

11-10-2025

## Experiences and Challenges of Grades 6-12 Principals and Assistant Principals Supporting Implementation of Standards-Based Learning

Judith Ann Zeka  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Judith A. Zeka

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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2025

Abstract

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Supporting Implementation of Standards-Based Learning

by

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EdS, Drake University, 2018

MA, Graceland University, 2017

BA, Buena Vista University, 1993

BS, Iowa State University, 1983

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2025

## Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was that grades 6-12 principals and assistant principals are unprepared to support teachers' planning and implementation of standards-based learning in classrooms at mid-size rural school districts in a single midwestern state. Grounded in Senge's five disciplines of a learning organization, the purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms at the study sites. For this basic qualitative study, semistructured interviews were conducted with 11 principals and two assistant principals. Through thematic analysis, the following five themes emerged: principals and assistant principals perceive that they must (1) build teacher capacity through explicit professional development and collaboration; (2) provide structured time and resources to support instructional change; (3) ensure access to aligned professional resources, including collegial and peer partnerships; (4) integrate intentional and balanced leadership approaches, encompassing both transformational and transactional leadership; and (5) cultivate strong relationships with teachers by recognizing their expertise and needs. The findings from this research may contribute to positive social change by providing districts with evidence-based insights into the leadership practices principals and assistant principals perceive as most effective, enabling more targeted instructional support for teachers and, ultimately, improved student learning outcomes.

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## Acknowledgments

Thank you to my family, my husband and my children. It has been a challenging journey, but I could not have done this without your patience, love, and support.

Thank you to my committee chair, Dr. Mendi Davis. Your guidance and patience throughout this process have been invaluable, and I owe my success in large part to you.

Thank you to my committee member, Dr. Michael Vinella. Your expertise and feedback have pushed me to think critically, and your challenges and perspectives have helped me to grow as a scholar and researcher.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

To prepare students for the rigors of postsecondary education and employment, school districts must foster an environment that encourages critical thinking and incorporates consistent and high-quality K-12 instruction (Barikmo, 2021). Initially introduced in 2010 to create consistency within the K-12 instructional core and to make the United States more competitive in the global market, 46 states plus the District of Columbia, Guam, American Samoa, The U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands either fully or partially adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Deas, 2018; Greer, 2018). Since 2013, five states have repealed the CCSS, and 12 other states are currently reviewing the requirement to implement the standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2024). Implementation with fidelity continues to be a challenge (Cohen et al., 2022; Deas, 2018). Much of the policy discussion surrounding standards-based learning indicates a need for a change in classroom-level instruction, but no pedagogical supports or practices are included; this leaves administrators unprepared to support teachers in implementing the standards within the curriculum (Cohen et al., 2022). In addition, there was an observed gap in practice between administrators' perceptions of the curricular shifts necessary for standards-based instruction and the realities of a district's implementation, including curriculum, effective instructional methodology, and student performance (Pak et al., 2020).

The purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area

classrooms at the study sites. The findings of this study may directly benefit building-level administrators, specifically principals and assistant principals, by identifying the gap between grades 6-12 administrators' perceptions of the challenges of standards-based learning and what prior research had identified as the most critical elements for implementing standards-based learning in the classroom. Information from this study may contribute to positive social change by providing districts with evidence-based insights into the leadership practices principals and assistant principals perceive as most effective. These understandings may facilitate stronger and more consistent instruction, ensuring that students are college- and career-ready and prepared to compete in a global marketplace.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study's background, including an understanding of the relationship between the CCSS and elements of effective instruction, as well as the critical role of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in supporting and implementing standards-based learning in the classroom. The study's problem, purpose, and research questions explored the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in planning and implementing standards-based learning and the challenges they faced supporting teachers in classrooms and defined the gap between administrators' perceptions of the challenges of standards-based learning and what prior research had identified as the most critical elements for implementing standards-based learning in the classroom. This discussion was grounded in a conceptual framework centered around Senge's (1990) seminal work on dynamics of change in educational leadership, including systems-level thinking, transactional leadership, and

transformational leadership. Chapter 1 also includes the study's scope and delimitations, and possible assumptions and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with an assessment of its significance and potential contributions to social change in both the profession and the literature.

### **Background**

The CCSS were passed in 2010 after decades of measures attempting education reform. The difference, however, introduced between earlier reform initiatives and the CCSS was the concept of a common set of standards, instead of individual state-based sets of standards (Greer, 2018). Written by state superintendents and governors from across the nation, the goal of the CCSS initiative was two-fold: (1) to create consistency between and among the states and (2) to better prepare U.S. students to compete in a global market (Deas, 2018). The CCSS created a more targeted and logical approach to both curriculum and assessment (Cobb & Jackson, 2011). In addition, because the CCSS focused entirely on the instructional core, all students were encouraged to increase the complexity of their learning and to engage in higher-order thinking.

The initiative was not without challenges, however. The expense of implementation and the lack of explicit direction regarding how districts should make curricular decisions and support teacher professional development proved to be significant obstacles to implementing the initiative with fidelity (Deas, 2018). Additionally, the targeted instructional approach necessitated ensuring that teachers were prepared and competent to implement the level of instruction implied by the standards (Cohen et al., 2022).

Implementation of the standards required major changes to both teacher beliefs and instructional practices, including curriculum and assessment (Abadie & Bista, 2018). Much research had been done to define standards-based learning and to create an understanding of the implementation of the standards within a system of instruction (Heflebower et al., 2014); however, how school leaders, particularly principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12, perceived challenges they would face (or had faced) remained unclear (Miranda, 2023; Townsley et al., 2019). There remains a need for targeted support in teacher professional development, training, and instructional leadership surrounding standards implementation (Greer, 2018). Both a strong understanding of building leadership's necessary communication and effective leadership capacity are critical in enacting any form of wholesale change in education (Buckmiller & Peters, 2018; Miranda, 2023; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Yet building-level administrators in all grade levels are often unsure of what is required to support teachers, especially in standards-based reform. This study was needed to provide more in-depth exploration of both the challenges faced and the communication skills needed to support teachers implementing a standards-based curriculum.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in this study was that grades 6-12 principals and assistant principals are unprepared to support teachers' planning and implementation of standards-based learning in classrooms at mid-size rural school districts in a single midwestern state. Implementing the shifts in learning complexity in the CCSS requires targeted professional learning opportunities in both curriculum and effective instruction, rather

than simply asking teachers to teach to the standards (Cohen et al., 2022; Polikoff, 2020). In addition, while building-level administrators recognized the necessity for change that met increasing student demands, there was an inconsistent understanding of both the organization of and value in the implementation of a standards-based curriculum (Pak et al., 2020). Finally, much of the policy discussion surrounding standards-based learning indicated a need for a change in classroom-level instruction, but no pedagogical supports or practices were included, leaving administrators unprepared to support teachers in the implementation of the standards within the curriculum (Cohen et al., 2022).

This lack of support within the process created an observable gap in practice between administrators' perceptions of the curricular shifts necessary for standards-based instruction and the realities of a district's implementation, including curriculum, effective instructional methodology, and student performance (Townsley, 2019). In addition, teachers' perceptions of standards-based learning were dependent on the support they received from administrators and on their understanding of both the purpose of standards-based learning and grading practices. (Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Without support from administrators, teachers were unable to consistently and effectively implement standards-based learning practices in their classrooms.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms at the study sites. Data were collected through face-to-face and Zoom video

conferencing semistructured interviews with principals from grades 6-12 in multiple mid-sized, rural K-12 school districts in a single midwestern state. A self-designed interview protocol (see Appendix B) was developed to address the three research questions for this study. The study examined the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 and the challenges they perceived in supporting teachers in classrooms within mid-sized rural school districts in the Midwest. The key concepts explored included the role of leaders in systemic change and that transformational leadership is built on a shared vision and commitment (Senge, 1990). This shared understanding and commitment transform the relationship between individuals and the organization, creating a foundation for stakeholders to collaboratively work toward a common objective (Senge, 2006).

### **Research Questions**

This basic qualitative research study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences and challenges faced by principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in supporting content-area teachers in the implementation of standards-based learning in classrooms?

RQ2: What resources do principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 need to support content-area teachers in the implementation of standards-based instructional practices?

RQ3: How do the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 frame the perceived influence of transactional and transformational leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms?

While questions one and two were designed to elicit in-depth discussion of the experiences and challenges faced by grades 6-12 principals in implementing the standards and standards-based learning, RQ3 was intended to also explore perceptions surrounding the leadership dynamics needed to lead standards-based instructional reform.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The social phenomenon explored in this study was leadership for institutionalized change. To study this phenomenon, the conceptual works of Senge (1990) were used as a framework. Senge's theory of systemic leadership was grounded in the principles of systems thinking, one of the five disciplines from his seminal work, and organizational learning. His seminal work on leadership primarily revolved around the concepts of transformational and transactional leadership, each with distinct characteristics and implications for organizational development and effectiveness. Senge's work underscored the importance of recognizing and leveraging the distinct strengths of both transformational and transactional leadership within a systems thinking approach.

Transformational leadership is characterized by its emphasis on motivating and inspiring employees through the creation and communication of a shared vision (Neal, 2024). Transformational leaders are committed to both personal and organizational growth, ensuring that their vision aligns with that of their team members. By prioritizing intrinsic motivation, these leaders encourage individuals to shift focus from personal gain

to work toward the collective good of the organization (Senge, 2006). This leadership style fosters a culture of innovation, adaptability, and continuous improvement, which are critical components for long-term success (Senge et al., 2012). In a rapidly changing environment, transformational leadership necessitates building an awareness of the fundamental issues schools face and fostering a willingness to explore solutions from multiple perspectives (Senge et al., 2012). This enables organizations to remain resilient and responsive to new challenges and opportunities.

Central to transformational leadership is the concept of vision, which serves as the foundation of this leadership style. According to Senge's (1990) discipline of shared vision, a powerful shared vision is not just a top-down mandate but emerges from a genuine commitment by individuals throughout the organization. Transformational leaders demonstrate exceptional ability in formulating and articulating an inspiring vision for the future, one that deeply resonates with employees at all organizational levels (Liu et al., 2023; Wiltshire, 2012). This shared vision provides direction, informs choices, and cultivates a collective sense of meaning for the team (Parham et al., 2020). By involving employees in the visioning process and aligning individual aspirations with organizational goals, transformational leaders create a culture where people feel personally invested in achieving the shared vision (Senge, 1990). Moreover, these leaders enable individuals to recognize their potential and inspire them to be accountable for their roles while actively contributing to the organization's success. By cultivating a collaborative and supportive environment, transformational leaders facilitate collective efforts toward shared objectives, ensuring the sustained advancement of a unified vision.

In contrast, transactional leadership is defined by its focus on exchanges or transactions between leaders and followers (Liu et al., 2023). This approach is highly structured, emphasizing clear expectations, roles, and the use of rewards and penalties to achieve compliance and performance (Senge, 1990). The completion of short-term and specific goals takes precedence, and leaders value preserving what is comfortable and familiar. This leadership style can be effective in stable environments where routine tasks and adherence to established procedures are crucial.

Senge (2006) acknowledged the utility of transactional leadership in certain contexts, particularly where consistency, efficiency, and adherence to established norms are paramount. However, he also highlighted its limitations, particularly in stifling creativity and innovation (Senge, 1990). The emphasis on extrinsic motivation and hierarchical control can lead to a lack of engagement and investment from employees, who may feel their contributions are valued only for their immediate output rather than their potential for growth and development.

Senge (2006) argued for a more balanced approach to leadership, integrating the strengths of both transformational and transactional styles. By understanding the context and specific needs of the organization, leaders adapt their approach to fostering both stability and innovation. This hybrid model allows for the maintenance of operational efficiency while also nurturing a culture of learning, adaptability, and long-term growth.

