his headspace and asking for time to readjust.

Bill believed reducing burnout began with support by showing appreciation and being grateful for the jobs that principals do. He was an advocate of acknowledgment by simply showing principals as a district leader the importance of understanding what the position entailed and having respect when not serving in the role. Bill indicated principals were always the last to be recognized but the first to be criticized. He admitted the burnout existed as a principal when investing an extensive amount of time in an initiative or project and then not receiving appreciation or gratitude for your efforts. He mentioned the compensation never amounted to the number of hours; the simple grace of being acknowledged was what was important for most principals. The factor sustaining Bill’s stay in his role was the impact and growth within his staff, students, and community. He admitted there was a vision when he accepted the position as principal, and each year, his vision came to fruition. He desired to see all students aspire to a post-secondary career and adequately prepare for those opportunities.

Bill understood that many of his students remained in the community after graduation, but his desire was for his students to be a benefit rather than a hindrance to the community. He said to his students, “This is what you call home and what would your home look like in the next few years if you’re not trying to make it better than what it is.” Leadership perseverance was

essential. His students' livelihoods have been impacted by his position, and this thought has kept him pressing forward each day. For Bill, this was motivation because he knew these children can graduate with career opportunities without the type of struggle the generation before them experienced. The last point Bill highlighted was that he never wanted his work to be in vain. This idea led to Bill giving new and current principals very detailed, organized, yet passionate advice about the principal position. Bill provided an impressive book of advice including the following:

1. Be strategic with your time.
2. Be organized and a planner.
3. Plan out your day and list of things to do based on priority.
4. Create a to-do list for your staff based on priority.
5. Create yourself a safety net of individuals that are trusted people.

Bill highlighted that while this list sounded good, the best method of productivity with it was to delegate it to the assistant principals. He added that it was important to continue creating and building relationships frequently to ensure staff morale. Bill reminded, "Transparency is good, I'm the principal of the school, but I'm still a human and they (staff) need to see that." Bill emphasized the schedule and calendar of the week, indicating that there were times when it was not possible to get everything done all at one time. He ended the interview by suggesting one should know their limits and only take on what they were actually willing to manage.

Participant Profile 6: Warner

Warner was the last individual to schedule his interview. He logged onto Microsoft Teams via his phone. He discussed retirement and the new 49% position he held at the time. The interview could only happen at the end of the day due to the school year and his job's location. Throughout the interview, there were a few interruptions, where his wife and a few family

members called in to check on the status of his drive home, ensuring his safety. With the researcher's day over, Warner discussed various topics, including the opening of school, the turnover of new positions in the local area, local staffing, student behavior, the athletic season, and the GAEL conference 2025. However, Warner was prepared to open the discussion and share his professional experiences.

Warner self-identified as a high school African-American male principal with 34 years of experience within education and 19 years of principal experience. Warner described a typical day as a principal at the secondary level beginning in so many various locations and areas throughout the school. Warner emphasized as a high school principal, "You wear so many hats." Warner indicated during his time as a secondary school principal, he served in the roles of father, support system, and, depending on the day, anything that was needed. Warner opened the day interacting with students as they entered the school, serving as a support system within the community.

Warner indicated as a principal that his daily leadership was based on situational leadership, simply what the situation required at that time. Warner stated students transitioned to classes after retrieving breakfast, and during that time, Warner was managing any issues that occurred within the school building. Warner discussed the benefit of situational leadership serving well in managing multiple situations through daily events. Warner says, "If you're not familiar with situational leadership or how to navigate through situational leadership, you know you'd be lost." Warner allowed his support to assist in many different situations that arose, and he delegated well toward the end of his leadership career.

As a retired principal, Warner did not explicitly state what his stressors used to be; however, he did discuss his coping strategies. He stated that his mother's example of faith and spirituality often strengthened him: "Mama quoted scripts." He stated that putting God first and

seeking God's guidance has been part of the planning and direction of his life. Warner stressed the importance of having a relationship with God: "If you don't have a relationship with God, man that is first and foremost putting Him first and then understanding." Warner expressed gratitude for God, who had enabled him physically and mentally. He also stated that it was important to know how others added or subtracted value from one's life: "I categorize people into four groups: those who add value, subtract value, multiply value, or divide value; by subtracting and dividing, I mean the latter two categories." This categorization seemed to help Warner avoid stress on some level as he sought relationships with those who added value in some way: "You know, I know how to deal with you on a different level, but if you add what we're trying to do and what we're trying to do in this building, then let's roll. Let's make it happen."

Warner, when describing the impact of stress and burnout on school culture, students, and staff, stated that attitudes reflected leadership. Similar to other participants, Warner says that his attitude was reflected in both his students and his staff. He stressed the importance of moving forward with the work, engaging in meetings, and taking care of the business of running the school. Likewise, he says that it was important for him to show up for his staff as well. If and when a principal was stressed, the school culture was absolutely "terrible." But communication and support have also been key, as people must feel they are protected and covered. Warner says that support has been a component of his "character."

Furthermore, Warner acknowledged to reduce burnout in a rural school system, it was essential for a principal to have support to grow the school and achieve the vision of success for the school. He included examples, administration of instruction and operations, school staff that reflected the student population, and support from the district office. Warner added that building

relationships helped maintain connections in school. He stated, “You get to know everything that’s going on and maintain a pulse of the community.”

Warner continued discussing support as a primary component for a principal to remain in a position. He emphasized support on numerous occasions by the district office post-pandemic when new leadership accepted the superintendent and assistant superintendent positions. He indicated when he retired, he was the longest-tenured principal but would have remained if the supportive measures had been implemented. He determined that the lack of support was ultimately what led to him retiring. He further stated that he had reached a critical juncture and understood it was time to step down. Currently, he is serving in a 49% administrative role where he can be impactful serving a community from the district level.

During the challenges and struggles in Warner’s principal position, his perseverance stemmed from knowing and understanding his purpose, beginning with his family, then his students. The relationships he created with his students and staff were what motivated him. He emphasized his wife was a constant, consistent presence serving as a reason for pressing forward during the most challenging times.

Warner further suggested a principal in the “country” needed to research prior to accepting the position. He provided advice for future principals, including current principals, by telling them to be certain they have support beginning with district leadership, then community leadership, and teachers. Warner indicated that a principal can determine the level of support received by whoever has served on the interview panel. Lastly, he added to always make time to rest and rejuvenate when there were breaks during the school year.

Summary

This chapter provided narratives from interviews about the experiences of six research participants from 60 to 90-minute interviews. These participants shared their life and career experiences during interviews. All six participants in this study have been current or former principals of a Title I, rural high school in South Georgia. Each high school principal shared information about their experiences, leadership journey, stressors, impacts of burnout, coping mechanisms, and prevention strategies for turnover and attrition. It was the researcher's job to determine the meaning participants gave to their experiences. The rich, detailed, and meaningful interview responses from participants and the observations contributed to an overview of six participants' lived experiences and perceptions of turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Title I, rural school systems in South Georgia. In Chapter 5, the researcher provides the themes and descriptions of the findings through data analysis of the interviews.

Chapter V

Results

The NASSP (2017) emphasized that only half of principals remained in their position for more than 3 years, and extensive costs to recruit and develop principals were mismanaged and inappropriately utilized. Such turnover has led to increased teacher turnover and decreased student achievement (NASSP, 2017). Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated principal turnover increased by 16%, and leader to teacher turnover increased by 10% at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. High rates of turnover have been evident in poverty-stricken areas with schools that have been in the bottom tier of performing schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The principal position has revolutionized over time, expanding duties and responsibilities administratively from clerical to visionary leadership (Chan et al., 2022; Loewenberg, 2016; Stevenson, 1995). However, the demand of the principal position to maintain high achievement and student safety, mentally and emotionally, has served as one of many stressors leading to principal burnout (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022; Williamson et al., 2018). A primary stressor for principals has been the challenge of decreased student success and no curriculum for workforce readiness within schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Principal turnover has been an underlying, ongoing, and steady issue creating gaps in leadership, primarily in rural and poverty communities with low educator recruitment (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022; Superville, 2023). Principals have often been susceptible to factors such as minimal support from stakeholders, difficult working dynamics, and an unstable professional

environment leading to burnout (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Maslach et al., 1997; Rangel, 2018; Steiner et al., 2022). The imbalance and lack of appreciation for managing an extensive workload and lack of support have resulted in overwhelming stress and burnout for a principal in such an environment (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia. These factors were based on the perceptions of principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I high schools located in rural South Georgia. Additionally, the study's secondary purpose was to examine the relationship between attrition, turnover, and burnout among Title I high school principals in rural South Georgia.

The following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in South Georgia?
- Research Question 2: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in South Georgia?
- Research Question 3: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in South Georgia?

This study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of high school principals, stressors that lead to burnout, the impact on turnover and attrition, and potential improvements to the retention rates of high school principals. To bridge the opportunity gap, schools have required principals who are driven to endure the challenges of their role and remain in their positions long enough to see a significant change and genuinely make an impact (Gacherieu, 2023). Out of the six participants in this study, four have been current high school principals and two have retired. In spite of the challenges and struggles throughout their leadership journey, each participant has remained steadfast to their professional and personal commitments to education and student learning.

This chapter contains the results of data analysis and is organized by coding and thematization, participants and participant profiles, results by research question, and results as they align with the theoretical framework (Maslach Burnout Inventory and Conservation of Resource Theory). This chapter includes a breakdown of the three iterations of coding necessary for data analysis: first iteration for research questions, second iteration for theories, and third iteration for components of theories. The three iterations of coding allow for the discovery of themes and patterns.

Coding and Thematization

For the deductive (RQs) coding, there were 203 coded segments (see Table 11). For RQ1, there were five codes with two themes that emerged: Educator Occupational Experience and Principal Role Evolution and Experience. For RQ2, there were seven codes with four themes that emerged: Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics, Professional Departure Factors, External Expectation Pressure, and Occupational Stressors and Challenges. For RQ3, there were eight codes with three themes that emerged: Stress Management and Impact; Administrative Support

Systems and Resilience; and Resource Allocation and Support Systems. Across the research questions there were a total of nine themes.

Table 11

Deductive Coding and Thematization for Research Questions

Coding Segment	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	Themes
203	Codes: 5 Themes: 2	Codes: 7 Themes: 4	Codes: 8 Themes: 3	Total Number of Themes: 9

Note. Coding and Thematization completed in Intellectus Qualitative, 2025

Within the deductive coding and thematization there were a total of 120 coded segments with three themes: Professional Emotional Detachment, Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals, and Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy to emerge in support of Maslach Burnout (Maslach et al., 1997), see Table 12. Additionally, there were three themes to emerge in support of Conservation of Resources Theory: Resource Conservation Dynamics, Valued Life Resources, and Resource Conservation and Investment Dynamics (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Table 12

Deductive Coding and Thematization for Theories and Components of Theories

Coded Segments	Maslach Burnout	Conservation of Resources
120	3 codes 3 themes	6 codes 3 themes

Note. Coding and Thematization completed in Intellectus Qualitative, 2025

RQ1 Results

RQ1 was as follows: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in South Georgia?

There were two themes to emerge in support of this question along with their respective codes: Educator Occupational Experience and Principal Role Evolution and Experience

Theme 1: Educator Occupational Experience

Educator Occupation Experience was one theme that aligned to RQ1. This theme highlighted the participants' professional trajectory along with their perceptions of their working conditions. The participants' narratives highlighted how their working conditions affected their careers in principalship. The participants described the evolution of the workload demands and their impact on participants' stress levels and, in turn, their career longevity. Additionally, this theme offered information about how the participants navigated their journeys. Lastly, their work experiences showcased challenges and ways in which they had to adapt to their roles as leaders. All six participants reported on these themes and related codes (Stress Level, Workload, and Years of Experience). The following question was posed to the participants: "How has your workload changed over the past few years?"

Bob provided a detailed, thorough response to how the workload changed over the years. Bob reflected on the beginning of his journey as a principal; starting 9 years ago, he attempted to accomplish everything. He admitted to lacking the ability to delegate anything, exhausting himself with an extensive workload. Bob acknowledged that as one gained experience as a principal, it became evident to hire and surround oneself with competent individuals to provide assistance. Bob indicated he had competent individuals available to assist him, but he needed to show independence. Consequently, he was unable to accomplish anything independently. He realized he needed to assign individuals to positions and then trust their competence. It was essential to ensure that they performed the task correctly. He emphasized the modern-day workload had expanded to where it was essential to delegate responsibilities, as one cannot

manage every aspect simultaneously. Bob suggested that it was impossible for any principal to monitor all situations in a school; a team must be trained to perform duties effectively. Bob indicated that leaders needed to ensure the appropriate assignment of roles to individuals, clearly communicate job expectations, and promptly hold them accountable for their performance.

Furthermore, Dorothy detailed how the leadership has changed from her mentoring years to her years as principal. She described the evolution of leadership from her time as a mentor to her tenure as principal. Her workload had changed, largely due to her actions. She acknowledged how critical delegating responsibilities and duties were; however, she admitted it was difficult to delegate in the beginning due to her preference to execute tasks in her own specific manner. At times, it was simply more efficient for her to take action herself. Recently, she had an assistant principal who was promoted to principal following her departure this year. When she arrived, they shared very similar values. Dorothy successfully delegated her responsibilities regarding certain duties, which alleviated some of the workload and proved to be beneficial. Dorothy admitted she was able to engage in other activities, allowing her to pursue additional interests. She indicated the workload had significantly increased, largely due to heightened expectations from the state. The increasing number of tasks was in correlation with a rise in state requirements. Dorothy believed that the workload at her school level automatically increased as a result of those factors.

Moreover, Bill explained when he first entered the leadership field; primary duties focused on operational management. Over the years, an even balance of operation and instructional leadership existed. Bill highlighted that the workload had shifted due to ongoing demands from the Department of Education, the district leadership, evolving standards, and the varying needs of students, as well as the changing accountability measures in place. As Bill

indicated previously, district leaders arrived at buildings, attended classrooms, occupied offices, and engaged in work activities. However, with the increases in accountability being a primary factor, “principals bear a much greater responsibility for the events occurring in these classrooms.” Bill highlighted data within a 9-month period that determined the workload of a principal and whether their tenure was a success or failure. Bill shared, "The awareness and preparation of a modern-day principal is essential." The demands placed on the principal were critical to the demands placed on the staff.

Theme 1 Summation

The theme of Educator Occupational Experience aligned with RQ1, detailing the careers of participants and their perspectives regarding working conditions while serving in the principal role. Participants provided a thorough timeline of how the duties and responsibilities expanded and became overwhelming over the years. The need for delegating and growing assistant principals, even teacher leaders, is critical to the stress levels of a principal. Participants emphasized that focusing on self-care involved including others and sharing responsibilities. Participants discussed how each experience encountered through leadership has molded their leadership role, revealing the challenges and their abilities to adapt to each challenge. Each participant identified how the demand for the principal position has increased and been influenced by state expectations and accountability measures predicated on data numbers, which constantly change each year. For example, Bob emphasized the importance of delegating and trusting the people hired to do the job and believing in their abilities. Dorothy indicated the habit of taking on too many responsibilities and not recognizing the need to delegate. Bill highlighted the change in leadership from operational to school systems, desiring a balance of operational

and instructional leadership. Ultimately, participants observed that the modern-day principal must be adaptable and flexible to be successful in any environment.

Theme 2: Principal Role Evolution and Experience

The Principal Role Evolution and Experience was the second theme to emerge in support of RQ1. The theme referenced how the participants experienced changes within their professional identities as their responsibilities changed within their careers. The participants identified challenges like the pandemic, staff shortages, and external pressures impacting their leadership journey. The participants described how their duties shifted from being operational management leaders to instructional specialists focused on assessments, data, and state scores to emphasize social and emotional awareness in the post-pandemic context. Participants believed the modern-day leader requires a keen balance in various areas to be successful, as progress is essential to the growth of all leaders. All six participants reported on the principal role of evolution and experience along with its codes: change in principal role and years as a principal. The following question was posed to the participants: “Do you feel your role as a principal has changed due to recent events (e.g., pandemic, staffing shortages, societal pressures)?”

Bill emphasized organization, communication, and preparedness as the primary leader within the building during pressured situations. His focus was everything that begins and ends with the building leader. He did express a shift in education. He highlighted as an example the transition during the pandemic from face-to-face interactions to a virtual environment, which occurred rapidly despite the lack of necessary resources. He indicated there was no Wi-Fi or connectivity available for individuals, and schools lacked the capacity to fully comprehend the situation. He said that children and educators exhibited complacency and lacked the inclination to comprehend the dynamics of operating in a digital context. He elaborated that situations have

generated numerous issues, and the pandemic has become stabilized and returned to the mainstream. He has balanced his reliance on technology and transitioned into a mode of supervision and service for support and resources. Bill believed all principals needed to retract approaches, as programs to address and support teachers were more critical for students during stressful times. He explained that his observation and concern stemmed from the lack of financial obligations for essential resources needed to assist teachers and students. He indicated the negligence resulted in students being unsuccessful.

Cliff emphasized the impact of Covid and how education instantly transitioned to virtual education. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact. He felt as though he was beginning to establish his footing in the role of principal. Cliff stated, “We received a phone call that led to a closure within a week, followed by a transition to a virtual format, and then a notification of being closed for a year.” Cliff indicated this year had been the first year post-covid that established a new normal, where people have been exhibiting variations of old patterns and gradually returning to familiar structures. He highlighted that conditions had significantly improved compared to the pre-COVID period. He added that his school promoted their status as a one-to-one school, providing each student with a Chromebook for their personal use, with teachers returning to traditional methods of teaching and learning. He acknowledged the initial 4 weeks of the school year had been tough due to the lack of a cell phone but they enjoyable for him.

Warner explained how critical building and maintaining relationships alleviated many issues during challenging times when pressured moments impacted principals. He expressed the importance of establishing and sustaining relationships to mitigate various challenges during high-pressure situations. He stated that the focus shifted significantly prior to the pandemic.

Post-pandemic, the focus shifted to relationships, emphasizing social and emotional dimensions as individuals navigated their experiences. The children had not yet fully recovered at the time of the interview. Warner stated that homework was unfamiliar. He acknowledged any effort was unfamiliar, and students desired simplicity. He agreed; the pandemic yielded this outcome. The pandemic presented challenges; however, it also yielded certain benefits in his situation during that year and a half.

Theme 2 Summation

The theme of Principal Role Evolution and Experience highlighted important growth periods for school leaders have experienced during expected and unexpectedly challenging times, such as the pandemic, staffing shortages, and other struggles. Participants discussed leadership through foreseen and unforeseen events throughout their careers. Participants mentioned a wide array of strategies that were successful during their leadership journey, from fostering relationships to adapting to sudden changes and being flexible. Participants believe in leadership; and principals must be prepared and demonstrate readiness for all situations. As part of a shift from an operational leader to an instructional leader focusing on assessment data, challenging times have directed attention to an emphasis on social and emotional awareness as a school initiative. The participants agreed that leaders must be balanced and maintain awareness and skill in all areas of leadership to be successful and impactful. Bill indicated how critical it was to be organized and maintain levels of communication. Cliff reflected on the shift from traditional education to virtual education and the lack of preparation and resources to prepare the community for such a major shift. Warner emphasized the role of building relationships and addressing the social and emotional needs of students post-pandemic. Participants agreed that the

experiences prepared them for any situation and provided each with a new meaning of resilience pertaining to challenges.

RQ2 Results

RQ2 was the following: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school South Georgia? Four themes emerged in support of RQ2 (i.e., Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics along with their respective codes.

Theme 1: Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics

Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics was the first theme in support of RQ2. The theme addressed the factors that directly affected the participants and influenced the journey of participants' leadership careers. By examining the challenges that led to participants leaving the education profession, or position, the theme coincided with providing a detailed description of the restrictions or opportunities that most impacted decisions. Each participant yielded a storied analysis that led to an influential career or life experience that has impacted their leadership journey. All the participants reported on the Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics and its codes (Peer Turnover or Attrition Factors, Turnover and Attrition Factors, Turnover and Attrition). Please note that although the two Turnover and Attrition Factors are defined as factors that may dissuade participants from either leaving the job or the profession, Turnover Attrition is specifically defined as the participant's desire to leave the job or the profession. The following question was posed to the participants: "Have you thought about leaving the position or the profession?"

Bob's response aligned more with turnover as he desired to remain in the profession. Bob thought for years about whether or not to leave teaching to go to law school in the early years of his teaching career. Since becoming principal, he feels a stronger sense of commitment. There has been more excitement as this has aligned more with his professional goals, which have impacted schooling and made it necessary to convert to online teaching right now. Bill had aspirations to move into a district leadership position. Bill's professional goal was viewed as turnover as he sought to remain in education. Bill indicated that thoughts of leaving his position last year to take a district level job were presented but he knew it was not the right time. He was invested in the people. Moving from a principal position to a district director role would remove him from what he loves best: working with the children.

Terrell was in the most stable position to leave the position or profession, but his desire has been to continue impacting lives and growing students. He has been working for 34 years. He could easily retire or leave the field, but he was not intending to do so at this time. His wife wanted him to help her coach basketball, but he preferred to stay dedicated to his job, which for him was gratifying, low-stress, and meaningful. He liked the people he worked with and did not feel like he needed to leave right away. He said that as a principal, creating and keeping solid relationships has been important for dealing with problems and relieving stress during tough times.

Additionally, participants responded to the following question: What factors make you stay? Warner believed support was a critical component to leadership retention and ultimately led to his departure. He said that the major reason he decided to step down as leader was because he lacked enough backing. He said that if he had received constant support to implement the adjustments that needed to be made, he probably would have stayed in the position. He was the

school's longest-serving principal, although he eventually retired, saying that he might have stayed longer if he had gotten more help.

Dorothy enjoyed the opportunity to serve as principal. However, the chance to advance to a district leadership position offered increased financial compensation and provided a reason to remain in the profession. Dorothy enjoyed serving as principal, but she felt that she might grow even more as a district leader. She said that she would have stayed in the field longer, either full-time or part-time, if a district job matched her skills. She was interested in jobs that involved secondary curriculum or helping other administrators, where she could use her skills to make a bigger difference.

Cliff provided a personal and professional keen sense of purpose for remaining in the position. Cliff indicated and referenced examples of relationships and interactions with students, staff, and community stakeholders making it difficult to exit the position but admitted aspirations to advance within the profession. Cliff disclosed that he stayed in his position for both personal and professional reasons. He loved being there for his kids during their high school years, especially since his daughter was now a freshman and wanted him to stay until she graduated. He also got many benefits out of talking to students every day, laughing with them, supporting them, and making important connections. Cliff liked the energy and purpose he received from these interactions. He thought that focusing only on academics missed the human side of education. He wanted to move up in his career someday, but he acknowledged that his love of working with students keeps him in his current job.

Theme 1 Summation

Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics aimed to point to the factors that directly impacted a principal's decision to leave or remain in their current position or profession. The participants provided extensive details of situations experienced, challenges, and struggles.

Moments when support was essential, the purpose of meaningful relationships, and ambitions for career development were motivations to continue striving. Participants included peer mentors as guides, a sense of purpose, and family involvement in the schools as reasons to remain there. In summary, while they enjoyed their careers, participants expressed a desire for support, appreciation, and opportunities to enhance their skills across a wider range.

Theme 2: Professional Departure Factors

The theme of Professional Departure Factors was the second theme to emerge in support of RQ2 by highlighting the conditions, or lack thereof, in the participants' positions that led to their exits during their leadership experiences. By reviewing each participant factor for leaving, commonalities and similarities were identified as patterns of professional challenges that increased turnover rates in leadership. This theme provided the researcher with a chance to assess the professional and personal issues affecting leaders, which can help improve retention in leadership roles. All six participants reported on Professional Departure Factors and its code Exit Readiness.

The following question was posed to the participants: "What made you leave the profession?" Bill alluded to leaving the profession of his accord knowing he did the very best he could and exited the profession improved. Bill initiated a stance of desiring to exit the profession on his own accord. He believed with the investment and sacrifices provided to the students, staff, district office, and community, the appreciation granted would allow him the opportunity to create a space for his own exit. He desired to see his vision come to fruition and observed the fruits of his labor sprout.

Like Bill, Terrell desired to leave the position and profession better than he entered. Terrell indicated a willingness to have an organization prepared for success when the successor

enters the position. Terrell had a genuine leadership mentality of “passing the torch.” He believed that a leader must leave any place that he has served better than it was before he arrived. He implemented initiatives and plans of success to ensure his predecessor had everything the school needed to be successful. His mindset was that the strategic plan for achievement and success was not for his successor but for what was best for present and future students. He added, “Ensuring the systems and processes in place are consistent and sustainable allows the accountability measures to remain high in achievement data.”

Cliff provided a personable response to exiting on his own terms. He desired to retire at a place having felt not only accomplished, where he reached his purpose, but also at a place to truly enjoy retirement with his family. Cliff desired to exit the profession on his accord, on his own terms. He indicated that it shows sincere appreciation and gratitude when individuals who have invested so much of their lives in the community can retire on their own terms. He indicated that the opportunity to have a 49% position with a flexible schedule, playing golf some days, enjoying family time, and simply choosing what to do has been exciting to him. He added that desiring the move from high school principal to superintendent was an ambitious goal of his before retirement.

Theme 2 Summation

The Professional Departure Factor focused on the reasons leaders walked away from the position, indicating similar struggles that led to turnover. Participant’s shared similar reasons for leaving, primarily desiring the best for their schools and wanting a successful transition from one leader to the next leader. The participants indicated that they left the profession at a young age to enjoy retirement, voluntarily, and with the realization that their school had improved. In summary, collaborative improvements in efforts to address professional and personal challenges have been essential to increasing leadership retention. Each participant discussed their own

motivating factors for leaving their position, with all desiring to leave the position better than when they arrived. Bill expressed fulfillment in knowing he truly had given the school everything he had to offer before he moved to his next opportunity. Terrell desired a commitment to prepare and ensure his successor has everything it takes to be successful, leaving the legacy of passing the torch. Cliff had a desire to retire on his terms and to be fully prepared to enjoy retirement. In summary, participants had personal aspirations, life purposes, professional goals, and organizational missions to leave behind, desiring to improve retention in leadership and grow leaders from within the community.

Theme 3: External Expectation Pressure

The theme External Expectation Pressure was the third theme to emerge in support of RQ2. The theme highlighted a significant challenge faced by each participant in the study. Participants admitted to desiring more support from district leadership, community stakeholders, and board of education members when conflict resolution measures were essential to resolve issues. In district leadership, participants indicated superintendents, assistant superintendents, and directors neglected to understand the difficulties and stresses of school leadership. Participants detailed the difficulty of managing the pressures of tasks through external expectations when minimal resources and support were provided and extended. All six participants reported on External Expectation Pressure and its code Sense of Pressure. The following question was posed to the participants: “How do the expectations from the community, staff and district contribute to your sense of pressure?”

Dorothy believed self-inflicted pressure created a more stressful atmosphere due to the demographics and history surrounding the position. She shared that she faced the typical stresses and pressures associated with being a principal, but much of this pressure was self-imposed. She

highlighted her unique position in the school, noting that she was the first woman to serve as high school principal, as well as the first African American woman in that role. She confessed to frequently placing unnecessary stress on herself in her pursuit of perfection and her desire to avoid any mistakes. Dorothy aimed to leave a legacy, hoping that others from similar demographic backgrounds had the same opportunities she has experienced. She recognized that pressure often originated from within, acknowledging that people were continually observing and evaluating her performance.

Bob welcomed the pressure from stakeholders realizing he self-inflicted more pressure internally. He drew greater frustration from receiving pressure from individuals who determined decisions from positions supervising his authority. He understood pressure in rural communities stemming from individuals with community and political ties. He admitted that his frustration sometimes arose from the audacity of people who believed they were entitled to special treatment or felt they were owed something. Bob also expressed his strong belief in transparency and the importance of modeling a code of ethics by always doing the right thing. He indicated that in rural communities, it was assumed that allowances were granted for special people or purposes. He provided examples, such as booster club members in athletics, Board of Education members wanting their child's behavior excused, or a president of the Parent Association wanting a discipline referral for their child waived. He believed in fair treatment all around.