Implementing standards-based learning underscores the importance of recognizing and leveraging the distinct strengths of transformational and transactional leadership (Townsend, 2019). While transformational leadership inspires change by

articulating a compelling vision and engaging stakeholders on an emotional level, transactional leadership ensures that specific goals are met through clear expectations, rewards, and accountability (Senge et al., 2012). Both styles are essential in navigating the complexities of educational reform, where fostering innovation must be balanced with meeting established standards.

Building a solid understanding of teachers' current reality provided leverage in building a shared vision that aligns across the stakeholders (Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). Understanding the challenges, needs, and existing practices of educators allows leaders to tailor their vision in a way that resonates with all parties involved (Thessin, 2021). This approach ensures that the shared vision is not only aspirational but also grounded in practical realities, making it more attainable and sustainable (Senge, 1990; et al., 2012). By fostering a shared vision, empowering employees, and maintaining a balance between stability and innovation, leaders can create more dynamic, resilient, and successful organizations. This process of aligning individual and organizational goals enhances commitment, facilitates collaboration, and drives continuous improvement (Senge, 2006). Furthermore, it enables leaders to cultivate a culture of trust and adaptability, creating an environment that recognizes all members and encourages their active role in the organization's development and success (Torres, 2022).

Multiple studies exploring systemic change in education have focused on incorporating standards into effective instructional practices (Fullan, 2005). For that to happen, educational leaders must have the tools to lead comprehensive change (Pak et al., 2020). The first step in the change process is identifying the barriers and challenges that

administrators perceive as limiting their ability to initiate change. The concepts of systemic and, more specifically, transformational and transactional leadership framed the elements of this study and provided structure within which to address the research questions guiding the discussion. An in-depth literature review and discussion of this conceptual framework are found in Chapter 2.

The study used semistructured interviews with 11 principals and two assistant principals from grades 6-12 to examine experiences and challenges in the implementation of academic standards across the content areas. To effectively support teachers in navigating the complexity of incorporating the standards into classroom instruction, a learning-focused approach must be applied (Cosner et al., 2020). Fullan (2016) posited that while improving student achievement is the overarching goal, it is the learning that is the priority. Systemic change is not possible if administrators simply mandate the change and assert their power over decision-making. Effective change requires team learning, personal mastery, and responsibility. Teams need to understand and implement both goals and expectations, and it is through the learning process that relevance and application are found.

Change is necessary for the big problems, those that do not have easy answers. Heifetz et al. (2009) suggested that leadership should challenge teachers to think innovatively; to learn new ways to address more complex problems. However, many contributing factors or components of a problem are often obscured or concealed, and they must first be identified before change can occur (Fullan, 2020). Townsley (2019) supported this premise within the context of standards-based learning. The challenges

faced in the classroom, including increased workload, frustration from parents who do not understand the change in grading practices, and a lack of understanding around the standards themselves, are only surface-level indicators. Building a conceptual understanding of the current reality and the more complex challenges administrators face supporting teachers in implementing standards-based learning is the first step in realizing purposeful change. Successful implementation of standards-based learning must be framed in the concepts of effective systemic leadership.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study used a basic qualitative design to explore the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in implementing standards-based instruction and the challenges of supporting teachers in that work. A basic qualitative design allowed for real-time analysis of data and for the collection of perceptions based on lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Employing a semistructured interview protocol, data were collected using structured questions to initiate the discussion but employed open-ended questions to guide the discussion and provided opportunities for individualized responses. This allowed for the collection of a more robust data response (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The effective implementation of standards reform must focus on the quality of instruction that aligns within and across content areas (Cohen et al., 2022). Investigating the data through the conceptual lens of Senge's systemic leadership (Senge, 1990) deepened the understanding of building leaders' perceptions concerning the challenges they face, including their role as instructional leaders, their critical responsibility to communicate

change, and the importance of developing extensive opportunities for professional growth for their teachers (Townnsley, 2019).

From a population of 37 principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 from multiple mid-sized rural K-12 school districts in a single midwestern state, the initial goal was to recruit 12-15 principal and assistant principal participants to interview, but if data saturation was not achieved, the number of participants could be increased (Burkholder et al., 2020). Thematic analysis of interview data was used to answer the research questions, and paired question and reflection analysis was used to further focus the data and eliminate any potential researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Definitions**

*Capacity Building:* Capacity building is the intentional development and reinforcement of knowledge, expertise, and resources of individuals, organizations, or communities to enhance performance and ensure long-term viability. (Fullan, 2007).

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS):* The Common Core State Standards outline specific skills and learning for students in grades K-12 in the content areas (mathematics, science, social studies, English language arts, etc.). Originally written to create nationwide consistency within the instructional core, the CCSS have become the standard for instructional decision-making in the United States (Townnsley, 2020).

*Mental Models:* Mental models are the internal frameworks people use to interpret experiences, shape decisions, and guide their understanding of the world. These cognitive frameworks can either enable or hinder learning and growth within an

organization. By becoming aware of and challenging these mental models, individuals and organizations can foster more effective learning and change (Senge, 2006).

*Personal Mastery:* Personal mastery is the continuous process of refining one's personal vision by expanding self-awareness and intentionally aligning behavior with core values and meaningful goals. (Senge, 2006).

*Shared Vision:* Shared vision is the collective commitment of an organization to a common goal or outcome. It fosters a sense of purpose or alignment, motivating individuals to engage in collaborative efforts rather than pursuing individual objectives to drive long-term success (Senge, 2006).

*Standards-Based Instruction:* Standards-based instruction is a model of instruction that considers both academic and non-academic elements separately. In standards-based instruction, students demonstrate mastery over time through multiple learning opportunities (Townsend, 2019).

*Systemic Leadership:* Systemic leadership is a multi-faceted approach to sustainable change within a school or district. Leaders recognize that systemic change must have clear goals, that it is more important to build capacity in others than to "rule" from the top, and that it is only through purposeful practice that others will begin to recognize not only the value of the change but also the collaborative culture that is created in the process (Lewis et al., 2019).

*Systems Thinking:* Systems thinking is a framework for understanding complex systems by focusing on the interrelationships between components rather than individual components. It emphasizes recognizing feedback loops and patterns of change over time

to see the whole picture, rather than isolated events. This approach helps organizations address root causes of problems and find sustainable solutions rather than quick fixes (Senge, 2006).

*Team Learning:* Team learning is the process by which a group aligns and develops its capacity to create desired results through collective thinking and collaboration. It emphasizes dialogue, where members suspend assumptions and engage in open communication to build shared understanding. This approach enables teams to tap into their collective intelligence, enhancing the group's ability to think and act together effectively (Senge, 2006).

*Transformational Leadership:* Transformational leadership is an approach to leadership that seeks to inspire commitment and elevate performance by aligning personal growth with collective organizational goals and promoting a unifying vision (Wiltshire, 2012).

*Transactional Leadership:* Transactional leadership is a structured leadership approach that relies on clear expectations, defined roles, and the strategic use of rewards and sanctions to secure compliance and drive performance (Wood, 2023).

### **Assumptions**

The focus of the study was to identify challenges perceived by principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in implementing standards-based learning and necessitated participants had a basic contextual understanding of the CCSS and how they applied within the planning and implementation of instruction. The study was predicated on three assumptions: (1) it was assumed that participants had a basic understanding of

the content of the CCSS and standards-based learning; (2) the perceptions of participants may not have been representative of principals from all rural midwestern K-12 school districts; and (3) administrators were willing participants and answered the interview questions truthfully, accurately, and based on their individual experiences. These assumptions were necessary to ensure that the data collected was representative of administrators' experiences and supported the possibility of actionable future research (Burkholder et al., 2020).

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study examined challenges in instructional leadership faced by principals in mid-sized rural Midwest school districts. Out of approximately 50 administrators expected to meet these parameters, 13 were recruited to participate. Face-to-face or Zoom video conferencing semistructured interviews were chosen as the data collection tool for gathering qualitative data because they allowed for a more personalized, in-depth review of participants' experiences, thoughts, and opinions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In addition, face-to-face and/or Zoom video conferencing interviews created opportunities for the researcher to observe participant body language and responses (Burkholder et al., 2020). Administrators chosen to participate in this study were engaged in standards implementation; however, their level of engagement varied.

The study targeted only principals and assistant principals. District administrators were intentionally excluded from the study to create a stronger understanding of the challenges faced by the instructional leaders of the individual grades 6-12 buildings as opposed to systemic, district-wide change. Finally, simply measuring teacher

understanding and their ability to implement the standards within their curriculum was insufficient (Pak et al., 2021). Building-level leadership was directly responsible for decisions regarding curriculum choices, addressing any pushback regarding the work, and integrating any necessary new learning by teachers (Townesley, 2019). It was critical that it was the principals and assistant principals who understood the challenges and made the connections between the standards and the new curriculum (Pak et al., 2020). For those reasons, teacher-leaders, including instructional coaches and professional development facilitators, were also excluded to keep the focus on the roles and responsibilities of the principals and assistant principals.

Transferability refers to a study's application and generalization within and among other contexts, including sizes of sites and groups of participants (Burkholder et al., 2020). This study explored mid-sized, rural, midwestern K-12 districts. While the goal of qualitative research is not to provide transferable findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), this study may be generalizable and of interest to other districts both within the same geographic region and in other regions.

### **Limitations**

A potential barrier when collecting primary data through individual semistructured interviews was access to enough participants to reach saturation. Extra duty responsibilities influenced the time individuals had to participate in this study. According to Burkholder et al. (2020), collection of data from individuals that involve lived experiences may have created potential biases between the experiences of the participants and the experiences of the researchers. To minimize bias, it was important to

recognize that there may have been differences in beliefs and perspectives between the participants and the researcher. It was the researcher's role to create transparency and build a relationship that ensured confidentiality and considered participants' time constraints, as well as cultural and ethical considerations (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). It was useful (and necessary) to stay current with changing legislated restrictions and district expectations and to consider the use of virtual interviewing when necessary.

### **Significance**

This study examined the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 and the challenges they perceived in supporting teachers in the planning and implementation of standards-based learning in classrooms. Because the focus of the research was on the experiences of principals and assistant principals, it addressed a gap in previous research. Instructional leaders must be the guiding force in implementing systemic and sustainable change (Lewis et al., 2019). While extensive research explored what it meant to implement standards-based learning and to incorporate CCSS within a curriculum, little was known about building-level administrators' experiences in the process or the challenges they faced supporting teachers in that implementation. Information from this study may help administrators to identify and define the challenges faced and to employ effective leadership practices within a standards-based curriculum. The findings of this study may directly benefit building-level administrators by identifying the gap between administrators' perceptions of the challenges of standards-based learning and what prior research had identified as the most critical elements for implementing standards-based learning. One major implication for positive social change

may be that improving administrators' understanding of the complexities of systemic change and defining effective practices supports consistent and meaningful implementation of standards-based curriculum.

### **Summary**

The CCSS were a federal education initiative designed to replace the individual states' standards with comprehensive sets of skills (initially in English and mathematics, and later in science, social studies, career and technical subjects, and other curricular areas). Intended to create consistency and equitability, by 2015, most states had adopted the CCSS. Initial guidance provided schools with what needed to change, but not with how districts should go about implementing the change. As a result, districts were slow to incorporate changes into their curriculum. The recent focus on college and career readiness required educators to re-examine standards-based instruction in K-12 classrooms; however, implementation continued to be problematic. Administrators were unprepared for the challenges created by the change's complexity and lacked the leadership awareness necessary for systemic change. This basic qualitative study used semistructured interviews to explore building-level administrators' experiences and the challenges they faced in the implementation of standards-based learning in the classrooms and filled a gap in practice by moving the focus from what needs to be done to implement the standards to addressing the challenges that are encountered during the process of implementation.