Warner explained how the pressure was heightened extensively when the lack of support from district leadership was unavailable. He described serving under two reigns of leadership, one who supported well and the other who did not support well. He elaborated on how the stresses and pressures of the position increased significantly when there was insufficient support from the district level. He pointed out that district leadership was responsible for evaluating

principals and determining their yearly contracts. Warner stressed the burden of unrealistic expectations imposed by the state, which were then passed down to principals along with an impractical plan to achieve the desired results. He noted that this situation created a noticeable divide and undermined the school climate, leading to tension among staff as they questioned whether their principal would return the following year.

Theme 3 Summation

The theme of External Expectation Pressure succinctly labeled the pressure that school leaders were contending with from outside entities like district leadership, community stakeholders, and board members. Participants identified the need for support and disconnect between actual school-level needs versus the needs outlined by district leadership. In this study, participants recalled feeling unnecessary pressure from external sources to meet unrealistic expectations with limited resources. Many participants believed that outside parties desired to grow their individual legacies and micromanage community perceptions fueled by those expectations. Dorothy created self-imposed stress as the first African-American and female principal; she felt an internal sense of pressure to succeed based on history. She needed to ensure opportunity for future leaders such as her through her legacy. Bob acknowledged and welcomed external pressure, yet he often felt irritated when unrealistic expectations are set by district leaders who former school leaders currently are supervising him. Similar to Bob, Warner highlighted that the absence of district leadership support became a major challenge. In summary, the participants provided experiences of persevering through the pressures imposed by district expectations while maintaining professionalism.

Theme 4: Occupational Stressors and Challenges

Occupational Stressors and Challenges was the fourth theme to emerge in support of RQ2. The theme highlighted the ongoing, consistent pressures and demands that participants anticipated daily, including the unanticipated situations that often occurred, surprisingly. Work-related stressors were often unprepared for due to unforeseen challenges from dissatisfied parents, families from under-resourced communities, and the requirement to work extended hours, which can lead to job dissatisfaction. The theme presented a more profound understanding of why participants were quick to consider leaving the position. All six participants reported on Occupational Stressors and Challenges and its codes Greatest Challenge, Stressors and Stressors. The following question was posed to the participants: “What are some of the biggest stresses or challenges that you will face on a regular basis?” Terrell explained his biggest stressors were ensuring his students were growing. Whether, academically, athletically, or extracurricular, he wanted to ensure their growth.

Terrell explained that his greatest stress came from ensuring students develop and reach their individual maximum potential. He consistently evaluated his processes, monitoring the effectiveness to determine if support is provided academically, athletically, and for extracurricular success. He was an avid advocate for teacher performance, making sure students were well prepared. He remained involved to demonstrate care for students and reassure families, which he viewed as an essential part of his role.

Bill indicated the primary stressors were centered on changing the mindset of the community each day. The community gauged so much information from inside the school system but lacked details and process, which created stress situations. He acknowledged that the most challenging aspect of his job was dealing with the community buy-in and local politics. He

indicated that parents often became consumed with local news and social media, creating conclusions without knowing all the facts. He explained to families that although they were focused on their one child, his decisions impacted the entire school. When individuals shared their concerns on social media first, instead of communicating to the school directly, it made things difficult. Bill often discussed the school's vision and mission and promoted open communication. Bob provided a point of emphasis common in rural settings: local politics. Local politics were stressors elaborated on throughout his response. He said that having a strong, helpful, and open superintendent made things a lot less stressful and made it easier for the district and schools to talk to each other. He also talked about how important it was to hire good personnel, saying that having good teachers and counselors around him made his job much less stressful and more gratifying.

Theme 4 Summation

The theme of Occupational Stressors and Challenges emerged from RQ2. Principals incurred daily pressures from parents, community conflict, and working overtime. The daily stressors of demands, unexpected situations, and community challenges served as overwhelming for participants. Participants emphasized the additional pressures imposed by state and district leaders to guarantee student growth based on data and state scoring. Participants provided extensive detail regarding social media's impact on community perception and how local politics dictated advancement. Participants indicated frustration and irritability from working extended hours and managing unnecessary challenges. Terrell highlighted stress in ensuring student growth but admitted parental concerns that occurred without his preparation. Bill discussed the struggle to change the community mindset and convinced the community to realize the potential of the students. Bill emphasized communities immediately rushed to social media for school

news, impacting the community's outlook, which can be damaging. Bob highlighted local politics as a significant stressor, explaining how it contributed to the pressures of the role, including the possibility of causing a principal to leave their position. The theme expressed the participants' frustrations and willingness to stay in their position while also needing support and communication to feel a sense of belonging. Overall, the participants strongly reflected on and believed principals must have a balance between community expectations and the reality of what the principal position usually entails.

RQ3 Results

RQ3 was the following: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school South Georgia? Three themes emerged in support of RQ3 along with their respective codes.

Theme 1: Stress Management and Impact

The Impact of Stress Management was the first theme to emerge in support of RQ3. Each participant extensively expressed how critical stress management impacted various levels of stakeholders throughout the school. Participants agreed to direct and cope with stress; pressures of leadership and professional development in successful stress management were vital to maintaining sustainability in careers, personal quality of life, and ongoing professional growth. This theme directed emphasis on the importance of preparation and training necessary in all aspects: pre-leadership, current, and post-leadership. All six participants reported on Stress Management and Impact, along with its codes Manage Prevent Stress and Impact of Stress.

The following question was posed to the participants: "How does the stress you face as a High School principal impact you (consider physical, mental, and emotional implications)?"

Bill admitted the impact of the position caused fatigue to affect the individual in multiple ways. Initially, he allowed the position to wear him down but matured to delegate to others for his growth and theirs. Bill indicated that his job may be exhausting, both mentally and physically. He let the stress get to him early in his job and thought he was a failure when he failed to resolve every problem. He learned to set limits and give other people duties over time since he recognized he couldn't make everyone happy or do everything by himself. Not only did this move make him feel better, but it also helped encourage those who he gave more responsibility to do better.

Dorothy admitted as a novice in the field, the impact was alarming to her from multiple angles. Oftentimes, her family had discussions with her about health status. Dorothy admitted that the demands of her job were overwhelming and negatively impacting her health and family life early in her career. Her husband often noticed how fatigued and exhausted she was by the end of each day. She realized that modifications were essential if she wanted to remain a high school principal long-term. Eventually, she set boundaries and priorities, starting with her health and committing to leaving work at a consistent time. She reflected on her past, recalling the times she continued working while undergoing treatments after being diagnosed with breast cancer in 2018. She acknowledged that her strong work ethic had helped her persevere through many challenges but recognized the importance of taking care of herself and achieving balance.

Cliff utilized his family and indicated he always did well about leaving work at work and focusing on his family. He admitted that having a wife in education has really helped him remain focused on maintaining that stress. He did not hesitate to point out that he had always been able to leave work behind and spend time with his family. His wife worked in education, which helped him deal with stress and keep everything in order. He put his three kids first and found

time to relax by playing golf, watching college sports, and playing fantasy football with friends. Cliff believed it was important to set limits to avoid burnout and encouraged his staff to do the same: go home, rest, and take care of themselves so they better served their students and coworkers.

Theme 1 Summation

The theme of Stress Management and Impact emerged in the discussions of the experiences of high school principals and RQ3. Participants emphasized the importance of essential components and resources for managing the stress of being a principal. Participants highlighted that stress management played a critical role in sustaining the career of a principal and their personal life. Each participant was adamant about their experiences of professional stressors and the impacts on their personal and professional lives. They expressed the coping strategies that worked best. Participants were adamant about how stress impacted them physically, mentally, and emotionally. The participants emphasized the importance of stress management practices, where they developed strategies such as setting boundaries, delegating responsibilities, and prioritizing self-care. The responding educators found these tools necessary to create a healthy work-life balance in order to prevent career burnout. For example, Bill discussed being exhausted for some days and feeling defeat that stressed him, but he realized he needed to delegate and grow the individuals around him into leaders. Dorothy, as a novice principal, struggled to maintain balance, but throughout her journey, she knew she wanted to improve others. Cliff said he was blessed with being able to leave work and go home. He focused on supporting his family and personal interests. Cliff emphasized self-care and the desire to support students, teachers, and staff. In summary, participants expressed through their

experiences that dealing with stress in leadership and learning strategies was part of the learning process.

Theme 2: Administrative Support Systems and Resilience

Administrative Support Systems and Resilience was the second theme to emerge in support of RQ3. Participants agreed that district leadership served as the most effective option for supporting casts, roles, and mentors. Mentors were essential to reducing turnover and increasing retention rates, allowing leaders to seek advice from experienced individuals. Participants expressed comfort knowing a colleague was also experiencing similar frustrations, thoughts, and questions, which eased stress while minimizing burnout. Participants utilized support systems as a network to aid their career progression. All six participants reported on Administrative Support Systems and Resilience and its codes: Providing Advice for Future Principals, New Principal Advice, District Leadership or School Board Support, Leadership Persistence, and Accountability (testing, school ratings).

The following question was posed to the participants: “What piece of advice would you give to a new secondary principal?” Bob encouraged an open relationship to seek help and assistance from experienced individuals who were serving or had served in the role of leadership. He stressed how important it was to find a mentor and ask experienced leaders for guidance and support. He believed that new principals should not feel like they must make decisions immediately. Instead, Bob suggested principals should take their time to contemplate things and respond in a sensible way. He made sure his choices were beneficial and well-balanced by talking to other people and taking the time to think about them.

Dorothy emphasized a focus on prioritizing self-care and understanding that a quality individual produces quality leadership. Dorothy discussed the importance of caring for yourself

and indicated that quality leadership began with efficient transparency. She informed her staff to take breaks, give responsibilities to others, and not try to complete everything at once. She relayed a consistent message to take one's time. She believed that a leader can keep up both good work and a healthy balance by pacing and setting limits.

Bill provided a step-by-step, thorough guide beginning with organization of schedule, seeking the help of an experienced leader assisting. He stressed that good principals needed to organize, plan ahead, and develop trust. He instructed new principals to make clear to-do lists for their days. He suggested principals should seek from veteran principals and give others tasks instead of trying to do everything. Bill believed in being visible and honest, which helped create relationships with all stakeholders, staff, and students. Bill believed it was important to create short-term goals, take breaks to avoid burnout, and demonstrate real concern and support for others, both at work and in personal life.

Theme 2 Summation

The Administrative Support Systems and Resilience theme emphasized the importance of mentorship and supportive district leadership to increase the retention of principals. The opportunity to network and foster relationships as a principal was invaluable for the participants. Participants emphasized the importance of mentors in navigating challenges, decreasing turnover in schools, and improving staff retention rates. Participants discussed the value of open communication, strategic planning, and growing a strong professional network within the school community. By implementing this feedback, which they received through professional networks, participants acknowledged growing into a more confident principal and leader of their school. Bob suggested new principals ask questions and seek support from experienced leaders prior to making a hasty decision. Dorothy stressed the importance of self-care and delegating to create other leaders just as a leader created you. By delegating a new principal, you avoid burnout. Bill

provided an ordered, step-by-step guide to leadership, advocating for the organization, building trust within the staff, and engaging within the community. In summary, participants valued support, mentorship, and collaboration that served as partnerships to help growth and development.

Theme 3: Resource Allocation and Support Systems

The theme of Resource Allocation and Support Systems was the third theme to emerge in support of RQ3. The theme illustrates how little to no support was made available to participants through their leadership journey. Participants recalled that no funds were distributed for time, staffing, mental health services, or professional development aimed at alleviating burnout and enhancing retention. The theme indicated insufficient support for educational leaders facing stressors and pressures. Participants sought to encourage and promote an open forum for future leaders entering the leadership field. All six participants reported on Resource Allocation and Support Systems and their code Resources.

The following question was posed to the participants: “What types of resources (time, staffing, mental health, and training) are provided to help you manage your responsibilities?” Dorothy emphasized that resources focused directly on staffing. She was afforded the opportunity to collaborate with previous administration who served as her supervisor in the Superintendent role providing her with resources when asked. She indicated she was provided with external help and resources as a principal, especially when it related to staffing. She had the opportunity to collaborate with former administrators who had transitioned to district and superintendent positions. She indicated her success was due to a stable, high-quality workforce and assistance from the district. She said the district encouraged administrators to care for themselves and was always ready to help, even without official mental health programs.

Cliff believed resources were always centered on staff for instructional purposes. His supervisors allowed him to attend Professional Affiliated organization conferences, but anything directly was unavailable. Cliff indicated that most resources were prepared to assist staff with instruction, teaching, and learning. The district leaders encouraged him to join professional affiliate groups and allow flexibility with his budget. He oversaw Title I, II, and IV funds, depending on the school's top goals for progress. He believed that being proactive and being in touch with district leaders served as a confirmation to ensure agenda items were completed. He believed that people were the most important resource, and the money needed to support their work was essential.

Warner indicated he was not provided with any resources directly to assist as an administrator for self-care, but the primary resource provided was the opportunity to attend conferences and share with other administrators. Warner indicated that as an administrator, he did not have any direct self-care tools, but he provided extensive assistance by creating professional relationships. He believed that conferences and networking events were his main sources of information and learning, and working with other administrators was his greatest asset. He was able to handle tough situations better because of support from prior superintendents and coworkers around the state.

Theme 3 Summation

The theme of Resource Allocation and Support Systems pointed out a lack of resources and support for educational leaders. Participants reported inadequate funding for staff, mental health services, and professional development impacting their capacity as a leader. While Dorothy and Cliff appreciated support from predecessors, overall, participants expressed a need for improved access to resources to better manage their responsibilities as principals and prevent individual burnout. While collaboration and relationships with colleagues were helpful, the

consensus was that resources were minimal, and support systems for leaders were uncommon in education.

Results from Theoretical Framework Analysis

The theoretical framework for this study consisted of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1997) and Conservation of Resource Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Two forms of analysis were conducted, one for survey data and the second for interview data. Each of the participants completed the MBI-ES, which measured emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (see Table 13). The MBI-ES measured how often participants had feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishments (Never = 0; A few times a year or less = 1; Once a month or less = 2; Few times a month = 3; Once a week = 4; A few times a week = 5; and Everyday = 6). Scores for each section were averaged.

Table 13

Participants' MBI Results

Pseudonyms	Emotional Exhaustion Score	Depersonalization Score	Personal Accomplishments Score
Dorothy	15	1	40
Terrell	0	0	48
Bob	10	2	46
Cliff	24	9	32
Bill	10	6	48
Warner	18	0	46

Note. The above scores are from the MBI-ES (Maslach et al., 1997) administered during the study.