The study was framed within the concepts of leadership for institutional change. School leaders play a critical role in effecting systemic change, especially with

instructional and curricular decision-making. Senge (2006) posited that leadership must be prepared to see the whole; that each whole (the system) is built from individual components that must be connected for long-term systemic change. Prior research showed that effective implementation of the CCSS supported the teaching of higher order thinking and communication skills that prepared students to be college and career ready and competitive in a global workforce. In addition, implementation of the CCSS must be more than just a change in instruction: effective implementation must incorporate a change in the culture of learning. This study explored the challenges and identified barriers to systemic, long-term change from the building leaders' perspectives. By improving understanding of those challenges and supporting positive, consistent, and effective implementation of a standards-based curriculum, this study had the potential to bring about positive social change by building collaborative learning environments that prepare students to be college- and career-ready and competitive in a postsecondary global workforce.

Chapter 2 explores the literature surrounding this study. The chapter will begin with an in-depth review of the elements of systemic leadership, the role of instructional leaders in the change process, and what it means to lead in a culture of change. The review includes prior research on leadership models as it pertains to the field of education and details the relationship between education leadership and classroom teachers that is necessary for change to occur. A review of the literature surrounding the CCSS includes the history of education reform, specifically, the incorporation of both state and federal standards of instruction. In addition, prior research on implementation of standards-based

instruction and the role of the administrator in supporting teachers through the process is examined. Other chapters will include the qualitative data collection methodology and analysis of the data used in the study, the results, and the conclusions and recommendations.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was that grades 6-12 principals and assistant principals are unprepared to support teachers' planning and implementation of standards-based learning in classrooms at mid-size rural school districts in a single midwestern state. The purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms at the study sites. This enabled a clearer understanding of the building administrators' role in the implementation process. Schools face challenges when attempting to implement standards-based instruction, and a deeper understanding of how principals and assistant principals perceive these challenges may help address the problem at the local level and beyond (Pak et al., 2021; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020; Townsley et al., 2019). Chapter 2 presents an overview of literature search strategies used for this study, including key terms and search parameters. It also examines the concept of systemic leadership and how the study fits within this framework. Finally, the chapter provides an extensive review of past and current literature detailing critical themes identified in the study including a historical perspective of education policy, the evolution of the CCSS, what is meant by standards-based instruction, constraints and barriers to implementation of the standards in instructional environments, and the influence of leadership on implementation.

### Literature Search Strategy

To gather current and relevant literature for the literature review, a Boolean/phrase search was conducted in six major databases including ERIC, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Education Source, SAGE Journals, and JSTOR. In addition, the Walden University library was extensively used as a resource and research guide. Keywords searched included the following: *Common Core State Standards (CCSS), standards-referenced, standards, standards-based learning, leadership, K-12 leadership, systemic leadership, systems thinking, capacity building, mental models, personal mastery, shared vision, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, Peter Senge, leadership challenges, team learning, and academic culture*. All chosen keyword topics supported the premise that instructional leadership is critical for the effective implementation of standards-based instruction. Articles were taken from peer-reviewed, scholarly journals that were available in full text and published between 2019 and 2025, with English as the original language of publication. The initial search was completed using two broad topics: *Common Core State Standards* (286 results) and *instructional leadership* (426 results). The search was narrowed to also include *standards-based learning, standards + implementation, standards + leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and change + culture*. Narrowed searches yielded 270 results, and 140 articles that met the required criteria were chosen for additional review. This research also included seven books.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study came from the works of Senge (1990) and the concept of systemic leadership. Senge's research stated that for an organization to be successful, there must be systems-level thinking. To put it more precisely, it is essential to view change from the perspective of the whole system instead of its individual parts. This is particularly pertinent to the field of education, where interdependence and dynamic processes are the norm. Senge's seminal work in systemic leadership underscores the importance of recognizing and leveraging the distinct strengths of both transformational and transactional leadership within a system-wide approach to foster a culture of continuous learning and growth.

Senge (2006) identified five core disciplines that are essential for creating a learning organization: (1) systems thinking, (2) personal mastery, (3) mental models, (4) shared vision, and (5) team learning. Each of these disciplines offered valuable insights and tools for educational leaders aiming to enhance the effectiveness and adaptability of their institutions. Specifically addressing education, Fullan (2020) suggested that standards-based reform, by itself, will not improve student achievement. Building-level leadership must first foster a deep and personal understanding of what needs to change and the instructional strategies necessary to facilitate that change. Creating a purpose-driven system requires leaders to understand what is necessary and to convey those ideas clearly and consistently across the organization, maintaining a collaborative approach rather than resorting to authoritarian methods (Reeves, 2016). In addition, educational leaders who focus the professional learning of the organization on embedded, content-

specific, and context-relevant topics were better able to provide relevance for teachers and address the diverse needs of students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Senge's five core disciplines frame this study and provide the impetus for facilitation.

### **Systems Thinking**

Central to Senge's (1990) framework was systems thinking, a discipline that encourages individuals to view problems and solutions in terms of the complete system rather than in isolation (Senge et al., 2012). In education, this means understanding how various elements, including curriculum, teaching methods, student behavior, administrator policies, and community involvement, interact and influence one another. Consider standards-referenced learning, for example. An initiative to improve student performance cannot be successful without considering factors such as teacher training, student engagement, parental support, and resource allocation. Systems thinking, as articulated in Senge's (2006) framework, is essential for educational leaders seeking to identify leverage points where small, strategically targeted changes can lead to significant improvements (Goode & MacGillivray, 2023; Loor & DiMartino, 2023). This discipline, along with the other four, emphasizes understanding the interconnectedness of components within the educational system and recognizing how these relationships influence outcomes. By adopting a holistic view, leaders can avoid fragmented approaches and instead implement changes that move beyond the quick fix and address the root causes of issues, leading to more impactful and sustainable solutions (Senge, 2006). Systems thinking equips educational leaders with a comprehensive approach to

addressing complex issues, enabling them to create meaningful and sustainable improvements by targeting underlying causes rather than just the symptoms.

Recent research reinforces the value of systems thinking in education, particularly in navigating complex challenges. Kunc (2024) found that educational leaders who adopted systems thinking were better equipped to manage crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, by leveraging feedback loops to adjust policies and practices based on evolving circumstances. Similarly, Aldridge and McLure (2023) highlighted how systems thinking facilitates strategic decision-making by helping leaders anticipate the long-term consequences of interventions, thus avoiding unintended negative outcomes. Moreover, systems thinking supports the continuous improvement process by fostering a culture of reflection and learning. Integrating systems thinking into school leadership not only promotes a more adaptive and resilient organizational culture but also empowers educators to collaboratively analyze patterns, identify bottlenecks, and co-create solutions. This approach aligns with Senge's (2006) view that systems thinking is not just about solving problems but also about enhancing the capacity for future growth and development. Additionally, adopting this discipline can help bridge gaps across different stakeholder groups by revealing shared interests and interdependencies, thereby promoting more cohesive and effective solutions (Davis et al., 2022). Incorporating systems thinking as a core practice enables educational leaders to implement changes that are not merely reactive but transformative, ensuring that the educational system is prepared to adapt to future challenges while continually advancing toward improved student outcomes.

## **Personal Mastery**

Personal mastery, as outlined in Senge's (1990) seminal work, involved individuals continuously clarifying and deepening their personal visions, concentrating their energies, and developing the patience and perseverance necessary for growth. For educators, this discipline underscores the significance of lifelong learning and personal growth. Educators who actively pursue personal mastery are better positioned to inspire and support their students' learning, creating a ripple effect of motivation and engagement within the classroom (Mohammad et al., 2025).

In the context of standards-referenced learning, personal mastery entails fostering a culture that prioritizes professional development and reflective practice. This commitment to continuous improvement allows educators to not only refine their teaching methodologies but also adapt to the evolving needs of their students. By promoting personal mastery, educational leaders can cultivate a workforce that is committed to exacting standards of teaching and learning and is passionate about their professional growth and the success of their students (Toikka & Tarnanen, 2024; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Marshall et al., 2022).

Moreover, the integration of personal mastery into educational leadership can lead to enhanced collaboration among staff, as individuals who are committed to their own development are more likely to share insights and best practices with their peers (Toikka & Tarnanen, 2024). This collaborative culture can further improve instructional quality and student outcomes, as educators work together to achieve common goals. By cultivating personal mastery within educational settings, leaders can build a resolute and

high-performing workforce that embraces innovation and resilience, enriching the learning experience of their students.

### **Mental Models**

Within the framework proposed by Senge (2006), mental models are internalized assumptions and generalizations that shape individuals' perceptions of reality and influence their understanding of the world. In educational contexts, mental models play a significant role in how teachers perceive their students, influence administrators' approaches to school management, and affect how policies are formulated and implemented. Senge argued that organizational transformation requires individuals to recognize and challenge their own mental models, as well as to be open to modifying them in response to new insights and responses.

Addressing mental models within educational leadership involves creating opportunities for open dialogue, reflection, and critical analysis, allowing educators to confront and reshape their assumptions. This process can lead to more innovative and effective decision-making that supports student achievement (Tarnanen et al., 2021). For example, rethinking traditional views on student learning (shifting from seeing students as passive learners to acknowledging them as engaged participants in their own education) can better align teaching practices with the principles of standards-based learning, fostering more personalized and student-centered instruction (Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022). Addressing mental models in educational leadership fosters a mindset shift that enables educators to make decisions that align with innovative, student-centered learning approaches.

To facilitate the reexamination of mental models, educational leaders can create safe spaces for discussion where staff members feel comfortable exploring different perspectives and challenging conventional wisdom. This can be achieved by encouraging reflective practice, using data-driven dialogue, and engaging in professional development activities focused on questioning assumptions and embracing change (Timperley, 2021). Such practices help educators identify and shift limiting beliefs that may hinder innovation, ultimately leading to more adaptive and responsive educational systems. Moreover, the process of examining and adjusting mental models is essential for overcoming resistance to change, which is often rooted in deep-seated beliefs about how things have always been done in education (Tarnanen et al., 2021). When educators actively engage in this reflective process, they are better able to adopt novel approaches that are better aligned with current educational goals, such as fostering skills in critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability among students (Konig et al., 2021). For example, shifting away from traditional grading practices toward standards-based assessment requires educators to change their beliefs about what constitutes meaningful evaluation and feedback, which can significantly enhance student learning outcomes (Brookhart, 2020). Creating opportunities for educators to examine and shift their mental models promotes openness to change, leading to more innovative practices that align with modern educational goals.

By fostering an environment where mental models can be explored and restructured, educational leaders not only facilitate individual growth but also contribute to the development of a more dynamic and innovative learning culture. This aligns with

Senge's (1990) vision of a learning organization, where continuous learning and adaptation are integral to the organization's success.

### **Shared Vision**

Senge's (2006) discipline of shared vision refers to a collective agreement on what an organization aspires to create, serving to inspire and align the efforts of all its members. The shared vision makes the organization's purpose more concrete and tangible by providing direction and motivation to all involved: administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community members. In the educational context, a shared vision represents the organization's unified commitment to agreed-upon goals and values, acting as a unifying force that guides decision-making and cultivates a sense of ownership among stakeholders (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). A shared vision unifies stakeholders around common goals and values, fostering alignment, motivation, and a collective sense of purpose within the educational community.

For transformational leaders, cultivating a shared vision is essential for both personal and organizational growth. These leaders prioritize aligning their vision with the aspirations of their team members, fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual support (Senge et al., 2012). This approach is especially critical in rapidly changing environments, where organizations must remain resilient and adaptable to new challenges and opportunities. Transformational leadership, by effectively communicating a compelling vision of the future, empowers all members to work toward common goals, thus contributing to the overall success of the organization (Eilers & Camacho, 2021; Hidayat & Patras, 2024; Sheninger & Murray, 2021). Transformational leaders drive

organizational success by fostering a shared vision that empowers team members to collaborate, adapt, and pursue common goals in dynamic environments.

Central to transformational leadership is the concept of vision, which acts as the cornerstone of this leadership style. Transformational leaders are skilled at creating and communicating a compelling vision of the future that resonates deeply with employees at all levels. By fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual support, these leaders ensure everyone is working toward common goals and contributing to the overall success of the organization. Developing a shared vision involves engaging all stakeholders in the visioning process, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their goals are represented in the final vision (DuFour & Fullan, 2020). This collaborative approach builds trust and commitment, making it more likely that the vision will be realized. For instance, a school that envisions itself as a center of excellence will see its staff, students, and community working together to achieve the goal through collaborative efforts, innovative thinking, shared programming, and resource allocation. Leaders who embed shared vision into the school's culture promote sustainable improvement by maintaining focus on long-term goals, even amid day-to-day challenges (Hallinger & Heck, 2021). In this way, the shared vision becomes not only a guiding principle but also a catalyst for ongoing reflection and growth, continually driving the organization towards excellence.

### **Team Learning**

Team learning, the fifth of Senge's five disciplines, involves the process of aligning and enhancing a team's collective capabilities to achieve outcomes that are genuinely valued by its members. In the educational context, this discipline emphasized

the significance of collaborative learning across different roles, including administrators, teachers, and students. Effective team learning dialogue facilitates a culture of communication, shared problem solving, and collective experiences that lead to a deeper understanding of issues and improved outcomes (Goode & MacGillivray, 2023; Senge, 2006). For educational leaders, promoting team learning requires cultivating an environment that fosters trust, open communication, and collaboration.

Implementing structures such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), interdisciplinary teams, and collaborative planning sessions can support the practice of team learning in schools. These frameworks provide formal opportunities for educators to engage in continuous improvement, share best practices, and collectively address the learning needs of their students (Hord & Tobia, 2021). PLCs have been shown to facilitate a cycle of inquiry, where educators regularly assess student learning data, reflect on instructional practices, and plan targeted interventions (DuFour & Fullan, 2020). This approach aligns with Senge's (2006) concept of team learning by enabling teachers to learn with and from one another while working toward shared educational goals.

Educational leaders play a crucial role in facilitating team learning by encouraging a culture that values continuous learning and collaboration. Practices such as providing time for joint planning, using data to guide discussions, and promoting reflective practices can strengthen team learning initiatives. This culture of collaboration not only enhances the professional development of educators but also positively influences student learning by ensuring consistent, coordinated efforts toward common goals (Marshall et al., 2022; Timperley, 2021). By fostering a culture of continuous

learning and collaboration, educational leaders enhance both educator growth and student outcomes through aligned, collective efforts.

### **Creating a Learning Environment for Standards-Referenced Learning**

Implementing Senge's (2006) five disciplines in educational leadership requires a shift in mindset and practice. Leaders must prioritize creating an environment where these principles can thrive, ensuring that systemic thinking and continuous learning are embedded in the school's culture. Transforming a school necessitates a focus on developing a clear and compelling vision for the change, investing in on-going professional development opportunities for teachers and staff, fostering a collaborative culture that houses safe spaces for innovative dialogue and experimentation, and supporting and encouraging a systemic perspective (Aldridge & McLure, 2023). Adopting Senge's (1990) five disciplines in educational leadership involves promoting a supportive, visionary, and collaborative culture that embraces systemic thinking and continuous growth.

Leaders often do not have the competence to lead. Historically, systemic change is not enacted at the levels that are necessary, regardless of the effectiveness of the practices (Maduforo et al., 2024). Knowledge, as opposed to information, relies on the leader's experiences, belief systems, and personal goals; simply focusing on the information at hand does not dig deeply enough to access the skills necessary for comprehensive change (Senge, 2000). In the case of standards reform, leaders must do more than simply identify the need for change; their actions must create a plan that addresses the instructional shifts necessary to incorporate standards-based learning into

classroom instruction, including changes in instructional materials, pedagogies, and belief systems (Townsend, 2020). Effective leadership for systemic change requires deep knowledge rooted in experience and beliefs, to drive meaningful instructional transformation rather than simply focusing on surface-level information.

In any type of systemic change, motivation is not easily attained. According to Bandura (1977), individuals are more likely to engage in and sustain behavioral change when they believe in their capability to perform the necessary tasks, an idea central to the concept of self-efficacy. Teachers often do not understand their role in the change process, and without a sense of efficacy, they may be hesitant to participate meaningfully. To become a true community of learners, participants must see both the relevance of the change and their ability to contribute to it (Hart, 2021). Motivation, which is shaped by past experiences, social modeling, and verbal persuasion, is intrinsic to all phases of the process. It is the leader's responsibility to create a shared sense of efficacy and purpose, one that continues to grow and adapt with the learning. All key stakeholders, from the principals to the classroom teachers, must see all aspects of the change and the relevance and application to student success (Wood, 2023). Dufour and Fullan (2020) argued that implementing the standards is not the outcome; the change in student performance is the outcome. Keeping that end in mind keeps the process grounded.

Also, implementation involves changing behaviors, identifying practices and resources, and seeing the relationships between the elements of change to create that systemic view (Senge, 2006). Implementation is not a fast process and can happen only by building individuals' capacities within the frame of the initiative (Escobar Arcay,

2009; Senge, 2006). In contrast to transformational leadership, transactional leadership is defined by its focus on exchanges or transactions between leaders and followers (Wood, 2023). The completion of short-term and specific goals takes precedent, and leaders value preserving what is comfortable and familiar.

Learning organizations, however, must be forward thinking. This means that organizations engage in continuous learning and growth, focusing on teamwork and shared learning (Anamai et al., 2024; Good, 2014; Senge, 2006). Research continues to support that the behavior of leaders has a critical influence on long-lasting change (Hansen et al., 2020). Teachers rarely lead the process of change (King et al., 2022), either because they are not asked or because they consider themselves to be incapable. Building capacity in teachers incorporates both individual and collective knowledge and resources. Grissom et al. (2021) purported that having knowledge and a plan are insufficient for administrators to enact change. Teachers must be prepared not only to follow explicit directions but also to continue to grow and change within the learning. Grissom et al. noted that leaders must build capacity in teachers and staff and have a deep personal understanding of the learning taking place in classrooms. A misunderstanding of what it means for teachers to be leaders creates an inability to agree on what each stakeholder should know and do in the process (Hart, 2021). It is establishing this balance that will create robust and enduring change.

Finally, the institutionalization phase happens when stakeholders have come to a collective understanding of expectations, practices, resources, and outcomes. A systemic change in instruction requires more than just a change in pedagogy; In many cases it

requires a change in the culture – of leadership, of expectations, of collaboration and communication, and of learning (Gill et al., 2022; Pedersen & Hammond, 2021; Senge, 2006). As individuals learn from, and grow with, each other, they create the opportunity for long-term growth. This growth must start with the knowledge and capacity of the leader. Educational leaders – principals and assistant principals – must be knowledgeable about curriculum, the current culture of the building, instructional methodologies, and assessment (Kenny & Cirkony, 2022). By beginning with the system in mind, the leader can keep the process grounded in the outcomes where the student is at the center.

Multiple studies exploring systemic change in education focused on two core elements: seeing the relationships and interdependencies between the elements of the system and interpreting the signs that will lead to the future (leading with the end in mind) (Senge, 2006). The first step in the change process must be identifying the barriers and challenges that administrators perceive to be limiting their ability to initiate change. The concepts of systemic leadership frame the elements of this study and provide structure within which to address the questions guiding this research.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables**

Implementation of a standards-based curriculum has become the norm for K-12 school districts in the United States. Written in 2009 and released in 2010, the CCSS refers to the group of content-specific expectations for learning. Intended to create instructional consistency and rigor in the core content areas of mathematics, English language arts, and literacy (and, more recently, science, social studies, career and technical education, and other core subjects) for all students in grades K-12 (Greer,

2018), the CCSS have become the benchmark for instructional decision-making in the United States (Townsend, 2020). Standards-based learning in the classroom creates consistent expectations and builds a criterion by which all students can be measured. The standards were intended to be flexible and adaptable.

What made the CCSS different than earlier attempts at standards reform was that there were commonalities across the content areas in the cognitive demand required of students at each grade level (Porter et al., 2011). Instead of being written as detailed, content-specific curricula, the standards are skills-based and provide a framework of expectations for each grade level and content area (Cosner et al., 2020). In mathematics and science, for example, the standards contain expectations for both content and practice, building skills in students that incorporate both inquiry and reasoning (Cohen et al., 2022). In English language arts and literacy, the standards in both reading and writing align across all grades and content areas from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, addressing the same basic skills but growing in complexity from one grade to the next (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2024). In addition, the standards were written to align with college and career readiness goals and with rigorous international expectations that provide students with the skills they need for postsecondary learning and work experiences.

Standards-based reform has been at the forefront of education policy and reform throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the motivation behind standards reform was framed in the need for equitable opportunities for students of color and encouraged a stronger role in education for the federal government.

President Johnson's 'War on Poverty' saw the advent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the birth of the Title programs. The National Assessment for Educational Progress or NAEP test was introduced to measure the growth of students and the effectiveness of instruction. While there have been changes in the structure of the NAEP testing procedure since it was first used in 1969, it has continued to be an effective measure of student proficiency and data-based decision-making (Greer, 2018). Many colleges and universities are now placing greater emphasis on high school grades and grade point averages over college entrance exams in their admissions processes (Guskey et al., 2020). Furthermore, additional evidence suggests that standards-based learning practices can offer students significant benefits for transitioning to postsecondary education.

The role of administrators in the effective implementation of policy change that prepares students to become global citizens has long been discussed. This was also true for the implementation of the CCSS. Industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries created a need for a consistent and robust curriculum and teachers who were prepared to meet the challenge of teaching (Paterson, 2021). While the CCSS were initially conceived to support global demands for a workforce prepared for the rigors and changing demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Greer, 2018), little federal guidance was incorporated for how to make that happen, leaving individual states responsible for the implementation of the standards within their K-12 schools (Buzick et al., 2019).

Implementation with fidelity proved challenging. Dunst et al. (2018) considered five key elements necessary to implement with fidelity, including clearly defining the

parameters of fidelity, measurement, and evaluation. In addition, Dunst et al. argued that fidelity is not just about compliance but also about capacity building, and that ongoing support and professional learning are critical to help teachers implement with integrity. Teaching requirements and licensing had grown increasingly more complex, and despite prior research into the need for professional learning opportunities for teachers that aligned with the standards, few pedagogical supports or practices were included in the roll-out of the Common Core. As a result, administrators were unprepared to support their teachers in the implementation of the standards within the curriculum (Cohen et al., 2022; Paterson, 2021; Vogel, 2019). A robust review of past and current literature surrounding the role of administrators in standards implementation has identified four critical themes including a historical perspective of education policy in the evolution of the CCSS and the role of administration, standards-based instruction as it is defined within the context of leadership, perspectives of stakeholders of the constraints and barriers to implementation of the standards in instructional environments, and the influence of leadership on implementation.