Please note that Terrell had scores of zero for both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization; however, he also had one of the highest scores for personal accomplishments. Conversely, Cliff scored high on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Additionally, Cliff

also scored low on personal accomplishments. Lastly, Warner scored high on emotional exhaustion but also high on personal accomplishments. Warner, like Terrell, scored zero on depersonalization. The second phase of theoretical data analysis consisted of an iteration of deductive coding, wherein three themes emerged in alignment with Maslach Burnout (Maslach et al., 1997) and three themes emerged in alignment with Conservation of Resource Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Maslach Burnout

The three themes that emerged in alignment with Maslach Burnout (Maslach et al., 1997) were Professional Emotional Detachment, Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals, and Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy. Each of the themes aligned with a Maslach Burnout Theory component: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, or personal accomplishments (Maslach et al., 1997).

Theme 1: Professional Emotional Detachment. Professional Emotional Detachment was the first theme to emerge in alignment with Maslach Burnout and the depersonalization component (see Table 15). The theme highlighted how the participants may have developed a psychological defense mechanism to address their feelings of being overwhelmed on the job. Depersonalization as defined by Maslach et al. (1997) demonstrates an emotional withdrawal as a coping strategy to combat burnout. Once participants have reached the depersonalization stage, they often report wanting to leave their principalship. Thus, leaving can be either turnover or attrition as they may choose to stay within education or leave the field altogether. Depersonalization may also be exemplified when principals start to seek detachment from students, staff, and or school communities. As principals continue to experience burnout, this may also increase their job dissatisfaction and erode their effectiveness within their positions. As previously noted in research, dissatisfaction and burnout can serve as factors for turnover or

attrition (Hallet et al., 2024). Four of the six participants reported on Professional Emotional Detachment and depersonalization. Participants were posed the following question: Has there ever been moments where you ever felt detached or less effective in your role at a certain location, certain school? Bob discussed the impact of burnout and depersonalization:

Yeah, I mean, I, you know, I've had, you know, I left, I left a previous job sort of unceremoniously, you know, I mean, and it was about some stuff in my personal life had nothing to do with the job. I mean, we were, you know, poverty wise in the bottom five in the state of Georgia, but you know, academic wise at that point we were ranked in the top. 10% of the state of Georgia, you know and I had just some personal life things that go on and it just it was time for me to go and I think for them it was kind of hey we just we both need to mutually go on you know our separate ways and that was all good.

Dorothy discussed experiencing burnout as well:

You know, I'm not, I'm not fighting with, and so I'm tired. I'm just not dealing with it today, you know? But then you must bring yourself back, go home, recoup, come back and, and you know, so I think it may have been the opposite with the kids. When you get burnt out, you just don't feel like fighting those battles, you know, sometimes you will just. Let some of the things get away that you usually wouldn't let get away because you're just tired, you know, tired of dealing with it.

Theme 1 Summation. The Professional Emotional Detachment theme aligned with the Maslach Burnout component of depersonalization (Maslach et al., 1997). Often participants utilized depersonalization as a defense mechanism to combat feelings of being overwhelmed. As highlighted by participants, burnout and stress have often served as a factor for principals wanting to leave their positions. The evidence of burnout and depersonalization often appeared

as detachment as this showcased emotional withdrawal. Participants have often reported feelings of dissatisfaction and a sense that they were not as effective at the job as they were prior to the burnout experience. As four of the six participants reported on this theme, Bob's example demonstrated how burnout can serve as a factor for turnover or attrition. Additionally, Dorothy's example highlighted how burnout can cause a level of fatigue that can reduce principals' capacity to continue in their challenging positions.

Theme 2: Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals. The Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals theme closely aligned with the Maslach Burnout component of emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 1997) in Table 15. The theme highlighted how Compassion Fatigue and Emotional Exhaustion can serve as a factor of turnover for high school principals.

Additionally, the theme underscored the participants' belief that they were under-resourced while serving in schools experiencing socioeconomic challenges. The participants discussed how they provided emotional support for students, staff, and families within their underserved communities. As a result, the participants reported feelings of being emotionally depleted from their continuous emotional investments. Conversely, often the participants reported inadequate replenishment sources which eventually diminished their empathy and compassion over time. In those instances, the role becomes unsustainable emotionally which often leads to the desire or decisions to leave the position. The participants reported that this often was not the desired results, as their hopes were to make a difference for their student, staff, and communities. Bill discussed how fatigue was always present:

Sometimes it give (sic) me a little fatigue where it makes me tear my body cause I'm always, you know, it's always present. It's always present, but not to the point where it's

that I'm just ready to throw in a towel. But it leaves me with a small sense of defeat because it's like I couldn't solve everything but.

Warner emphasized how the high school principal is the primary leader in a rural community: "I'm going to tell you why, man. In a small community, man, you are the hub of the community. The high school is a hub of the community. You know that all eyes on high school."

Theme 2 Summation. Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals described a crucial deficit among high school principals. Participants regularly reported the need to support students, staff, and families within their schools. The participants discussed the number of problems principals were burdened with in rural communities, where challenges increased and support was minimal. Without proper resources and time to truly plan how to utilize them, participants explained that stress distracted compassion in one's leadership, causing a principal to contemplate exiting the role.

Theme 3: Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy

The Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy theme aligned with the Maslach Burnout component reduction in personal accomplishments (Maslach et al., 1997; see Table 14). The theme highlighted how burnout served as a factor of principal turnover. The participants reported an increase in responsibilities along with the burden of inadequate support. As a result, participants reported beliefs that their ability to make meaningful impact had eroded over time. Essentially, the participants felt a sense of diminished professional efficacy. As a result, participants began to question their purpose professionally; these feelings also led to a desire or decision to seek other positions. The desire or decision to seek other positions was in part so that they could regain their sense of accomplishment and professional efficacy. Dorothy, for instance, pointed out that all educators reach a place of burn out, but purpose remains:

I think naturally that where we all will face those times when we all feel, you know, like we're just not as effective as we need to be or feel like maybe it's a better way to do it. I can, I can say that some days I would think, you know. I'm tired, you know, but I think I always knew there was a purpose. Also, Warner believed burnout affected each and every stakeholder:

Attitude reflects leadership. If my attitude was not where it needed to be and I wasn't getting the support I need, you would see it in the staff and you would see it in the students and you see it in the structure.

Theme 3 Summation. The Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy theme was appropriate for high school principals in our theoretical framework. Participants believed high school principals became overwhelmed with problems within their school communities, struggling to create solutions. Participants admitted they often contended with duties and responsibilities that were unforeseen and ultimately “rest upon their shoulders if undone.” Participants agreed burnout existed when there was inadequate support and they were unnoticed or unrecognized, leading them to question their professional purpose and ultimately seek positions where they can regain a sense of accomplishment and effectiveness.

Table 14

Maslach Burnout Theory and Components

Themes	Codes
Professional Emotional Detachment	1. Depersonalization
Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals	2. Emotional Exhaustion
Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy	3. Reduction in Personal Accomplishments

Note. The codes are the components of the Maslach Burnout (Maslach et al., 1997).

Conservation of Resource Theory

The three themes that emerged in alignment with Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) were Resource Conservation Dynamics, Valued Life Resources, and Resource Conservation and Investment Dynamics. Each of the themes aligned with a Conservation Resource Theory component: resource loss/spirals, condition/object resources, resource investment, and energy resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Theme 1: Resource Conservation Dynamics. The Resource Conservation Dynamics theme aligned with the Conservation of Resource theory components of resource loss spirals and resource gain spirals (Hobfoll et al., 2018) in Table 16. The theme highlighted how participants navigated resource constraints within their positions. One of the key responsibilities of the principalship was to manage cycles of resource gains and losses. Often the participants reported on the limited ability to secure and maintain resources and how that directly impacted both school outcomes and professionalism. The participants reported that successful principals were strategic when addressing or breaking negative resource cycles. Often successful principals utilize networks, creative problem-solving, and the ability to prioritize needs and resources. If a principal cannot successfully navigate negative cycles, they believe that they are ineffective, which in turn can impact their longevity within their careers. Cliff's strategy was to believe, suggest, and delegate, then hold each individual accountable:

Delegate and hold the individuals accountable. Delegate based on individual's strength's ensuring you are not overwhelmed. The objective is preventing yourself from being worn out.

Terrell indicated principals must use the individuals they hire as delegates:

I have great administrators. My APS are awesome. I hired all of them and have worked in the building with each of them. I have great confidence in them, know their work ethics, and what they are good at. So, as principal, that keeps my stress level down.

Theme 1 Summation. Resource Conservation Dynamics was a fitting theme for the theoretical framework. Participants balanced and managed school resources to fit their school's needs for school improvement and growth, professional development, and career growth. Through networking with local RESAs and professional affiliates, participants created connections to school resources that each believed were beneficial for all principals entering the leadership field.

Theme 2: Valued Life Resources. Valued Life Resources aligned with the Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) and the components of Condition and Object Resources (see Table 16). Participants reflected on the moments in their leadership journey when they questioned whether to stay in their position or leave. Maintaining a work-life balance often presented numerous challenges and increased stress levels contributed to burnout. Participants recommended implementing activities aimed at alleviating stress and providing support to help navigate daily challenges. They relied on various sources of support, including religion, family, exercise, and recognizing when to leave work. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of support and mentorship from an experienced principal who could offer guidance on preventing stress and burnout. Bob, for example, believed as a leader, you must have confidence within your ability to lead:

Always be yourself and everybody brings different things to the table. So, if you're a principal, you got to figure out you've got to become almost like a chameleon in your building, and you got to build. You got to put all the people under you in the best position

to utilize their strengths. And so, you got to figure out what those strengths are, and then you put them in the positions to be able to be successful, and then you've got to fit yourself into where their needs aren't, aren't good at. And so being able to do that and when you have a piece leave that things change, you know, because that may not be a strength of the new person that comes in or what not.

Bill provided professional affiliates as support for professional growth of new leaders:

GASSP is good. GAEL is good. Executive coaching is good. Um. Some reasons are good at providing these days where you're doing the job alike things. So yeah, there's a lot of Pl. that you can do to help you with coping with crucial conversations. That's a great Pl. I highly recommend those.

Theme 2 Summation. The Valued Life Resource theme focused on work-life balance.

Participants emphasized the importance of family time and understanding the importance of delegation. Participants admitted that stressors were an issue when one individual assumed too many responsibilities. A few participants agreed that earlier in their careers, they made the mistake of becoming overwhelmed. Participants agreed that their best relationships were with their families, and many of the issues discussed occurred with their spouses.

Theme 3: Resource Conservation and Investment Dynamics. Resource Allocation and Support Systems aligned with Conservation of Resource theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) components: Resource Inventory and Energy Resources (see Table 15). The theme pointed out the lack of resources provided to principals and leaders in education. Participants indicated how resources were budgeted, and principals did not have the opportunity to provide mental services, certified staffing, and professional development appropriate for growth and development. Participants agreed support was offered in various cases, but micromanaging played a role that

led to stressful situations. Participants emphasized the importance of autonomy but offered support through mentorship, guidance, and fostering relationships. Each participant in the agreed school systems can benefit from improved support systems to increase retention rates among leaders. Bill discussed utilizing resources to address areas of improvement:

If there's an area of weakness, I don't understand, like I know I struggle with trying to figure out this FTE stuff. He walked me through that, finding a course for me to receive training, learning how to do the budgeting and financing through GSSA that he's paying for . . . I told him, I'm good with human resources, but I can always be better. So, he said, "I need you to also go to this course in the spring." So, he is my leagues plan, and my goal is based on my needs. I'm also with GLSA, have another coach because my district signed off to that. We met today and she's tapping into my Clifton strengths and seeing my areas of strengths, but also my areas of weakness and just talking about things to make me more an effective leader.

Cliff detailed the network of resources created over his leadership that he has invested in over time:

I want to know how they should respond. So, make sure that you go ahead and have those in in place for me. I've built a network over the nine years that I've been here for folks that I know I can trust and call. There's a couple of principals in Tifton that I can call. And being a part of that GASP, the GASSP Executive Board and the board itself, being able to click on an e-mail and just type out there like, hey, how are y'all doing with this? Or are y'all having a problem with party first period? What is y'all solutions? Being able to tap into those things and also, you know, putting your own self through professional learning where you know your weaknesses are.

Theme 3 Summation. Resource Conservation and Investment Dynamics were a theme that appropriately aligned with the theoretical framework. The participants specified the challenges of managing a budget with limitations, primarily with orchestrating resources to develop staffing, addressing instructional deficits, upgrading facilities, and providing professional development, all while trying to improve working conditions. Participants agreed that by implementing mentorship and professional development support programs on financial budgeting at the local, state, and federal levels, principals would experience reduced stress levels and gain a sense of safety and security, along with a deeper understanding of high-priority areas.

Table 15

Conservation of Resources Theory and Components

Themes	Codes
Resource Conservation Dynamics	1. Resource Loss Spirals 2. Resource Gain Spirals
Valued Life Resources	1. Condition Resources 2. Object Resources
Resource Conservation and Investment Dynamics	1. Resources Investment 2. Energy Resources

Note. This is a tabular representation of codes for this study, which contained components of the Conservation of Resource Theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The study utilized two theories as part of its framework: Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1997) and Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Each theory produced themes and codes that aligned participants' experiences of stress, impacts, burnout, and resource management. The first theory, Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1997) produced three themes and three codes. The second theory, Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) produced three themes and six codes. Each participant shared their experiences with authenticity, originality, and passion for leadership.

Cross Comparison of Research Questions Themes & Theoretical Themes

In conducting a cross comparison (see Table 16) of the research question themes and the theoretical themes, it was important to first identify which theoretical components aligned with RQ themes; thus, for RQ1 themes, Educational Occupational Experience and Principal Role Evolution and Experience were all components of both theories. Maslach Burnout and Conservation of Resources aligned within themes. Resources, support, stress, burnout, and the idea of attrition and turnover were examined within the themes discussions. When examining the theoretical themes, all the themes aligned with RQ1, as participants did discuss levels of detachment, especially during high times of stress, which aligned with Maslach's Professional Emotional Detachment. As noted in Chapter 4, Cliff and Terrell disengaged as to not have a negative impact on school culture, students, and staff; this was indicative of Maslach's Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals.

The RQ2 theme, Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics, aligned with the Conservation of Resource Theory, specifically the Resource Investment component. The three other themes—Professional Departure Factors, External Expectation Pressure, and Occupational Stressors and Challenges—corresponded to various elements of the Maslach Burnout Theory. As highlighted in Chapter 4, participant data revealed reasons for remaining in their positions long-term, including a sense of purpose, a desire to leave a legacy, and an appreciation for the option to exit the profession on their terms. Additionally, Bob and Bill pointed out that local politics, particularly district leadership, heightened pressure through unrealistic and unsustainable accountability measures. The extensive hours spent starting early in the morning and finishing late at night over many years prompted some participants to consider leaving their current roles for district leadership positions, such as superintendent.

The RQ3 themes Stress Management and Impact, Administrative Support Systems and Resilience, and Resource Allocation and Support Systems aligned with various components of the Conservation of Resources theory. These components included Resource Loss Spirals, Resource Gain Spirals, Condition Resources, Object Resources, Resource Investment, and Energy Resources. Additionally, the Conservation of Resource themes were Resource Conservation Dynamics, Valued-Life Resources, and Resource Conservation and Investment Dynamics. A way that participants managed stress was to engage in proper delegation, especially during times when they were overwhelmed, as noted by Bill. In being intentional about Value-Life sources, participants have had to set boundaries and prioritize their health and family life much like Dorothy and Cliff. Setting boundaries and prioritizing health and family were ways in which participants conserved resources and were intentional about their energy and resource investments. Support systems, whether present or absent within and outside the school, can significantly influence the stress levels that principals experience.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the lived experiences of participants who served as high school principals in rural South Georgia, Title I schools. Stress and burnout had an impact on the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals. Improvements can be implemented to increase the retention rate among Georgia high school principals in rural South Georgia Title I, taking into consideration Title I schools. The data were collected by conducting 60 to 90 minute -interviews with six high school principals who responded to the survey. The data were gathered using Qualtrics software and then transferred to Intellectus Qualitative (Intellectus Qualitative, 2025) software to conduct data analysis. There were significant relationships found, indicating that themes and codes derived from the data analysis were accurate. Therefore, the turnover and

attrition rates were impacted by stress and burnout, significantly affecting Georgia high school principals, causing districts and organizations to implement resources and support systems for current and incoming educational leaders.

Table 16

Cross Comparison of Research Questions Themes & Theoretical Themes

Research Question Themes	Theoretical Themes	Components to Theories
<p>RQ1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational Occupational Experience • Principal Role Evolution and Experience 	<p>Maslach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Emotional Detachment • Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals • Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy <p>Conservation of Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Conservation Dynamics • Valued-Life Resources • Resource Conversation and Investment Dynamics 	<p>MBI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Exhaustion • Depersonalization • Personal Accomplishments <p>Conservation of Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Loss Spirals • Resource Gain Spirals • Condition Resources • Object Resources • Resources Investment • Energy Resources
<p>RQ2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics • Professional Departure Factors • External Expectations Pressure • Occupational Stressors and Challenges 	<p>Maslach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional Emotional Detachment • Compassion Fatigue in Helping Professionals • Burnout-Induced Diminished Sense of Professional Efficacy 	<p>MBI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional Exhaustion • Depersonalization • Personal Accomplishments <p>Conservation of Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources Investment
<p>RQ3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress Management and Impact • Administrative Support Systems and Resilience 	<p>Conservation of Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Conservation Dynamics • Valued-Life Resources • Resource Conversation and Investment Dynamics 	<p>Conservation of Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Loss Spirals • Resource Gain Spirals • Condition Resources • Object Resources • Resources Investment

- Resources
Allocation and
Support Systems

- Energy Resources

Chapter 4 contains a discussion of Chapter 5 findings that align with the literature and the theoretical framework. Additionally, Chapter 6 contains implications for practice for board of education, district leadership, professional development organizations, principals, and parent liaison groups. Lastly, Chapter 6 contains recommendations for future research and conclusions.

Chapter VI

Discussion, Implications & Recommendations

This chapter contains a discussion of the key findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. The research questions guide the organization of the discussion of key findings and their alignment with relevant literature. The implications for practice are organized by organizations, groups, and individuals. It includes actionable steps for improving principal retention and assisting principals with mitigating burnout. The recommendations for future researchers include suggestions for expanding the current study's methodology, topical scope, sample size, and geographical locations to improve the transferability of the study's findings (Ary et al., 2014).

The NASSP (2017) emphasized that only half of principals remained in their position for more than 3 years, and extensive costs to recruit and develop principals were mismanaged and inappropriately utilized. Such turnover has led to increased teacher turnover and decreased student achievement (NASSP, 2017). Levin and Bradley (2019) indicated principal turnover increased by 16%, and leader to teacher turnover increased by 10% at the end of the 2021-2022 academic year. High rates of turnover have been evident in poverty-stricken areas with schools that have been in the bottom tier of performing schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

The principal position has revolutionized over time, expanding duties and responsibilities administratively from clerical to visionary leadership (Chan et al., 2022; Loewenberg, 2016; Stevenson, 1995). However, the demand of the principal position to maintain high achievement

and student safety, mentally and emotionally, has served as one of many stressors leading to principal burnout (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022; Williamson et al., 2018). A primary stressor for principals has been the challenge of decreased student success and no curriculum for workforce readiness within schools (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Principal turnover has been an underlying, ongoing, and steady issue creating gaps in leadership, primarily in rural and poverty communities with low educator recruitment (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022; Superville, 2023). Principals have often been susceptible to factors such as minimal support from stakeholders, difficult working dynamics, and an unstable professional environment leading to burnout (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Maslach et al., 1997; Rangel, 2018; Steiner et al., 2022). The imbalance and lack of appreciation for managing an extensive workload and lack of support have resulted in overwhelming stress and burnout for a principal in such an environment (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia. These factors were based on the perceptions of principals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I high schools located in rural South Georgia. Additionally, the study's secondary purpose was to examine the relationship between attrition, turnover, and burnout among Title I high school principals in rural South Georgia.

The following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?

- Research Question 2: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?
- Research Question 3: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia?

This study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of high school principals, stressors that lead to burnout, the impact on turnover and attrition, and potential improvements to the retention rates of high school principals. To bridge the opportunity gap, schools have required principals who are driven to endure the challenges of their role and remain in their positions long enough to see a significant change and genuinely make an impact (Gacherieu, 2023). Out of the six participants in this study, four have been current high school principals and two have retired. In spite of the challenges and struggles throughout their leadership journey, each participant has remained steadfast to their professional and personal commitments to education and student learning.

Methodology

The study highlighted the lived experiences through the lenses of the participants. A phenomenological study served as the most effective design to gauge the lived experiences of participants (Ary et al., 2014; Patton, 2002). A phenomenological design has provided researchers with opportunities to compare similarities based on commonalities to collaborate with deeper understanding (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This approach has allowed the

researcher to collect data about the participants' experiences and perspectives (Seidman, 2019).

The desired outcome was to discover participants' perspectives and indicate their behaviors and ideas based on those experiences (Patton, 2002). The researcher was able to engage in an in-depth analysis of the participants' meaning construction, primarily based on the study of Title I high school principals in rural communities located in South Georgia (Seidman, 2019).

Sampling and Data Collection

The researcher sampled present or former high school principals from rural, Title I school districts out of South Georgia. The participants selected in the study provided the most extensive data and information, verifying the importance of purposive sampling as the method for selection and data saturation (Ary et al., 2014). The sample size for the research study was six current or former high school principals with 3 to 5 years of experience in a Title I rural school district located in South Georgia (Ary et al., 2014; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

The survey data contained information for a diverse group of current and past principals having key differences in experience and demographics. Among the eight survey respondents, one was female and seven were male, with a racial composite of five African Americans and three Caucasians. Years of experience as principals varied, ranging from 2 to 19 years. Many of the participants were serving in principal roles at the time of the interview, while others transitioned (turnover) to different positions within education. For example, one participant had accumulated 34 years of experience, including 19 years of administration, while another was in their second year as a principal. Advanced degrees, such as a master's or doctoral degree, indicated a high level of education that helped identify their perspectives on professional experiences and job-related behavior. The age range of the participants when entering their first

principalship was between the ages of 30 and 39. Most of the participants' longest tenure ranged between 4 and 7 years, with one principal currently having served 2 years and two principals serving between 8 and 11 years as a principal. The survey provided an indication of a realistic scope by highlighting the diversity among backgrounds and experiences of those who directly influence school environments in communities.

The study utilized the Maslach Burnout Inventory Survey to examine participants' well-being and health (Maslach et al., 1997). The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI-ES) focused on surveying participants' emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement (Maslach et al., 1997). Each participant was provided with a survey code for privacy rights, and background information consisting of ethnicity, gender, and years of experience was collected. The survey's last question asked respondents if they would like to participate in a 60- to 90-minute interview; the researcher contacted respondents who noted that they would like to participate. The original number of survey respondents was eight; however, only six participants completed an interview. The survey also, as noted previously, contained the MBI-ES (Maslach et al., 1997). The three measures for burnout were emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction in personal accomplishments (Maslach et al., 1997). Most of the participants noted emotional exhaustion levels between 0 and 24; overall, this level was a low to moderate indicator for burnout. Additionally, the depersonalization range was 0 to 9, which served as a low indicator for burnout. Lastly, the personal accomplishment range was 32 to 48, which served as a low indicator for burnout.

Within the interview, participants also noted their experiences with burnout, turnover, and attrition. Interviews are usually designed to create a natural, easy, and relaxed setting for participants to share their experiences. The essential components for aligning interviews include

confirming which potential participants completed the survey, identifying those who chose to participate in an interview, and determining whether each participant meets the criterion sample (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Before conducting one-on-one interviews, the researcher obtained approval from the IRB and sent the appropriate documents to participants to secure consent using pseudonyms. The documents informed participants that interviews would be conducted virtually on Microsoft TEAMS for 60-90 minutes and included probes for in-depth awareness. The documents also included written language that expressed appreciation for participation in the interview (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that fell within the following categories: burnout identification and experience, support and resources, impact of burnout on professional commitment, impact of burnout on students, impact of burnout on staff, coping strategies and resilience, organizational and cultural insights, and recommendations/reflections on how to reduce burnout for school leaders.

Research Questions: Summary Discussion

The researcher utilized six steps to guide the data analysis post-interview process: organizing, examining, coding, reporting, interpreting, and checking the accuracy (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Interviews were conducted and recorded utilizing Microsoft TEAMS programs. Transcriptions were downloaded through a program using Intellectus Qualitative, transferring participants' auditory responses to text, allowing for an efficient narration that remained confidential and secure through pseudonyms.

The analysis began with an overview of each participant's response, which led to coding and the organization of those codes according to the themes highlighted in the participants' experiences. The researcher aligned in vivo and lean coding, emphasizing three to five themes

from the data. The researcher aligned the findings according to the following three iterations of data analysis: first iteration for research questions, second iteration for theories, and third iteration for components of theories. The three iterations of coding allowed for the discovery of themes and patterns. The researcher reported the findings in narrative form, breaking down the results into participant profiles, RQs, and theoretical themes. In the initial deductive coding for RQs, there were 203 coded segments. For RQ1, there were two themes (Educational Occupational Experience and Principal Role Evolution and Experience) and five codes. For RQ2, there were a total of four themes (Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics, Professional Departure Factors, External Expectation Pressure, Occupational Stressors and Challenges) and seven codes. Lastly, RQ3 identified three themes (Stress Management and Impact, Administrative Support Systems and Resilience, and Resource Allocation and Support Systems) along with eight codes.

RQ1: What were the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school in Southeast Georgia?

RQ1 sought to understand the career and life experiences of identified current or former high school principals who served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia. Overall, the themes in RQ1 contained information about career-related experiences for the participants and also identified how the evolution of responsibilities and external challenges compounded their work and stress. Lastly, the themes highlighted the need for principals to be adaptable and learn how to delegate responsibilities. The study's findings also emphasized the need for principals to have both self-awareness and emotional awareness in leadership.

Theme 1: Educator Occupational Experience. The theme Educator Occupational Experience was the first theme to emerge in support of RQ1. The primary components of

Educator Occupational Experience among the six principals were stress and burnout. Williamson et al. (2018) defined occupational burnout as “long-term, unresolvable job stress.” (2018, para. 1). Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) described principal burnout as mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. Additionally, Steiner et al. (2022) stated that principals reported the highest level of job-related stress at 85% and the second-highest level of burnout at 48% among working adults. This research aligned with the participants’ narratives, as they communicated extensive work hours, indicating receiving messages on their cell phones from early in the morning to serving in capacity roles securing the school building from a late evening function, arriving home at 2:00 a.m. Similarly, Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) stated that extensive after-hours also contributed to principal burnout. Participants cited other factors of burnout, including the difficulty in maintaining an extensive schedule of supervising students, conducting instructional observations, conducting faculty and staff meetings, and responding to district leadership demands. Additionally, principals were responsible for ensuring acceptable state and district accountability measures; all these factors led to burnout. Levin and Bradley (2019) identified high-stakes accountability policies, such as No Child Left Behind, as a key factor in principal turnover. Overall, the policies created significant stress from district leadership (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Some of the participants noted the increase in accountability. Principals and teachers struggled with depression and inadequate coping mechanisms in response to stress and burnout (Steiner et al., 2022).

Principals detailed the difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance, with one principal stating, “I have no work-life balance.” Burnout was a factor of principal turnover in rural communities, as participants’ narratives highlighted the factors related to working conditions and structure (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Additionally, the occupation of the principalship has been

evolving; thus, principals have continued to experience occupational stress and possibly burnout if their situation has lacked systematic acknowledgement of this involvement. Additionally, as the participants noted, they had to engage in self-care and self-advocacy to ensure their mental, physical, psychological, and social well-being. DeMatthews et al. (2021) outlined several strategies to help principals mitigate burnout and engage in self-care: promotion of self-care from supervisors, alignment of workload conditions, delegation or shared leadership responsibilities, and creation of work-life balance.