### **The Evolution of the Common Core State Standards**

The CCSS were developed in a joint effort by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (Greer, 2018; Pak et al., 2020; Porter et al., 2011). Since their release in 2010, 41 states, the District of Columbia, the United States Department of Defense Education Activity, and four territories – Guam, The U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and The Mariana Islands – have adopted the CCSS (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2024). Prior

to the CCSS, states were responsible for developing their own curriculum and set of standards, leaving inconsistencies and disparities between and among the states.

Adoption of the CCSS was intended to build a national framework that would ensure students were ready to meet the rigors of a global economy (Cosner et al., 2020). In other words, having consistent standards for instruction and learning in all grades K-12 would provide the critical thinking skills students need to be competitive in the global marketplace.

### ***Historical Perspective***

The idea behind creating a set of common learning expectations was not new. Much of the dialogue surrounding the need for a consistent, rigorous, and skills-based curriculum focused on 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands and learning; to understand the rationale behind the writing of the standards, it is necessary to examine education policy development from a historical perspective (Greer, 2018; Young, 2018). Education in pre-colonial and colonial times in America saw a shift from family-based to community-based educational opportunities, and education was seen to build knowledge and good citizenship (Young, 2018). As early as 1892, the National Education Association argued for a consistent curriculum for all U.S. high schools that led to consistencies in other areas of education reform but not instructional integrity.

Modern attempts at standardization have been centered around improving student proficiency and better preparing all students for life after high school. Policy initiatives including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top, and President Clinton's Goals 2000 changed the face of education but were not successful in creating a standards-based

curriculum (Greer, 2018). President Obama's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) added the stipulation that at a minimum, accountability data for schools needed to include a non-academic measure, including school climate, behavior, attendance, safety, etc. (Belton & Brinkmann, 2024).

Who was responsible for ensuring that change was sharply debated, and there was much disagreement over the role of the federal government in the education process (Lee & Wu, 2017). Historically, there was very little direction for educational leaders regarding how to implement the changes required by the policies (Pak & Desimone, 2018). In addition, a lack of funding, a focus on rote learning, the absence of educator stakeholders in the process of development, limited teacher commitment for the reform, and disagreement over the structure of the standards and what should be included limited the success of each attempt at standards reform (Deas, 2018; Greer, 2018; Nichols et al., 2021).

Standards initiatives were costly, and effective implementation was limited in states and districts that struggled financially (Deas, 2018). While prior to standards reform, big textbook companies were the primary impetus of curricula in schools, and standards brought an influx of external programs and resources because of their apparent reduced cost (Nichols et al., 2021). In addition, a lack of clarity around the funding structure of standards-based reform plagued attempts to create consistency in expectations for student learning (Abadie & Bista, 2018; Greer, 2018). Mismanagement of funds, unfunded mandates, and an absence of direction for how to spend the funds that were allocated led to increased inequities in the very programs that were intended to

balance the resources. In addition, no accountability measures were established for large private expenditures, creating a system of the-rich-get-richer that did not address the key issues of public education or build consistency in the learning environment for all students (Vegel, 2019). The burden of implementation fell on the leadership of the states and, more specifically, individual districts.

One of the most important purposes for standards-based learning was to build higher order thinking skills in students (Porter et al., 2011). Early attempts at standardization neglected to incorporate this critical element. Both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and NAEP in the 1960s failed to address the diverse backgrounds of students. The act of creating higher expectations for students was not enough to ensure that teachers or students were prepared to meet those expectations. For example, children entering kindergarten came from varied backgrounds and experiences, family dynamics, and socio-economic statuses, all of which influenced an individual child's ability to learn, but adherence to the standards did not provide the differentiation needed to close the gap in learning for those students (Loveless, 2021). Further attempts to define higher expectations also proved ineffective. NCLB's focus on proficiency levels for students also encouraged districts to write their own sets of standards that their students could meet and to align curriculum to the test. Even the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 did not provide clarity in how to change, only that the situation was dire. President Obama's Race to the Top initiative further exacerbated the problem by tying federal funding to district performance and the implementation of some form of standards. With teacher pay contingent on student performance, teachers were concerned

about rote learning and teaching to the instrument of measure, not on the actual learning of the students (Quinn & Klein, 2019).

Students were spending a significant amount of time in each class doing work that did not support grade-level learning or critical thinking. Furthermore, teachers who said they supported college-and career readiness goals did not incorporate the advanced learning required to ensure students were prepared for the challenges of postsecondary employment and education (Guskey et al., 2020; The New Teacher Project, 2018). In contrast, the CCSS were better aligned to the NAEP assessment (which has evolved since its inception to better reflect student learning objectives) and required higher-order thinking skills and increasingly more difficult cognitive demand (Bleiberg, 2021; Cohen et al., 2022; Greer, 2018; Porter et al., 2011). While previous initiatives emphasized rote learning and performance-based measures, the CCSS offered a shift toward higher-order thinking skills and more meaningful assessments aligned with student learning objectives.

Critical to the implementation of dynamic change in education was the need for buy-in from all impacted stakeholders. Education reform in general, and standards reform specifically, required a shift in instructional pedagogy to one focused on student learning (Burt & Boesdorfer, 2021). Teacher understanding and beliefs were critical to the implementation of standards-based learning (Fullan, 2007), and building-level leaders (principals and assistant principals) needed to be the driving force behind student growth and success. Without an explicit understanding of the changes in the reform and a strong

belief in the power of the change, it was not possible for building and district leadership to generate the required commitment among teachers and involved parties.

An area of the standards movement that has received limited attention in research is its influence on the development of educational systems. It has facilitated a transition toward instructionally focused education systems that emphasize the guidance and support of educational practices by establishing instructional objectives and delineating the responsibilities of various stakeholders in organizing and coordinating instruction (Cohen et al., 2018; Peurach et al., 2019). Before the CCSS, there was little direction provided that supported the needs of and demands placed on administrators. Earlier attempts at standards reform lacked a structure that created alignment between and among the content areas. This situation left administrators responsible for interpreting and executing multiple uncoordinated initiatives which contributed to inconsistencies in teaching and learning outcomes.

While the authors intended instructional rigor and to provide teachers with the skills to implement, the standards themselves were not explicit enough to define the core content (Greer, 2018), and there was a lack of clarity around the standards as curriculum. While the focus of the research that followed the CCSS disagreed over the emphasis of the cognitive demand required in the standards, both Porter et al. (2011) and Cobb and Jackson (2011) agreed that compared to previous state-written standards, the CCSS standards were more consistent and did a better job of addressing critical student learning. Specifically, the CCSS, especially in mathematics, did a better job of focusing instruction on what students need to know (Cobb & Jackson, 2011). Gathering input from

stakeholders (including businesses, parents, and educators, among others) that ensured the standards were aligned with college and career readiness goals proved challenging, and administrators were often left with the responsibility to find or create curricular materials.

Beginning before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, education reform and policy change focused on creating consistent and rigorous expectations for learning in K-12 classrooms (Paterson, 2021). However, these initiatives lacked the funding and structure necessary, and administrators were not provided with the training and skills to either understand the purpose behind the standards or how to convey that purpose to their teachers (Cohen et al., 2022). As a result, earlier initiatives were missing the consistency and focus necessary for their success (Loveless, 2021). The CCSS were introduced as a cumulative result of prior attempts at standardization, and while they are superior to prior attempts, administrators continue to lack the guidance and pedagogy necessary to effectively implement standards-based instructional change.

### **Effectiveness of the Common Core State Standards**

Historically, the CCSS were intended to shift from the disparate instructional priorities found in the state-level standards to a more congruous set of expectations at the national level (Porter et al., 2011). The initial intent of the CCSS was to create a consistent and rigorous framework for K-12 curriculum. The standards themselves were not intended as a curriculum; rather, they established a benchmark by which all students can be measured (Bleiberg, 2021; Porter et al., 2011). Providing a more explicit and structured framework within which to implement curriculum would create consistency in

learning between and among students regardless of where they lived or the socio-economic group to which they belonged. Prior to implementation of the CCSS, initiatives like NCLB and Race to the Top failed because they created unrealistic expectations for students and districts and not only did not close the gap but also brought attention to the greater disproportion of opportunities between students of different ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Greer, 2018).

To close that gap, Young (2018) posited that providing a more explicit and structured framework within which to implement curriculum would build consensus between and among students regardless of where they lived or the socioeconomic group to which they belonged. In addition, leadership at the federal level believed that only through standards-based education would the United States be prepared to compete on a global level (Cohen et al., 2022; Deas, 2018). In other words, creating a standards-based curriculum was the key to equitable educational opportunities for all students in the United States. Advocates argued that such a system would ensure all students had access to a rigorous, high-quality education that was no longer determined by zip code or local funding disparities. This shift was also intended to provide educators with clear expectations and a shared language for instruction, thereby promoting greater consistency in teaching practices and learning outcomes nationwide.

Initially, states were willing and motivated to incorporate the CCSS (Watson & Williams, 2018). Most states either adopted the CCSS as they were originally written or rewrote the standards both to be more rigorous and to meet specific state expectations (Bleiberg, 2021). Even the state versions of the standards, however, followed the same

structure of the initial CCSS and provided a consistency in the core subject areas like mathematics, literacy, science, and social studies for schools across the United States. District-led initiatives focused on standards-based curriculum and the creation of rigorous and standards-based assessments. The questions most prevalent in conversations surrounding the CCSS include how districts can ensure that learning in all building levels has been implemented with fidelity (Guskey et al., 2020) and whether the standards have had a positive influence on student achievement. The answer to this question and the why behind the answer drives the focus of this study.

### ***How the Common Core State Standards Are Working***

Districts quickly grew frustrated with the expectations that surrounded implementation, including confusion about the purpose of the standards and how to incorporate the standards into the learning of the classroom (Polikoff, 2020). Additionally, teachers were faced with the task of separating academics from secondary elements such as behavior and attendance (Ketsman & Reeves, 2023). The greatest concern, however, was in how to measure the effectiveness of the standards on student achievement. Since the 1960s, NAEP has been the yardstick by which student achievement was measured. The CCSS, however, did not directly align with NAEP (Bleiberg, 2021; Polikoff, 2017), and a numeric representation of success was difficult and did not adequately reflect the influence of the standards on the educational process. Instead, it is necessary to look at how K-12 education has changed since putting the CCSS into practice. There are multiple ways the CCSS have positively influenced student outcomes including changes in student expectations, curricular changes, and instructional

changes at the classroom level (Bleiberg, 2021). While not measurable by traditional means, each of these has had the potential to positively change student learning.

The CCSS differed from earlier standards initiatives in that they not only incorporated content expectations but also performance standards and expectations. Grading based on the standards allowed students to identify their gaps in learning and provided a clear path forward to close those gaps (Ketsman & Reeves, 2023; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). In mathematics, for example, state standards offered students the opportunity to focus on more explicit core concepts rather than general content knowledge. In addition, students were encouraged to make connections within and between concepts and content areas and to apply the learning in real-world settings through differentiated learning opportunities (Abadie & Bista, 2018; Williams, 2023). In literacy, the changes in complexity between the grades were reflected across the content areas (including science and social studies) and promoted both qualitative and quantitative measures of growth. For example, students were explicitly encouraged to support work with text-based citations that expand the depth of knowledge for learning. Classroom observations have documented changes in instructional quality that focused more on student-driven discussion and, as in Abadie and Bista's (2018) study, the ability of students to make connections (Cohen et al., 2022). In addition, implementation of the CCSS has increased the availability of standards-aligned curriculum and instructional materials for all grade levels that purport to be high-quality (Lee & Wu, 2017); this has worked to create consistency in the content available across the states.

One of the key purposes for the adoption of the CCSS was to prepare students to compete in a global economy (Edgerton, 2020). The CCSS initiative encouraged states to create better alignment between state standards and college and career readiness goals (Mathers, 2019). Furthermore, the standards have spotlighted the need for employer-based skills and partnerships that better meet the needs of students who may not be bound for four-year colleges. This has included the incorporation of work-based learning, technical skills, and a wider range of career pathways (Iowa Work-Based Learning, 2022). This targeted approach has provided opportunities to eliminate out-of-date and inappropriate career pathways in favor of more competitive and applicable career options.

### ***How the Common Core Standards Are Not Working***

Proponents of the CCSS have voiced the importance of incorporating critical thinking skills, changes in instructional quality, and an increase in student access to relevant postsecondary learning opportunities. In addition, there was agreement that the Common Core was a significant improvement over the earlier state-driven attempts at standards (Bleiberg, 2021; Deas, 2018; Lee & Wu, 2017). However, significant research disputed the current level of effectiveness of the CCSS. Historically, education reforms were more successful if they were flexible and changed to accommodate the challenges teachers faced in the implementation process (Rosenberg et al., 2021). With the CCSS, there was a lack of clarity behind the purpose for the standards (Beckham, 2020; Cohen et al., 2022; Deas, 2018; Edgerton, 2020), implementation was not supported in the rollout, student motivation was influenced because at least initially, students did not see the importance of their effort as it applied within the new grading system, and curricular

materials that explicitly showed educators how to incorporate standards into their content were not available (Bleiberg, 2021; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Polikoff, 2017). The obstacle that pervaded all problems in implementation was that leadership was not prepared to effectively implement standards-based reform or to understand what was necessary to either support classroom-level instruction or to close the gaps.

Multiple stakeholders participated in the process that led to the adoption of the CCSS in 2010. However, educators were notably missing from the decision-making table (Nichols et al., 2021; Vogel, 2019). For the implementation to be effective, it was essential that districts believed the initiative had relevance and purpose. This required a clear understanding of the standards at each grade level and alignment across content areas and grade bands to support instructional planning and transitional thinking between and among grades (Novy, 2020). Despite these needs, involved entities were unable to agree on key policy issues, and it quickly became apparent that several obstacles to successful implementation existed (Jacobson et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2020). Specific areas within the CCSS needed to be clarified, including what it meant to raise academic expectations for students, define the responsibilities of teachers and students, challenge prior beliefs, and build capacity to support the necessary instructional shifts (Bleiberg, 2021; Cohen et al., 2022; Townsley et al., 2019).

This lack of clarity led to hesitation and frustration among educators. Many perceived an increase in workload and stress, and following the financial and emotional toll of NCLB, the CCSS felt like just another top-down mandate with limited classroom relevance (Vogel, 2019; Williams, 2023). Parents and community stakeholders also

expressed concerns, often feeling uninformed or unprepared to support their children in a standards-based learning environment (Channell et al., 2021). Without transparency in the purpose behind the standards and how their implementation affected all involved parties, misunderstandings and resistance occurred early in the process. Although a renewed push for standards-based learning and grading holds continued relevance in today's K-12 classrooms, failure to address these same issues – lack of clarity, stakeholder involvement, and insufficient communication – will likely result in challenges similar to those experienced in 2011 and the years that followed (Townsend, 2019). Ultimately, the initial resistance and limited adoption underscored the importance of clear messaging, stakeholder buy-in, and sustained support for long-term success.

A second major issue that affected the initial adoption and rollout of the CCSS was a lack of support for the implementation of the standards in K-12 districts (Bleiberg, 2021). Implementation continues to be the catalyst driving the need for change. The passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 demonstrated a meaningful change in direction for education, encouraging standards reform at the national level. With a mandate for 100 percent proficiency for students in reading and mathematics but little direction from either the state or federal governments as to how to make that happen, districts chose to set their own Annual Yearly Progress goals (AYP) and to build their own sets of standards to avoid being penalized for low performance (Greer, 2018; Lee & Wu, 2017; Vegel, 2019). Implementation was inconsistent and ineffective, which was not the intent behind the legislation. The writing of CCSS overshadowed what the standards were intended to do. According to Cosner et al. (2020), implementing the CCSS

necessitated a focus on the required learning to achieve results, and those learning initiatives needed to start with school leadership.

The CCSS required several major changes in instructional pedagogy, including (but not limited to) methods of instruction and instructional materials. Even more critical was the role of the administrator. To support teachers in these changes and to address the resistance that was encountered, administrators needed a clear understanding of, and a tough stance toward, the CCSS (Carswell, 2021; Townsley et al., 2019); however, the implementation process of the CCSS did not incorporate these necessary supports (Polikoff, 2020). One of the key reasons that implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards, for example, was successful was because the gap between release and adoption was multiple years and allowed for an iterative and flexible rollout (Rosenberg et al., 2021). While effective implementation of the CCSS was the key to the success of change initiatives, few pedagogical resources were provided, professional development opportunities were vague and difficult to access, and curricular materials were few. What materials were available were expensive and often not aligned to the changes in the CCSS.

In addition, a lack of available funding meant that districts who already struggled could not afford the curricular changes necessary to appropriately adopt the CCSS. Teachers who were tasked with writing or finding resources to supplement existing curricula found the responsibility overwhelming, and for newer teachers, there was a disconnect between what they were being asked to do and what they had been taught in their teacher prep programs (Abadie & Bista, 2018; Bondie, 2023). Focus was often on

student expectations instead of on effective instructional strategies, and teachers grew disheartened over the lack of support (Polikoff, 2017, 2020). A lack of guidance from both the federal- and state-level leadership, and an absence of support for district-level leadership that demonstrated how to support teachers, reinforced the existing premise that the CCSS were not worth the time it would take to implement them successfully.

### **Perceptions of Standards Implementation**

The influence of standards-based reform continues to shape instructional practices, accountability systems, and school leadership across the United States. In response to these reforms, multiple stakeholder groups (teachers, administrators, policy makers) have expressed diverse views regarding the clarity, effectiveness, and feasibility of implementing academic standards (Pak et al., 2020; Polikoff, 2021). Although considerable research has explored the challenges general and special education teachers face in aligning instruction with rigorous standards (Berry, 2021; Hill et al., 2020), comparatively little attention has been given to the role and experiences of building-level administrators. Yet principals and assistant principals are central to driving instructional improvement and leading change initiatives at the school level (Coaxum et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021). Understanding how other stakeholders interpret the challenges of standards implementation provides a critical entry point for identifying leadership strategies, support structures, and contextual factors that influence the successful implementation of standards-based learning in schools.

### *Perspectives of General Education and Special Education Teachers*

Making changes to instructional practices directly involves the general education teachers in K-12 core classrooms. Prior research has identified numerous challenges with implementing systemic initiatives such as the Common Core academic standards, including insufficient professional learning, limited resources, inadequate preparation and understanding, and the burden placed on educators to navigate and interpret the standards independently (Buzick et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2022; Farley et al., 2022; Senge, 2006). Multiple studies have examined the perspectives of the general education teacher regarding both the implementation process and the success (or failure) of the standards themselves. Responses can be categorized in three overarching buckets: teachers' opinions of the standards, the challenges classroom teachers faced in the implementation of the standards, and the influence of the standards (success or failure) on student achievement.

**Teachers' Perspectives of Standards.** Teacher perspectives of standards were mixed; however, several key patterns emerged in the literature. First, teachers agreed that the standards themselves did not raise student achievement (Abadie & Bista, 2018; Bleiberg, 2021). There was little understanding of how the standards are applicable to and with special education instruction (Farley et al., 2022). And, while the standards create a framework for curriculum, they are not, in and of themselves, a curriculum. This exposed additional challenges in communicating effectively with parents. Also, the flexibility teachers and districts are allowed in the implementation of the standards

creates inconsistencies in both familiarity with the learning in the standards and in how they should be taught. (Allensworth et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2022).

Additionally, prior knowledge and experiences significantly influenced the ability of teachers to understand and implement standards-referenced instruction, leading to a consensus in the literature that a conceptual understanding of the standards may be limited or enhanced by an individual's formal teacher training and pedagogy (Bowen, 2021; Smith & Robinson, 2020; Watson et al., 2020). Furthermore, teachers perceived that they had greater reward and/or restriction than administrators at all levels and had measurably less autonomy in the implementation of the standards in their classrooms (Edgerton & Desimone, 2019). These findings were like studies that examined other systemic change initiatives, including policy-directed professional development, evaluation reforms, and professional practice in multiple content areas (King et al., 2022; Smith & Robinson, 2020). The consensus in the literature regarding implementation of the standards was that there was no consensus in teachers' familiarity with the standards and their requirements, or in the implementation of required instructional changes.

**Challenges Faced by Classroom Teachers.** Teachers in multiple states and across a range of grades perceived similar challenges. Some of the greatest frustrations had to do with constantly changing instructional expectations from school leaders and a lack of consistency and specificity (Abadie & Bista, 2018; Edgerton & Desimone, 2019). Building-level administration plays a key role in effective implementation and in meeting the direct needs of classroom teachers in education reform (Burkett & Hayes, 2023; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). A widespread challenge was a lack of resources and

materials for implementation, including those that supported understanding for teachers and for students, curricular resources, and continued professional learning opportunities (Bleiberg, 2021; Lee & Wu, 2017; Smith & Robinson, 2020). Teachers did not feel they were given adequate time to become familiar with the standards or given the tools needed to apply them to the learning within the classroom; in addition, the perception was that the state-level education agencies and the district-level leadership also did not know the standards before mandated compliance, leading to confusion (Bleiberg, 2021; Hall et al., 2015) and anxiety over lack of teacher efficacy, the influence of evaluations, and a general lack of control (Abadie & Bista, 2018).

Another area of concern was that students lacked background knowledge and prior learning to perform at the level of the standards, and teachers did not feel adequately prepared to fill those gaps in learning (Knight & Cooper, 2019). In most instances, the challenges perceived were with the implementation process and a lack of direction, not with the standards or the changes in instructional practice (Burkett & Hayes, 2023). The challenges teachers faced were largely related to inconsistent and unclear expectations, insufficient resources, and a lack of support in understanding and applying new standards, highlighting the need for more effective leadership, professional development, and clearer communication during the implementation process.

Considering these persistent challenges, Sergiovanni's (2004) framework on moral leadership offered a useful lens through which to understand and support teachers during periods of reform. Sergiovanni argued that effective school leadership is rooted in shared values, relational trust, and a sense of moral responsibility to the school

community. In an environment where teachers are navigating unclear expectations, uneven support, and perceived loss of autonomy, building-level administrators must function as not only instructional leaders but also as moral stewards who provide clarity, listen empathetically, and create conditions in which teachers feel respected and supported. Aligning leadership with the moral and relational needs of the school community can help mitigate the stress of reform, foster professional collaboration, and promote deeper engagement with standards-based instruction. By focusing on trust, shared vision, and teacher empowerment, leaders can help bridge the gap between policy and practice, enabling more consistent and meaningful implementation of the standards.

**Teachers' Perspectives of Standards and Student Achievement.** The perception of the success or failure of the standards on student achievement was also mixed. Guskey et al. (2020) posited that teachers attribute only 15% of student achievement to their own instruction, and most of the student success or failure on other student-based elements including behavior, family dynamics, etc. Data from during and immediately after the pandemic revealed that although the intent continued to be on grade-level learning for all students, no additional information on reteaching and filling the gaps in learning was forthcoming (Reeves, 2021). While most studies had teachers self-reporting on student data, many comments focused on the challenges faced in implementation, inconsistent support from administration, and lack of adequate resources as opposed to actual data on student growth and performance (Edgerton & Desimone, 2019; Smith & Robinson, 2020).