Theme 2: Principal Role Evolution and Experience. Principal Role Evolution and Experience was the second theme to emerge in support of RQ1. This theme highlighted the participants' individual evolutions. However, the literature has documented the evolution of the principalship overall, as initially principals were thought to be building managers and head teachers/preceptors (Rousmaniere, 2013; Stevenson, 1995). Over time, the principal's role moved from disciplinarian to supervisor and community liaison (Stevenson, 1995). As a result, the standards of eligibility for the principalship required higher levels of education and training (Stevenson, 1995). Within the theme of principal role evolution, the participants found it most challenging to keep up with the demands of the ever-changing responsibilities of the principalship. Stevenson (1995) explained that as the role of the head teacher shifted to more administrative responsibilities, so did the study's participants find themselves immersed in administrative duties related to supervision, high-stakes accountability testing, budgetary responsibilities, and the like. As a result of the changes, the principalship has contained many roles: administrator, operational, and instructional leader (Cieminski & Asmus, 2022; Glanz, 2005). The study's findings indicated that there was a shift from operational management to instructional leadership. Oftentimes, participants had to shift their focus to assessments and

social-emotional awareness (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022). Su-Keene and DeMatthews (2022) cited high achievement testing as a factor of principal burnout. Along with high achievement testing, extensive hours and managing the social-emotional well-being of staff and students were cited as burnout factors (Su-Keene & DeMatthews, 2022).

One of the factors for attrition and turnover included understaffing. The study's findings indicated that principals found understaffing to be an issue during the pandemic (Bryant et al., 2023). During the pandemic, changes within instruction delivery practices as well as the extensive hours may have led to emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 1997). Bill discussed the impact of the transition and how it helped identify significant resource gaps that hindered student success. Bryant et al. (2023) discussed the decline in reading scores, which served as an indicator of learning losses. Additionally, Cliff described his experience of moving to virtual education almost overnight, noting that the initial transition was difficult. One of the issues that Cliff discussed was lack of technology resources and access for students; he stated that his school had since improved and provided each student with a Chromebook. Warner stressed the importance of building relationships to navigate challenges, highlighting a shift in focus towards social and emotional needs post-pandemic. Likewise, the literature stated that one of the key responsibilities of principals has been to establish environments that foster emotional, psychological, and social well-being and physical safety (Maslowski, 2021). Overall, the study's findings indicated that effective leadership often results from balance and the ability to adapt to any situation. Additionally, the principal evaluated the ability of other principals to foster relationships of support and develop a level of personal resilience, specifically to face future challenges.

RQ2: What were the challenges of high school principals that may have contributed to the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school Southeast Georgia?

Research Question 2 sought to understand the challenges of high school principals who serve or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia that have contributed to the turnover rate in Georgia. The themes indicated a series of factors that included the duties and responsibilities of the occupation, pressures from stakeholders, individual ambitions, and individual growth. Primarily, participants included various components that contributed to the themes related to RQ2 and provided appropriate, multiple answers for RQ2. In conclusion, the study indicated that the high turnover rate among principals primarily existed due to intense demands, challenges, and struggles they faced; however, these principals also had a strong desire for growth and promotion, which motivated them to pursue higher-level positions.

Theme 1: Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics. Principal Retention and Attrition Dynamics emerge as the first theme of RQ2. The theme highlighted factors and keys determining whether principals remained in the position of principal long-term, left the position for reasons due to challenges, or exited the profession altogether. The NASSP noted that school systems spend between \$36,850 and \$303,000 on recruiting and developing principals (NAASP, 2017). Traditionally, high school principals have remained in leadership positions and served for many years graduating multiple cohort classes. Typically, as high school principals begin to reach the end of their careers, there is more ambition to begin seeking a Superintendent position. As an effective retention strategy, they implement succession plans within an improvement plan, as well as develop initiatives like “grow your own” programs in rural districts that prepare

principals through best practices (Sloan, 2021). In rural school systems, local high school principals seek to transition into the superintendent position.

For example, Bob indicated earlier in his career as a teacher, he considered exiting the profession for another career but admitted, “I would have made the biggest mistake of my career.” He continued his career, later becoming a high school principal. Bob indicated his aspirations to transition from the principal position to a superintendent position. Cliff aspired to globalize his passion to the district level and serve students from a K-12 perspective, rather than high school only. Cliff was presented with an opportunity to advance to the district level in a director position, but his desire for his staff and students and to graduate his daughter prevented him from leaving. He believed by remaining in the building, many of his teachers were less likely to leave and more likely to stay, which served better for his students (Sloan, 2021).

Terrell has loved his job and his students and staff, so retirement has not been something he has wanted to do. He stated, “Honestly, it cannot become any easier than this.” He was remorseful about the impact and legacy, passing the torch and ensuring his successor had no struggles when assuming the principal position. Terrell constantly redesigned principal roles, and he delegated responsibilities to alleviate his workload. Professional development and mentoring remain essential for fostering future effective leadership within his school (Cieminski, 2018). Warner emphasized the importance of supportive central office leadership. Warner agreed that his tenure could have been extended if the incoming district office had provided more support. Warner endured a change in leadership at the district level, which caused him to retire.

In conclusion, study results showed that principals have had a passion and understanding of what the principal position entails. Principals have desired to aspire and continue growing within their leadership journey. However, principals have been lifelong learners and have sought

support while on their journey to improvement and development. Retention has been less likely to occur when principals lack growth and increase complacency.

Theme 2: Professional Departure Factors. The second theme that emerged in support of RQ2 was Professional Departure Factors. The theme highlighted factors that may have contributed to turnover. Levin and Bradley (2015) identified five key factors that contribute to principal turnover: inadequate professional development, poor working conditions, insufficient salaries, lack of decision-making authority, and high-stakes accountability. Within the sample, four of the participants had experienced turnover: Bob, Dorothy, Terrell, and Warner. Attrition was defined as principals leaving the profession; turnover has been more related to principals leaving a position, school, school district, or state (Levin & Bradley, 2019). For this study, several participants experienced involuntary placements, voluntary placements, or turnover. However, Levin and Bradley (2019) noted that only 35% of principals have stayed at their schools, meaning 65% had left before their third year. Additionally, only principals have remained in their schools for 10 or more years (Levin & Bradley, 2019). All the study's participants have served as principals longer than 2 years; however, only Terrell (11) and Warner (19) have served as principals beyond 10 years at the time of the study.

Participants in the study emphasized the significance of stepping down from their positions at their own discretion. Dorothy and Warner were retired at the time of the study. Dorothy decided to leave the position due to health reasons and concerns, as there was a need to prioritize her health: "detrimental . . . my health and my life. . . . That's when I would leave the profession." Warner decided to leave his position at 67 voluntarily rather than involuntarily by succumbing to external pressure: "My goal was to hit 67, retire . . . I want to be able to walk away because I want to walk away, you know, not because I'm being pressured." Similarly, Bob

expressed some concerns about the unpredictability and the politics of education. He desired to leave the position at the right time: “I hope to be able to make that decision on my own and go out, you know, in good graces.” Cliff’s departure plans aligned more with fulfillment of their personal goals and financial security. Cliff wanted to spend more time with his family and pursue more personal interests, as he is really involved in community and civic service. While Terrell is primarily focused on leaving to achieve the intrinsic accomplishment of creating a legacy, he also has desired to see others grow and ultimately enhance the institution where he works and serves. Bill’s departure plans are more aligned with Terrell’s, as he is interested in leaving once he has made contributions that have a lasting impact.

Terrell and Bill’s departure plans aligned with the understanding that they had of their impact on school culture and climate. Levin and Bradley (2019) noted principals’ impact on school culture and climate; furthermore, Grissom and Bartanen et al. (2019) noted the impact of turnover as a disruption to school culture and climate, especially if replaced by a less experienced principal. Thus, participants who expressed a clear departure from their positions was critical to note. How they have planned to depart their positions and hire new staff can have a lasting impact on school culture, students, and staff. The departure of principals affects student achievement and staff stability (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). Additionally, turnover can impede leadership effectiveness with the installment of a new principal over the first 5 to 7 years of their tenure (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022). In essence, it will take 5 to 7 years to positively impact school culture and student outcomes (Pannell & McBrayer, 2022).

Theme 3: External Expectation Pressure. The third theme that emerged from RQ2 was External Expectation Pressure. This theme detailed the participants’ experiences pertaining to the stresses and pressures conflicting with community and local politics. Based on the data, the high

school principals in rural school systems were influential individuals within the community and served as transparent role models for many community members and local civic organizations. Often, a struggle for high school principals involved seeking support from district leadership, community members, and Board of Education members who consist of elected community members. In rural communities, students, staff, and other employed personnel had close relationships with individuals. Personal and family relationships may have created a unique bond or they may have created an influence on decision-making based on the depth of the connectivity between the political connections. Individual and district-related issues, such as school size and community relationships, also played a role (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Dorothy indicated she was promoted from assistant principal to principal, when the principal transitioning to the superintendent position. However, he often provided her with suggestions and advice regarding decisions within the school based upon a conversation with a community member. She discussed parents having a conversation with her, expecting “free passes” on behavior incidents due to their personal acquaintance. Bob expressed frustration with the demands and unrealistic expectations imposed by former school leaders who now hold positions as current district leaders. He admitted his greatest disappointment was the lack of grace provided and the failure to understand what takes place in the principal position. Bob also expressed having irritable moments with parents who are consistent monetary donors to the school expecting unfair treatment for their children simply due to the voluntary service they choose to provide.

Warner stated that the lack of support from district leadership created external pressure on principals. The pressure tended to leak into the community and bleed among the staff, impacting the morale of the school. Overall, participants understood outside pressure existed

with the principal position. However, acknowledging, preparing, and maintaining professional conduct was frustrating. The stresses and pressures did lead to burnout when support was absent.

Theme 4: Occupational Stressors and Challenges. The fourth theme that emerged from RQ2 was Occupational Stressors and Challenges. This theme explored the participants' experiences with the duties, responsibilities, and requirements—both foreseen and unforeseen—of a high school principal. Each participant interviewed mentioned feeling “overwhelmed” at some point in their career, whether momentarily or over an extended period. Rogers et al. (2025) further identified school climate, teacher burnout, and student misbehavior as contributing elements, categorizing burnout into environmental, professional, organizational, and personal factors. Their experiences provided a wide array of perspectives, indicating responses suggesting that turnover, preferably voluntary, was likely in their futures. Participants articulated difficulties in managing constant demands, unexpected situations, and conflicts—both internal and external—such as dealing with complaining parents, navigating community and local politics, sustaining extensive work hours, questioning yearly letters of intent and contracts, and undergoing formal evaluations. Often, the additional stressors went unnoticed, including increased workload, time constraint deadline pressure, and interpersonal conflicts with staff and district-level superiors (Rogers et al., 2025). While professional conduct and political correctness prevented in-depth discussions, demographic biases existed in human resources and personnel conduct. Racial discrimination served as an impact on the burnout rates, with principals and teachers of color more frequently burned out than their white counterparts (Steiner et al., 2022).

Terrell emphasized the importance of focusing on his students and preparing them for the challenges that life's adversities may bring. He expressed a desire to care for and reassure each child's family that he has had their best interests at heart. Bill was focused on achieving the

vision of impacting the community and changing mindsets. He understood that by impacting the community, he ultimately impacted the school, the students, the teachers, the district office, and everyone involved. Although Bill acknowledged that the battles he faced were stressful and overwhelming, he believed his purpose was greater. Bob emphasized that local politics were his most significant and stressful challenge. At the time of the study, the absence of a superintendent added to his stress.

In conclusion, participants strived to persevere through frustrations and stress for the “greater good.” While they agreed that times were difficult, the relationships they cultivated within their buildings with students and staff made the challenges worthwhile. Participants remained committed to providing consistent support, believing that effective communication led to reduced stress and minimal burnout. According to research and the participants of this study, daily tasks of a high school principal have created exhaustion, fatigue, and, in many instances when unnoticed for extended periods, burnout. High schools have required so many activities and events that principals must create a work-life balance to sustain longevity and quality effectiveness. The failure to attain proper work-life balance has impacted principals and ultimately has had a lasting effect on the school climate and culture, affecting students, teachers, and staff. Principals often have had difficulty separating occupation and personal family time, leading to challenges professionally and personally. This eventually has resulted in burnout, both at school and at home.

RQ3: What are the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high school Southeast Georgia?

RQ3 sought to understand the potential changes that might be made to lower the high school principal turnover rate in Georgia as perceived by identified current or former high school principals who serves or served in Title I rural high schools in South Georgia. The RQ3 theme described strategies for managing stress and potentially reducing high school principal attrition and turnover. Overall, the study's findings indicated the need for self-care and boundaries as well as administrative support. Participants noted that resource allocation and support systems were crucial, as they reported instances of insufficient funding for staffing, mental health services, and professional development. The lack of resources and support has served as a professional challenge.

Theme 1: Stress Management and Impact. The first theme that emerged from RQ3 is Stress Management and Impact. This theme emphasized the participants' experiences with stress management and their impact as high school principals. With such a critical position, the effectiveness and efficiency of leading a large group of stakeholders have required an individual who has been mentally, emotionally, and physically healthy. As principals, best practices are and must be consistently implemented to prevent burnout while promoting self-care in leading a school (DeMatthews et al., 2021). DeMatthews et al. (2021) suggested an effective strategy for principals has been delegating a few leadership duties and responsibilities as a method of self-care to maintain a healthy work-life balance. One participant in the study indicated that at the beginning of his principalship, he struggled during the first year and felt extremely overwhelmed and fatigued by the end of the academic year. He indicated a goal of his was to delegate many of his duties to be more effective and empower the individuals he hired to assist him. Dorothy, as a novice principal, admitted the stress she placed on herself impacted her family, students, and staff. Cliff indicated the opposite. He felt like he did a good job managing

stress but focused on instilling stress management strategies in his staff. He was avid about telling his staff to leave, go home, and finish it the next day.

Theme 2: Administrative Support Systems and Resilience. The second theme that emerged from RQ3 was Administrative Support Systems and Resilience. This theme highlighted participants' perspective on the increase in trajectory of how successful principals can be with a mentor, guide, and confidante. The value and role of a support system were the most essential components of the principal experience. Principals have received support from various levels of stakeholders, beginning with the district leadership and extending to the community. Each principal expressed how essential having a mentor has been to discuss situations and occurrences when a decision must be made that may require experience rather than education or policy. Principal burnout is influenced by various factors, including extensive workload, lack of autonomy, minimal recognition, and inadequate community support (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

The importance of professional affiliates to support or validate decisions encourages principals to feel comfortable in the role of principal and reduces principal turnover (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). Principals desire to have support systems from mentors who serve as evaluators or former school leaders but properly support without micromanaging. Several means of supporting principals include conversation, discussion, and offering suggestions that may indicate appreciation and gratefulness for the job of a principal. Bob was avid about support systems, mentors, and professional networks, which has been a requirement for all principals—new, current, and experienced principals. Dorothy added that self-care times have been critical to help assist and prepare principals for challenges. Bill advocated for new principals, suggesting that a mentor would have prevented him from making many mistakes. He believed preparation and organization prevented burnout, and having a strong support system has been the best help.

Implications for Practice

This phenomenological study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of Title I rural high school principals in South Georgia. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors contributing to the turnover and attrition rates of high school principals in Georgia and key factors based on the perceptions of identified principals who voluntarily or involuntarily left their positions in Title I rural high schools. After thorough data analysis, four themes emerged and provided a basis for the implications of this study. While this research focused on the principal experiences in a Title I rural high school in South Georgia, findings have had broader implications for principals in multiple areas beyond South Georgia.

Implications for District Leadership

The study's findings provided eight implications for school district leadership: create support systems for principals; develop initiatives for addressing burnout; providing political awareness and training; develop protocols for clear communication; and ensure professional development, community engagement, focus on social-emotional learning, and retention strategies. District leaders serve as primary supervisors and evaluators for principals. The first line of defense for principals are district leaders, who are typically former school level leaders, who are typically former school level leaders who transitioned to district administrators. Superintendents evaluate principals through the Georgia Department of Education evaluation LKES program determining their effectiveness.

As a district leader, the benefits of the study can enhance district leadership. It is crucial for district leaders to establish a support system for principals across various roles. The need for mentoring, support, and guidance for principals throughout their journey is vital for their success, well-being, and ability to manage the stressors associated with their position. For instance,

participants said that not getting enough support from district leaders made it harder for them to decide whether to stay in their jobs or leave. District leaders who cultivated relationships with principals and maintained open lines of communication may have potentially enhanced principal retention rates. It is important for district leaders to differentiate between providing support and micromanaging, thereby fostering an environment that empowers principals to exercise autonomy and act as the chief operating officers of their schools.

A key finding from the interviews highlighted the considerable challenges faced in improving one's knowledge of community dynamics and the political pressures that arise from the role of a high school principal in a rural community. District leaders, primarily former school administrators who have fostered relationships with current principals, served as effective mentors in informing principals of the dynamics of such politics and the ramifications if potential balance does not remain. District leaders have failed to acknowledge that community dynamics and local politics have created stress and burnout for the principal, impacting school culture, staff, and principal retention. A few participants indicated that their frustration and stress levels affected the culture and climate for both students and staff, suggesting that district leadership seemed to prioritize appeasing community stakeholders, particularly Board of Education members.

Professional development opportunities that include focus groups are crucial for principals to build resilience and address shared challenges. While district leaders consistently invest in teacher leadership and instructional improvement, there is a noticeable lack of attention to the specific needs of principals in areas such as leadership, stress management, and community engagement. Rural districts have established systems for promoting school leaders to district leadership roles. Consequently, district leaders should work to foster open

communication between current principals and district leaders, many of whom are former principals themselves. This is especially important when unrealistic expectations are set and misunderstandings occur during the transition from school leader to district leader, as these factors can contribute to principal burnout. By creating a supportive environment for both current and future high school principals, district leadership can enhance retention rates, improve the overall experiences of principals, and implement an effective induction program for school system leadership.

Implications for Principals

The study's findings provided eight implications for principals: create support systems for principals, establish professional development, sustain a work-life balance, initiate protocols for clear communication, develop an awareness for addressing unrealistic expectations, implement best practices for community engagement, focus on social-emotional learning, exercise effective coping strategies, and identify an ability to adapt to change. Principals must identify and research school systems prior to applying for and accepting a position. Furthermore, information from the study may help principals decide if the high school principal is a position to accept.

The study consistently revealed that an overarching theme for principals before they enter the leadership journey was the level of support from the school district. Strong backing and support from the school superintendent and Board of Education have been paramount to the mental and emotional balance regarding the ability to manage stressors that come along with being a high school principal in a Title I rural, South Georgia community. Effective principals desired to implement vision, mission, and strategies to improve the school initiatives; a lack of support from superiors generally led to feelings of abandonment, questioning of leadership

capabilities, and burnout, ultimately impacting a principal's effectiveness and desire to remain in the position or even profession long-term.

As a principal, building strong community ties and fostering investments within the community is essential. In rural areas, principals must become familiar with local dynamics and politics to ensure ongoing and consistent support. Understanding how to cultivate these relationships provides a foundation for various strategies, while adhering to the Code of Ethics helps maintain a manageable level of emotional and mental stress. As a secondary component to support and professional development, it is essential for principals to develop an understanding of delegating responsibilities to create priority for self-care and work-life balance. Principals must be encouraged to take advantage of holiday breaks and weekends and leave when the workday is complete to enjoy individual coping methods, essentially finding enjoyment. By doing so, principals acquire the ability to adapt and utilize flexibility to seek and provide peace, creating and sustaining high morale among their students, teachers, and staff.

Principals can prepare and organize any type of major event that may occur, such as teacher resignation, school emergency, or community disruption. School systems must implement leadership or ensure all principals are members of an organization with the availability of resources, education, and experiences in navigating community relationships. It is important to prioritize self-care and adapt to the changing educational landscape to enhance effectiveness and reduce turnover rates.

Implications for Professional Leadership Organizations

The study's findings provided eight implications for school district leadership: create a support systems for principals; ensure professional development; develop initiative for addressing burnout; provide political awareness and training; develop protocols for clear

communication, implement best practices for community engagement; exhibiting a right to policy advocacy; focus on mental health; and exercise effective coping strategies. Professional Leadership Organizations serve as direct resources to prepare and train principals for the duties and responsibilities of the position. Disconnect occurs when the lack resources are not provided when principals are prepared for those circumstances, mishaps, occurrences, and unforeseen situations only because of experience.

The Professional Development Organization must become a safe haven and support system for current, new, and incoming principals. Professional affiliates have grown to only become an opportunity to network, meet vendors, interview for jobs, and take vacations. These organizations must provide real-world leadership experiences that principals encounter daily, such as lack of support, overwhelming stress, and political pressures within the educational environment. The organizations must provide principals with resources to help them navigate, manage, and potentially guide occasional situations.

Professional development organizations can benefit from having open forums that allow questions and topics to be discussed among principals, ensuring issues are common themes for the posts, and creating a focus on stress management and resilience methods. As part of this professional development initiative, meaningful peer networking and mentoring commence for principals in order to share experiences and coping strategies. Principals have issues that are difficult to discuss among many individuals but communicating with a small group of 2–3 individuals alleviates stress and reduces the potential for burnout.

The Georgia Department of Education assumes control of schools when principals fail to meet deadlines and encounter unrealistic expectations. It is essential for professional affiliate organizations, local RESAs, and state educational agencies to advocate for support roles within

the leadership, school improvement teams of principals, or strategic needs assessments within the schools. Participants discussed the interview, noting that while there is a strong emphasis on social and emotional awareness for both students and staff as part of a school initiative, there has been a lack of professional development or training for principals to address the pandemic and its aftermath. To promote sustainability for principals and ensure the effectiveness of school leadership during challenging times, all professional organizations must create programs, resources, and training.

Implications for Parents

The study's findings provided seven implications for parents: understanding principal challenges, supporting school leadership, engaging in local schools as community, promoting open communication, encouraging in mental health awareness, recognizing a work-life balance, advocating for professional development. Parents struggle to understand the level of preparation required to lead multiple levels of individuals arranging, organizing, and developing life decisions daily. Parents focus on one household while principals center on a wide array of households between students, teachers, staff, community stakeholders, and their own families. From the study, parents can develop a realization of what the principal position entails and uncover the people who genuinely want what is best for the school.

Parents have the opportunity to communicate with the school regarding any issues concerning their child through various methods. They are consistently informed on a daily basis. Principals ensure that parents can access them according to their schedules, but emergency situations require immediate attention. When parents recognize the stress and burnout that principals experience, they become more appreciative of the time dedicated to addressing their concerns. The principal helps to alleviate stress and burnout by promoting the mantra, "It takes a

village to raise a child.” The parent plays a vital role in reinforcing the partnership between the school and the home.

Parents must understand their role in the principal’s support system. Every encounter and issue will be managed and handled accordingly by the principal or the principal’s representative. It does not require a threat of a call to the Board of Education, a visit to the Board of Education, or a negative social media post creating stress. Parents must serve many school organizations in their roles to advocate for the school in a positive light for students and staff and support the vision of the principal. As community stakeholders, parents play a role both inside and outside the school, collaborating closely with staff and participating in school events. Creating an initiative to involve parents alleviates the stress of parental dissatisfaction for the principal.

Parents serve the school temporarily, typically while their child attends. That parent is an advocate for their child’s emotional and social development. The principal is responsible for ensuring that a child’s high school experience is memorable and life-shaping. Principals must create activities to include parents to serve in their child’s development as their child navigates through high school, preparing for life, building resilience, and forming a positive attitude on their post-secondary life. In conclusion, the principal fosters relationships with the students, parents, and community, allowing many to observe the investment in the students. Potentially, it lessens the likelihood of stress, challenges, and struggles that parents can bring to the school and the principal in the future. Principals must place an emphasis on the efforts of parents, their well-being, and stress management with a high school student. Principals and parents must exhibit healthy coping strategies and a collaborative, balanced working relationship to create a successful student, maintain a priority of self-care, and prevent burnout. Principals with supportive parents are highly successful, professionally and personally.

Implications for Community Leaders

The study's findings provided 10 implications for community leaders: create support systems for principals, develop initiatives for addressing burnout, provide understanding of local political dynamics, develop protocols for clear communication, ensure professional development, implement best practices for community engagement, focus on health resources, develop retention strategies, recognize a work-life balance, develop an awareness for addressing unrealistic expectations, design a plan for crisis prevention, foster relationships, and advocate for policy change on the local/state/federal levels. Community leaders are the voice of the community and serve on many community outreach projects. Public schools are the largest community projects in any community with the largest community members being students and parents. It is imperative that community leaders act as primary sources of support within a principal's network to ensure that resources and guidance are consistently available. These resources often involve keeping the principal informed about relevant community issues that may impact the schools. Principals have noted various stressors, including political pressures, insufficient support, and the weight of community expectations. Community leaders can help by fostering a sustainable and neutral environment, particularly when they comprehend the challenges involved in leading and managing a high school in rural Georgia. An essential aspect for community leaders is recognizing the significance of work-life balance and self-care, which are vital for maintaining stability and longevity, as well as for retaining individuals familiar with the community in leadership positions. Ultimately, community leaders must engage actively in supporting school leaders to improve educational outcomes and enhance community well-being.

Limitations

According to Maxwell (2013) and Yin (2018), the researcher revealed limitations through generalizability, researcher bias, and reactivity. The researcher must disclose limitations in qualitative research to establish credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 2015). By reducing the sample size and selecting high school principals from school districts, limitations may affect the study and recommendations for future research along with proposed research findings. Transferability is the extension of the study sample's research results, conclusions, or participant accounts to a broader population not directly related to the study (Maxwell, 2013). However, it should be noted that the researcher engaged in triangulation of data sources (MBI-ES and interviews) and triangulation of findings through iteration and cross comparison (Ary et al., 2014). The data's ability of dependence for the proposed phenomenological study was limited by researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). However, as noted above the researcher engaged in several iterations of data analysis which enhances dependability of the findings (Ary et al., 2014). Thus, the researcher was aware of and addressed issues of bias and reactivity so as not to unduly influence data collection, research analysis, or study validity (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher engaged in reflexivity journaling and audit trails as to preserve neutrality. The study was limited to high school principals in rural Title I schools in South Georgia. The study's purposeful sample of six principals was limited to gender with one female to five males.

Recommendations for Future Research

As this study employed a phenomenological design, future researchers may consider employing different methodologies such as longitudinal studies, case studies, comparative analysis, surveys and focus groups, and mixed-method designs (Creswell & Guetterman,

2019). If future researchers develop a longitudinal study, they may want to consider tracking principals over time to better understand the long-term effects of stress and burnout on health, career trajectory, and school performance (Bartanen et al., 2019). Additionally, a case study design would allow researchers to gather data from different schools and/or school districts to ascertain which unique strategies are effective for principal retention (Yin, 2018). As noted by some of the participants, politics may lead to turnover; thus, surveys and focus groups would provide participants with space and breadth for which to discuss political pressures as factors of burnout (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Although this study is not deemed a mixed-method inquiry, the employment of the MBI-ES and interview data could allow mixed-method researchers to use data collection instruments to develop an in-depth understanding of burnout, turnover, and attrition (Creswell, 2014; Maslach et al., 1997). Future researchers are encouraged to consider some of the key recommendations of expanding the current research design for larger diverse samples across multiple geographical locations. Expanding both the sample size and the geographical locations may enhance the study's findings. Additionally, expansion of the study could provide an opportunity for researchers to conduct a comparison of the factors of attrition and turnover impacting rural and urban high school principals. A comparison may allow the researchers to determine targeted strategies for challenges faced by both rural and urban high school principals.

Researchers may also explore the impact of specific types of support (e.g., mentorship and professional development) and support systems on principal retention. Professional development is key in equipping principals with the necessary skills to navigate the responsibilities of the principal role. Additionally, professional development may assist

principals in managing or mitigating stress as they navigate the ever-changing role of the principalship. It is recommended for a future study of turnover and attrition among high school principals to examine more populated communities such as suburban and inner-city areas that offer more diversity. Geographic locations that may expand the backgrounds and experiences of participants also offer a study with more distinctive challenges, as well as unique methods and resources for solutions. Next, researchers should consider guidance and support programs intentionally focused on principal recruitment and retention. The research should consider the community and area, determine the implementation of the leadership induction program, and ensure sustainability in creating and building leaders as part of the school system's strategic plan. Ideally, future research should focus on utilizing resources for professional development that helps principals acquire essential skills in stress management, adaptability in challenging environments, and effective delegation to enhance their leadership capabilities.