Lee and Wu (2017) measured student growth over multiple years and found that while data slid in the initial years of implementation (from 2003 – 2009), there was moderate growth between 2009 and 2013, with steady growth in 2015. Bowen's (2021) study had teachers comparing student performance to their own K-12 experiences in mathematics and found that most teachers were overwhelmed by the changes in mathematics curriculum and the increase in inquiry-based learning; others felt that students were stronger in higher order thinking skills. The concrete nature of mathematical concepts was seen as well-suited for more hands-on learning, allowing manipulatives to be used to represent the problems. This met the needs of more students, especially those who struggled with abstract concepts. Comparable results were found in literacy. Multiple studies found that the standards in literacy improved students' ability to communicate with peers and to think critically, both key 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Stengel et al., 2019). Grissmer et al. (2024) discovered that foundational skill building often overshadowed knowledge building when instruction was less focused on the standards. Overall, teachers were more concerned about their own challenges than they were with student outcomes.

**Special Education Teacher Perspectives of the Standards.** The perspectives of teachers of academically vulnerable students were more defined. Since the adoption of the CCSS in many states, there have been significant revisions (Allensworth et al., 2021; Stengel et al., 2019). For teachers of students who are academically challenged, the standards represent benchmarks that they feel their students cannot reach. Disregarding the widespread perception that the standards were poorly introduced, and implementation

was inconsistent at best, the goal of the common core standards was to raise expectations. While the literature is finding small correlations between the standards and student performance, without support, academically challenged students will fail to meet expectations, creating an even wider achievement gap (Allensworth et al., 2021; Bleiberg, 2021; Polikoff, 2020). Also, teachers in one study indicated that they felt the literacy standards, especially those in writing, were not appropriate for students performing below grade level and English language learners (Hall et al., 2015). However, this was more about their ability (or inability) to teach to the higher expectations and to scaffold the learning to meet the needs of discrepant students. The current literature focused more on teacher perspectives of their own abilities than on the actual influence of the standards on student performance.

### **The Importance of Administrators in School-Based Initiatives**

Leadership has long been considered as one of the driving factors in creating school-wide change, and significant time, attention, and research has been spent to define qualities of leadership in district-level administrators (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen, 2021); however, increasing time commitments for administrators are pulling principals away from a focus on student learning and growth (Lavigne et al., 2023; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019). Peter Senge's 1990 theory of systemic leadership identified specific skill sets that are necessary to lead school-based change, including the ability to motivate teachers and bring about a change in beliefs and culture. Many times, however, building-level leaders demonstrate more of a management role instead of one of instructional leader and find themselves distanced from critical

instructional shifts (O’Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Somoza-Norton & Neuman, 2021). Current research suggests that there are two reasons for this disconnect: principals are unprepared to meet the instructional needs of their teachers, and they fail to consider the human side of the initiative and the need to support the growth of both teachers and students (Neumerski & Cohen, 2019; Reeves, 2021). This study emphasizes the importance of providing clear training, sufficient support, and prioritizing learning, while also highlighting the need to cultivate capacity and promote collaboration between school leaders and teachers.

When enacting systemic change, teachers look to building-level administrators (principals and assistant principals) for guidance and support. If expectations are not clear, teachers are less likely to feel supported and are more likely to be confused and disengaged (Hall et al., 2015; Husain et al., 2021). Building leadership is critically important in motivating student growth and influencing school success (Dickens et al., 2021), and research has shown that when principals have training and support in authentic and real-world experiences, they are better equipped to handle the challenges of leading their staff (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). In addition, teachers who perceived that their administrators were better leaders had a stronger and more positive culture and higher job satisfaction. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

However, teachers have traditionally relied only on each other for those supports, often teaching in isolation (Thessin, 2021). Making the shift from being a manager to being an instructional leader is challenging for school teams and their leaders (Reeves, 2021), and it is that context-responsive leadership that provides the momentum to go

from knowing what needs to be changed to how to enact that change (Fancera, 2022). Lasting change must be viewed systemically, and teachers are the key to any systemic change (Dickens et al., 2021; Senge, 2006; Watson et al., 2020). Understanding the challenges to be addressed must be built on what is already known (Guskey et al., 2020), and principals and other building-level administrators must foster a deep understanding of the initiatives to be addressed to create a culture of trust and collaboration between and among the teachers and staff (Torres, 2022). Without this culture, administrators will be faced with declining morale and sense of value in their instructional staff (Lang & Townsley, 2021). To implement standards-referenced learning, principals must have a robust understanding of the challenges they will need to address wholly and effectively with the standards, the instructional shifts, supports for teachers, and changes that will be needed within grade-level learning.

While current research details the importance of the role of the building principal in systemic change, and there is a strong understanding of the challenges in implementation perceived by teachers, there is limited literature on the experiences of challenges faced by principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12. This study seeks to fill that gap in the literature. This basic qualitative design will offer the opportunity to gather perspectives and allow for personal reflections about the topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To answer the research questions in this qualitative study, data will be collected through face-to-face, semistructured interviews with grades 6-12 principals.

## Summary and Conclusions

A thorough and robust review of the literature on this subject yielded three major themes: the need for an understanding of the history of standards-referenced learning in the 6-12 instructional setting and the evolution of the common core standards; an understanding of the effectiveness of the standards including teacher perspectives of the implementation process of standards-based instruction; and the role of building-level leaders in systemic change in learning organizations. Each of these themes forms a piece of the foundation upon which this study is built. While there is a wealth of historical knowledge about standards initiatives in education, recent studies have focused on the evolution of the standards as they appear in the modern field of education. The need to increase the rigor and depth of learning drove education reform; however, the initiatives were without funding, necessary foundational understanding, and a lack of proper training for both leaders and teachers. The common core standards, as we know them today, were an attempt to solve those problems. However, the new standards faced many of the same challenges and obstacles as the earlier attempts.

Although it has been several years since the CCSS were introduced in the United States, opinions of their effectiveness continue to be inconclusive and mixed. These conflicting perspectives arise from a variety of factors including a lack of adequate training, teacher and administrator buy-in, inconsistent and inequitable funding for the rollout, and an absence of high-quality and comprehensive structure for the implementation. Multiple studies demonstrated that teachers felt they were not given the

support they needed to properly understand and implement the standards, and they did not have the knowledge they needed to use the standards to improve student growth.

Even more prevalent in the literature was the teachers' perspective that their principals and other building-level administrators were often hands-off, leaving teachers to figure it out for themselves but, at the same time, being held to expectations that had not been clarified or defined. Finally, the literature detailed that there was a general belief that the level of engagement and commitment to the change initiative of administrators was directly related to the success or failure of the change. Administrators who were actively engaged in the learning and development necessary in the change process were perceived as more encouraging and supportive. A review of the literature detailed the importance of leaders being actively involved in change initiatives; however, there was limited research regarding what principals and other building-level leaders perceived as challenges faced in implementing standards-referenced learning.

Chapter 3 will examine the rationale for using a basic qualitative design that employs face-to-face, semistructured interviews with 12-15 building-level principals and assistant principals from mid-sized rural K-12 school districts in a single midwestern state to gather data that will close this gap in the literature. In addition, Chapter 3 will detail the methodology, including the setting, the selection of participants, and data collection and analysis. The data analysis process will also include considerations of validity, reliability, and ethics.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms at the study sites. Data were collected through face-to-face or Zoom video conferencing with semistructured interviews conducted with 11 building-level principals (grades 6-12) and two assistant principals from multiple mid-sized rural K-12 school districts. Interviews allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of what individual building-level principals think and feel about the standards and standards-based learning (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using a self-designed interview protocol (see Appendix B) to address the research questions for this study allowed the researcher to build an overall interpretation of the data based on the unique perspectives of the individual participants (Butin, 2010; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This was accomplished by identifying relevant themes and patterns within the data. The goal of a basic qualitative study was to not only identify but also interpret the patterns and themes found in participant responses.

Qualitative research assumes that individuals (participants) construct new learning by building onto an understanding of prior knowledge and by interpreting their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following this constructivist research tradition, basic qualitative studies gather data through observation and interpretation in the real world (Burkholder et al., 2020). Chapter 3 examines the rationale behind both the use of a basic qualitative study design and its organization within the structure of constructivist research. In addition, the chapter outlines five major aspects of the study's methodology,

including the research design, participant selection, the researcher's role, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Finally, this chapter provides a clear understanding of instrumentation, data collection, and analysis.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This basic qualitative research study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences and challenges faced by principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in supporting content-area teachers in the implementation of standards-based learning in classrooms?

RQ2: What resources do grades 6-12 principals need to support content-area teachers in the implementation of standards-based instructional practices?

RQ3: How do the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 frame the perceived influence of transactional and transformational leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms?

While questions one and two were designed to elicit in-depth discussion of the challenges facing grades 6-12 principals in implementing the standards and standards-based learning, RQ3 was also intended to explore perceptions surrounding the leadership dynamics needed to lead standards-based instructional reform.

The study is grounded in Senge's (1990) seminal theory of systemic leadership and explores the challenges leaders face in enacting systemic change in their buildings and districts, especially as they work to support teachers in implementing standards-based instruction. The key concepts to be explored included the role of leaders in systemic

change and, following a constructivist tradition, that effective leadership is built on experiences, both individual and shared.

### ***Qualitative Methodology***

This study examined the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in planning and implementing standards-based learning and the challenges they faced supporting teachers and used qualitative methodology to answer the foundational research questions. Qualitative research is a method that focuses on exploring and understanding the experiences, perspectives, and behaviors of individuals in their natural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Researchers can build a more authentic understanding of how individuals behave, make decisions, and interact with their environment (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Lambert, 2012; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By conducting research in natural settings, researchers observe and interact with participants in their everyday lives. Engaging with participants directly, researchers gain deep insights into their thoughts, feelings, and motivations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation.

A basic qualitative methodology was chosen for this study to answer the three research questions. While both quantitative and mixed-methods research were considered for this study, qualitative methodology was most appropriate for this situation.

Semistructured interviews placed the researcher as the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research uncovers patterns, themes, and underlying processes that have relevance and

application beyond the scope of the study. While the primary goal of qualitative research is to understand the data within a specific context, the insights gained from these studies can often be applied to broader contexts and inform the development of theory.

### ***Basic Qualitative Design***

For this study, various research methods were considered, including both quantitative and mixed methods. However, the most suitable approach was chosen to be a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research and quantitative research have distinct differences. First, quantitative research involves using numerical data from a larger number of participants to examine the relationship between variables. It aims to explain or predict phenomena within a wider population. This type of research provides a broader understanding of the subject matter, although less detailed (Burkholder et al., 2020).

On the other hand, qualitative research focuses on exploring the perceptions and understandings of specific content in a more in-depth manner. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research delves deeper into a smaller number of participants, resulting in a more in-depth and multi-layered set of data. Qualitative research looks for patterns in the data and is driven by inductive reasoning (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Mixed methods research integrates both qualitative and quantitative research and is used to answer questions that cannot be answered by either qualitative or quantitative research alone (Burkholder et al., 2020). A more focused approach was needed to answer the questions for this study, and qualitative methodology was determined to be most appropriate for this study.

Data were gathered using semistructured interviews, and the questions were developed based on an established interview protocol. Interviews offered valuable insights from participants, capturing not only the text of their responses but also the nuances of tone, inflection, and body language (Burkholder et al., 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants were interviewed following a series of semistructured questions as well as probing questions that allowed the researcher to dig deeper into participants' responses to specific questions (Burkholder et al., 2020). Researcher observations during the interview process provided additional detail and context to responses and participant behavior (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Individual interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through the Zoom conferencing platform at a time that was most convenient for each research participant.