Future research must extensively open discussions to prepare principals for the community and the political pressures that impact the principal's position. The stress caused by the two factors impacts the principal's ability and decision to remain in the position. The researcher must understand that, by preparing principals for potential challenges, even notifying serves as a support system. The principal serves as the leader of the school and represents each decision made. The researcher would benefit future principals by examining successful and effective stress-management systems and coping strategies to maintain sustainability and durability at a high level in the principal's position. Future research should aim to explain more about the need for adequate preparation, education, and support. It is understood that stress does occur within any leadership role; however, proactive measures can help principals manage stress effectively and improve retention rates at the high school level. Peer observation and onsite

experience are recommendations to allow for more observatory educator experience for principals to assess daily stressors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's findings highlight principal turnover and attrition in rural Title I school districts. The principals face several challenges that can lead to stress and burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2025). As the findings indicate the impact of burnout on school culture, students, and staff, they also illuminate the factors of stress and burnout, including political pressure, work-life balance, allocation of resources, and accountability measures (DeMatthews et al., 2021). There are a number of strategies that school district leadership, principals, professional organizations, and parents can employ to provide better support for principals to ensure their mental, physical, psychological, and social well-being (Sibisanu et al., 2024). Key stakeholders providing support for principals are encouraged to better understand the factors of burnout, as they may be able to develop support systems that can improve retention rates, such as mentorship and check-ins (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Several implications provide actionable steps for districts, principals, professional organizations, parents, and community leaders. Districts can help new and aspiring principals by offering mentorship and leadership intensives. In these programs, aspiring principals (teachers) can learn about the principalship and improve their knowledge, skills, and resources. Additionally, as noted by previous research, novice principals are most likely to leave the position within the first three years due to the perceptions of lack of training and support (Alenezi, 2020; Cieminski, 2018; Cieminski & Asmus, 2022). Thus, intentional mentoring and support can help retain novice principals. Furthermore, district leadership's awareness of

workload imbalances, the impact of communication, and the need for ongoing professional development and support can also aid currently serving principals (Levin & Bradley, 2019).

Aspiring principals (teacher leaders) are encouraged to develop their leadership skills through participation in teacher leadership teams and seeking mentorship. Teacher leaders demonstrate their capabilities by consistently meeting deadlines, supporting the school, presenting themselves professionally, and showing clear preparation. Additionally, teacher leaders can express their aspirations by asking questions, demonstrating awareness through observations, and recognizing the development process. Teacher leaders are vital to all schools and represent the first step toward future leadership. As aspiring principals engage in teacher leadership opportunities, each experience allows them to assess their need for support from their mentors (Cierninski & Asmus, 2022; Levin & Bradley, 2019). The demands of the job, workload, and hours increase with the specific leadership position at different levels of leadership (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Before entering any principalship field, educators are encouraged to establish a strong work-life balance to maintain their mental health and ensure sustainability in the position.

As noted by the study's findings and Hobfoll's (2018) Conservation of Resources, principals are encouraged to have a high level of self-awareness to assess their resources to properly cope with or manage their stress. Participants also were aware when they experienced burnout, thus noting the signs of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishments as signs that they needed extra support (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Maslach et al., 1997). The study's findings indicated that some of the principals were able to properly set up work-life boundaries that supported both physical and mental health and well-being (Dorothy and Cliff). Additionally, Bob provides an example of engaging in problematic coping strategies

that he later remedies to become healthy physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. As principals obtain the necessary support, they are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to have high levels of personal accomplishments, much like Terrell and Cliff (Maslach et al., 1997). Principals who experience job satisfaction are more likely to remain in their positions, which establishes leadership stability (Cieminski & Asmus, 2022; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019).

Addressing internal and community-related political struggles can also alleviate some stress for school leaders. Furthermore, ensuring resource allocation can allow principals to obtain staffing and other instructional resources that enhance students' outcomes. As communication and instructional delivery were most impacted by COVID, keeping effective strategies for transitions may serve principals well for future challenges. Future researchers may consider expanding this study by utilizing different methodologies: longitudinal studies, case studies, or mixed-methods designs. Topically the researchers may consider the long-term effects of burnout and stress as well as unique strategies that improve principal retention. Overall, future researchers may be able to expand the actionable steps as outlined here to better support principals.

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Appendix A:

Survey

1. Informed Consent
2. Please enter your participant code located on your invitation email:
3. Years of Experience
4. Racial/Ethnic Origin
 - A. African American, non-Hispanic origin
 - B. American Indian/Alaskan Native
 - C. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - D. Hispanic/Latino
 - E. Other
5. Age
6. Gender
 - A. Male
 - B. Female
 - C. Non-Binary
 - D. Prefer not to answer
7. Highest Degree Earned
 - A. Bachelor's
 - B. Master's
 - C. Advanced Degree (ex. Ed.S.)
 - D. Doctorate
8. School District Type
 - A. Rural
 - B. Town or small city
 - C. Suburb
 - D. Urban city or large city
9. Which descriptor best describes you?
 - A. Currently Serving Principal
 - B. Formerly Serving Principal
10. Number of schools where you serve (currently serving) or did serve (formerly served)?
11. Number of years in your present position? Please put N/A if this is not applicable.
12. Longest principalship held?
13. Number of principalships held?
14. Total number of years in the position of principal for currently serving and former principals?
15. Age at first principalship?
16. Have you transitioned from the principalship into another profession and or role within education?
 - A. Yes

B. No

17. Please list the new profession or role, if you have transitioned from the principalship.
18. How long have you been in the new position or profession (if you transition)?

Section 2 – Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educator’s Survey (MBI -ES)

Maslach, Christina; Jackson, Susan; Leiter, Michael. (1997). MBI: The Maslach burnout inventory manual. Consulting Psychologists Press. Palo Alto, United States.

How Often	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Never	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Every day

How Often 0-6	Statements
1.	I feel emotionally drained from work.
2.	I feel used up at the end of the day
3.	I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
4.	I can easily understand how my students feel about things.
5.	I feel I treat some students as if they were impersonal objects.
6.	Working with people all day is really a strain on me.
7.	I deal very effectively with the problems of my students.
8.	I feel burned out from my work.
9.	I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work.
10.	I’ve become more callous toward people since I took this job.
11.	I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.
12.	I feel very energetic.
13.	I feel frustrated by my job.
14.	I feel I’m working too hard on my job.
15.	I don’t really care what happens to some students.
16.	Working with people directly puts too much stress on me.
17.	I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my students.
18.	I feel exhilarated after working closely with my students.
19.	I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
20.	I feel like I’m at the end of my rope.
21.	In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.
22.	I feel students blame me for some of their problems.

Appendix B:

Permission for Use of MBI-ES

For use by Brandon Andrews only. Received from Mind Garden, Inc. on August 6, 2025

MBI for Educators Survey

How often:	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Never	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Every day

How often 0-6	Statements:
1. _____	I feel emotionally drained from my work.
2. _____	I feel used up at the end of the workday.
3. _____	I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
4. _____	I can easily understand how my students feel about things.
5. _____	I feel I treat some students as if they were impersonal objects.
6. _____	Working with people all day is really a strain for me.
7. _____	I deal very effectively with the problems of my students.
8. _____	I feel burned out from my work.
9. _____	I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.
10. _____	I've become more callous toward people since I took this job.
11. _____	I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.
12. _____	I feel very energetic.
13. _____	I feel frustrated by my job.
14. _____	I feel I'm working too hard on my job.
15. _____	I don't really care what happens to some students.
16. _____	Working with people directly puts too much stress on me.
17. _____	I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my students.
18. _____	I feel exhilarated after working closely with my students.
19. _____	I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
20. _____	I feel like I'm at the end of my rope.
21. _____	In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.
22. _____	I feel students blame me for some of their problems.

(Administrative use only)

EE Total score: _____	DP Total score: _____	PA Total score: _____
EE Average score: _____	DP Average score: _____	PA Average score: _____

MBI - Educators Survey - MBI-ES: Copyright ©1986 Christina Maslach, Susan E. Jackson & Richard L. Schwab. All rights reserved in all media. Published by Mind Garden, Inc., www.mindgarden.com

Note. Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Schwab, R. (1986). Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES). Mountain View, CA: CPP. Inc. All rights reserved.

Appendix C:
Interview Protocol

I. Burnout Identification and Experience

1. How many years of experience do you have in the field of public education?
2. How many years have you served as a principal at the secondary level?
3. Can you describe a typical day in your role as principal?
4. On a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being little to no stress and 10 being extreme stress, how would you rate your daily stress level?
5. In no order, what are the stressors you face as a High School principal that may have an impact on your daily stress level?
6. What are some of the biggest stressors or challenges you face on a regular basis?
7. How does the stress you face as a High School principal impact you (consider physical, mental, and emotional implications)?
8. For the purpose of this question, burnout is defined as “complete mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion that results from an inability to effectively cope with stressors over a period of time.” Based on this definition, have you ever experienced stress to the point of burnout? If so, when did it begin?
9. For this question, Whether or not you have ever been at the point of burnout, in your experiences what factors do you believe caused to reach that level of a burnout as a secondary principal?
10. How has your workload changed over the past few years?
11. Are there moments when you’ve felt detached or less effective in your role? Can you share an example?

II. Support and Resources

12. Do you feel supported by your district leadership or school board? Why or why not?
13. What types of resources (time, staffing, mental health, and training) are provided to help you manage your responsibilities?
14. Have you ever considered seeking external support (e.g., coaching, therapy, peer networks)?

III. Impact on Professional Commitment

15. Have you ever thought about leaving your position or profession altogether? What led you to that point?
16. What factors would make you more likely to stay in your role long-term?
17. If you've seen other principals leave, what do you believe contributed to their decisions?

IV. Impact on Professional Commitment

18. What are the impacts, if any, that your stress/burnout had on your staff?
19. What are the impacts, if any, that your stress/burnout had on your students?
20. What are the impacts, if any that your stress/burnout had on school culture, including but not limited to student achievement, disciplinary rates, etc?

V. Coping Strategies and Resilience

21. How would you rate exercise, humor, journaling, meditation, spirituality/religion as a method that you use to help cope with stress?
22. How would you rate socialization/support network as a method that you use to help cope with stress?
23. Out of the coping strategies listed (exercise, humor, journaling, meditation, social support network, spirituality/religion), which one do you find most helpful and why?
24. What piece of advice would you give to a new secondary principal that might help them manage their stress as they navigate this leadership position?
25. What strategies do you use to manage stress or prevent burnout?
26. Are there professional development opportunities that have helped you cope or build resilience?
27. How do you maintain work-life balance, if at all?


VI. Organizational and Cultural Insights


28. How do the expectations from the community, staff, or district contribute to your sense of pressure?
29. Do you feel your role as a principal has changed due to recent events (e.g., pandemic, staffing shortages, societal pressures)?
30. How do accountability measures (like standardized testing or school ratings) affect your stress levels or motivation?

VII. Recommendations and Reflections

31. If you could make one change to reduce burnout for school leaders, what would it be?
32. What advice would you give to new principals just entering the profession?
33. What keeps you going despite the challenges you face?
34. What made you leave the profession?

Appendix D:
CITI Training Program Certificate


CITI PROGRAM



Completion Date **08-Jun-2025**
Expiration Date **08-Jun-2028**
Record ID **70107273**

This is to certify that:

Brandon Andrews


Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Research
(Curriculum Group)
IRB Basic
(Course Learner Group)
2 - Refresher course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Valdosta State University


Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 08-Jun-2025. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wf799254d-d73a-42c2-be38-f1e2cc7c3612-70107273

Appendix E:

IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board (IRB) *for the Protection of Human Research Participants*

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04640-2025

Responsible Researcher(s): Brandon Andrews

Supervising Faculty: Dr. April Strevig

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. William Truby

Project Title: *A Phenomenological Study of Turnover and Attrition of High School Principals in Title I Rural School Districts in South Georgia.*

Institutional Review Board Determination:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

Comments:

- *IRB protocol number (IRB-04640-2025) must be included at the end of consent statements, correspondence, recruitment documents, etc.*
 - *Qualtrics settings must allow participants to skip or decline to answer questions. Additionally, the settings must be configured to prevent the collection of IP addresses.*
 - *Interviews may be recorded to create an accurate transcript. However, it's important to note that the guidelines strictly prohibit collecting, storing, and/or sharing the recordings. Therefore, it is imperative that once the transcript is created, the recorded interview session must be deleted immediately from all recording and storage devices used. This measure is to uphold confidentiality and ensure that the sensitive information contained in the recordings is adequately protected.*
 - *To comply with consent guidelines, recordings must capture the researcher reading the consent statement aloud and confirming the participant's understanding and willingness to participate. Each transcript must document the consent process and the participant's voiced consent. A copy of the interview consent statement must be provided to each participant.*
 - *Upon completion of the research study all data must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*
- Proposed modifications must be submitted to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu for review and approval. Implementing any modifications without written approval from the IRB is strictly prohibited.*

Elizabeth W. Olphie

09.05.2025

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 06.02.16

Appendix F:

Email Invitation to Participant

Recruitment of Participants

Dear Current or Former Principals:

I am a doctoral student in the Leadership, Technology, and Workforce Development program at Valdosta State University. I am conducting research on turnover and attrition of high school principals. I am interested in discovering the factors and impacts of turnover and attrition.

I am inviting you to participate in this study, as your experiences are invaluable in discovering what factors of principalship may lead to turnover and attrition. I want you to share your experiences and discuss your journey through leadership as a principal, including both your successes and struggles. Your participation is completely voluntary.

I have outlined the study's participation below:

- Completion of a survey within one week of receiving this email. The completion of the survey is estimated to take approximately 10 to 15 minutes. The electronic submission of survey responses is confidential; however, you will be prompted to enter the following participant code: XXXX.
- You may self-select to participate in the one-on-one 60-to-90-minute interview.
- You can participate in the completion of the survey and choose not to participate in an interview.

After the video-recorded virtual interview has been transcribed, you will have an opportunity to review your participant profile prior to submitting the final draft of the study to ensure accuracy.

If you accept this invitation to participate in this research study, please submit the survey, which includes informed consent and your self-selection to participate in the interview one week after receiving this email.

Survey: https://valdosta.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3pAgIODb93As6Uu

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout this process, as the participant code will be used in association with the survey data, and pseudonyms will be used in association with the interview data to ensure that no names will be reported or disclosed within this study. There are no anticipated risks of this study. If you have questions about this study, please contact Brandon Andrews at biandrews@valdosta.edu or (478) 494-7284, Dr. April Strevig, Dissertation Advisor, at alstrevig@valdosta.edu or (229) 333-5633 or VSU Institutional Review Board at irb@valdosta.edu or (229) 259-5440. Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Brandon Andrews