### **Role of the Researcher**

One important characteristic of a qualitative study is that the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In a qualitative study, the researcher is more than an observer and must be critically aware of their own understanding of the topic under discussion, as well as any personal biases, and consider the individual beliefs and experiences of the participants. In this basic qualitative study, the researcher was both observer and participant. In responsive interviewing, researchers take on an active role by facilitating the conversation, responding to participants' comments, and probing further with specific questions to explore their initial responses in greater detail (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) referred to this relationship as an insider-outsider relationship. As an

observer (outsider), the researcher's role was to guide the conversation to gather as much information as possible through clearly worded questions and follow-up questions. As a participant (insider), this researcher has had the opportunity to be an active participant in unpacking and adopting CCSS in multiple content areas and grade bands, both as a teacher and as support for administrators and teachers in the process.

There is often a barrier to understanding the specialized language and experiences of interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), but being involved and immersed in the process brings credibility and a level of understanding to the researcher's role, and an awareness of the process allowed for more in-depth and targeted questioning. I have spent more than 25 years as a secondary educator in both language arts and academic intervention. For the past 5 years, I have worked in multiple districts across K-12 grade bands to support administrators and teachers in literacy, standards implementation, and postsecondary readiness. It is this experience that has influenced the decision to explore the gap in research discussed in the literature review, but these experiences have also provided the experience of being both an observer and a participant in districts that are part of the study sample.

My role with all potential respondents has been (and continues to be) strictly one of support, even as I've been invited into districts to support the perceived needs of teachers and administrators as it pertains to literacy, instructional best practices, and standards implementation. There is not, nor ever will be, a supervisory dynamic with any power over participants. In addition, all eligible participants were building-level principals, which minimized any potential inequity in power that might have surfaced in

the interviews. I have been introduced to many knowledgeable and experienced school leaders in their current role, all of whom have varying levels of understanding about the standards and the process toward implementation in the district, the building, and the classroom. This range of perspectives allowed for a deeper and more robust collection of data.

Building trust is an integral part of the interview process. People may be more inclined to speak to someone with whom they are comfortable and familiar (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). While it is possible that I had worked with some of the administrators who responded to an interview request, any relationships were collegial and could be considered professional relationships, not personal. There was no perceived conflict of interest, and incentives for participants were not offered.

### **Methodology**

This section of Chapter 3 detailed the methodology used in this study. The following areas were explored: participant selection and rationale, the instrumentation to be used, and the structure of the interview process. Finally, the section detailed procedures for data collection, organization, and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

#### **Participant Selection**

Participant selection was a critical component of the research process. It involved carefully choosing individuals or groups who possessed the necessary knowledge, experiences, or perspectives to respond to the research topic. Creating well-defined goals and expectations for not only the research questions but also the population ensured

fidelity of the data collected (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By defining these parameters, researchers ensured that the collected data aligned with the research objectives and provided meaningful insights. Moreover, setting clear expectations for the population being studied ensured that researchers had a comprehensive understanding of the target group. This knowledge helped in determining the appropriate sampling techniques and recruitment strategies to reach the desired participants.

**Population.** The population of this study was principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in Midwest rural districts. All participants were chosen from a set of 24 districts in a single midwestern state. Within these districts, there were a total of 73 administrators: 28 high school principals; 19 high school assistant principals; five middle school/high school principals (responsible for both buildings, grades 6-12); 16 middle school principals; and five assistant middle school principals. While sample size is less important in qualitative research than in quantitative (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), it is still critical to have a sample population that is large enough to pull a representative sample for effective data. The goal for this study was to create a participant pool of 12-15 principals split equitably between middle school and high school administrators to reach a point of saturation. When the target population of 15 districts and 37 administrators was not large enough to gather at least 12-15 participants, the initial sample population was extended to include an additional 9 districts and 37 administrators.

In this study, all participants were from K-12 districts in a single midwestern state that requires implementation of CCSS. All districts were not in the same place in the process, but all potential sample participants had been exposed to and were familiar with

the standards for their grade band(s). Participation criteria for the sample included the following: participants were building-level administrators, both principals and assistant/auxiliary principals, in K-12 districts in a single midwestern state and were actively participating in the process of unpacking the state academic standards and incorporating standards-based learning and grading.

**Sampling.** This study used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling assumed that the researcher had a specific goal or expectation in mind; to achieve that goal, it was necessary to choose participants who offered the greatest insight into the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Purposeful sampling was the best option for choosing a population that was familiar with the standards implementation process. As a typical sample, the respondents had knowledge of standards implementation, but their experiences reflected what was normal or typical of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, the districts and participants were chosen because their district goals had recently included a re-evaluation of standards across multiple grades and/or had begun the process of incorporating standards-based grading practices. Snowball sampling was also employed to expand the defined population beyond the two rounds of interviews. In snowball sampling, participants were asked to refer the researcher to other participants who also demonstrated the key attributes being researched in this study. Through snowball sampling, the population got bigger but remained purposeful (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Instrumentation**

Data for this study were collected through individual face-to-face or Zoom video conferencing semistructured interviews. This study used a responsive, semistructured interviewing format – structured questions to frame the conversation but the flexibility to go more in-depth with probes or follow-up questions. Using a responsive interviewing process meant that the interview was looking to foster rather than preserve any relationship between the interviewer and the participant. Rubin & Rubin (2012) explained that the responsive interviewing process encouraged the respondents to go into detail about the questions from the onset; the researcher, then, encouraged deeper response by asking directed and clarifying questions.

The instrument used for data collection was an interview protocol (see Appendix B) containing a set of 10 semistructured questions that were grounded in the study framework, and, when responses to the questions were analyzed, provided answers to the research questions. Questions 1-4 addressed RQ 1; questions 5-7 addressed RQ 2; and questions 8-10 addressed RQ 3. Using suggestions by Ravitch and Carl (2021) and Rubin and Rubin (2012), questions produced by the researcher were worded such that they were not leading but also clearly stated and clean, were open-ended, and encouraged detail and depth.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), intentional research design is critical for establishing content validity. As stated above, the interview process was chosen for the research design for this study to garner detailed responses from respondents who have differing perspectives on the research topic. This design was structured but also

responsive to participant input. Rationale was clearly defined. In addition, feedback from experts on standards implementation was collected throughout the question writing process. The research questions were grounded by the framework, and the interview questions were used to answer each of the 3 RQs. Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to check their responses for accuracy, make any corrections to interpretation, and add any additional comments.

Field testing was conducted to practice the process and ensure that the questions were likely to yield the rich level of data required to answer the research questions. Practice interviews were utilized for three specific reasons: (1) monitoring the effectiveness of the questions, (2) supporting the trustworthiness of the research process, and (3) ensuring that any questions that arose during the interview process could be answered. Field testing allowed the researcher to build confidence in conducting interviews. Any potential bias that may not have been immediately recognized was made visible and addressed before the actual data collection with study respondents. In addition, practicing the interview questions identified any questions that did not directly address the research framework of the study or gaps in the data to be collected.

Three field interviews were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Each interview ranged in length from 12 - 18 minutes and yielded an average of five pages of transcribed data. Each interview was transcribed using a different format to provide experience in different protocols, including the Zoom transcription feature, the Word transcription feature, and researcher review. Much knowledge was gained from field testing. First, the questions were asked and answered too quickly, so participants did

not have the opportunity to expand their responses or to provide much-needed clarity. In addition, questions were rephrased to be clearer and to allow for more natural responses from the participants. For instance, in the initial interview, certain questions were overly suggestive and influenced the participant to answer in a manner that aligned with the researcher's expectations, rather than expressing their true feelings about the question. Finally, the initial set of 12 questions was condensed to 10 to allow for more in-depth conversation and response from the participants. Field testing in a real-world setting allowed the researcher to gather valuable insights about the interview process and the questioning protocol. This included becoming more at ease with the questions and crafting thought-provoking inquiries that elicited deeper responses to the topics being discussed.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

As stated earlier, the sample population included grades 6-12 principals from 24 mid-sized rural K-12 districts in a single midwestern state. Following University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (12-10-24-1063470), all administrators who met these criteria were sent an email invitation (see Appendix A) that detailed study expectations, confirmed voluntary participation, ensured confidentiality, provided guidance for both the researcher and respondents, and encouraged participation to clarify the administrators' role in standards implementation. The email also included the researcher's contact information for any questions and a link to a letter of informed consent (to both participate in the interviews and to be recorded) that was electronically signed and returned to participate. The informed consent included information on

withdrawing from the study including an understanding that there will be no negative consequences should they choose, at any point in the study, to withdraw (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). From the list of those who returned letters of informed consent, a sample of 13 administrators was randomly chosen and included participants from middle and high school grades (6-12) and from varied sizes of rural districts. Respondents were notified by email of their acceptance, and individual times for one-on-one interviews were scheduled using a Google form online scheduling program.

The researcher sent an email to follow up with each participant to confirm the date, time, and place of the interview. Each participant was interviewed one-on-one in a setting that was comfortable for the participant, including the respondent's office or conference room. Virtual interviews using Zoom video conferencing protocols were also utilized. Interviews were recorded using a hand-held audio recording device and transcribed using the Word 365 transcription program. Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and included both semistructured and probing open-ended questions to achieve saturation in both the interview and in the data collected across the interviews. At the conclusion of the interview process, participants received a thank you letter for participating (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Once data were transcribed and analyzed, participants were given the opportunity to check their data for accuracy, and at the conclusion of the study, participants received an executive summary of the findings of the study.

After each interview with respondents, the recorded interviews were transcribed using Microsoft 365 WORD transcription, and data were initially organized by question.

Transcripts were checked against the audio files multiple times for accuracy. Once the interviews were transcribed and sorted, validity of responses was checked through the debriefing of respondents who also had the chance to review their responses and make any suggestions or additions that they felt were relevant to the use of their data in the study. As was discussed before, respondents had the right to withdraw from the study at any point in the process.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

For this study, Saldana's (2021) in vivo coding was used in coding cycle one without the use of computer assistance. Saldana's in vivo coding is a qualitative research method that uses participants' actual spoken or written words as codes. This approach helps to preserve the authenticity and depth of participants' experiences and perspectives (Saldana, 2021). The process in this study involved seven steps: First, qualitative data were gathered through semistructured, in-depth interviews. Next, the interviews were transcribed using the agreed upon transcription program, and initial read-throughs of the transcript allowed the researcher to check for accuracy of the transcript and to build a better overall understanding of the content and context of the data. In step three, the researcher highlighted or underlined specific words or phrases that participants used and that stood out as significant or illustrative of broader themes. Finally, the highlighted phrases were used directly as codes. This preserved the participants' original language and exact sentiments.

In vivo codes were then grouped together to form categories or themes. In this step, themes and concepts became evident from within the transcribed data without

reference to literature or prior research. The themes themselves were defined as they appeared as opposed to in advance of the study, so the analysis was determined by the data rather than the data being applied within a pre-determined set of expectations (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2021). The next step involved classifying, organizing, and conceptualizing the data, looking for connections between themes and considering how they related to the research questions (Saldana, 2021). Using connecting strategies helped to recognize the way the points of data connected within and to each other and did not rely on everything fitting into a specific theme or category (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This allowed for the creation of a whole based on the way the data points connected to each other. Finally, findings were reported by integrating participants' exact words with the researcher's analysis, providing a rich, grounded understanding of participants' perspectives, and ensuring that their voices were authentically represented in the research.

### **Trustworthiness**

Strict and robust internal and external validity must be present for research to be credible. Trustworthiness refers to the strategies that are used to ensure that credibility, transferability, and dependability are present and are integral to the research design. Detailed notes during both interviews and conversations, thorough transcriptions, and coding that was comprehensive and iterative were critical to the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was established using multiple strategies including exhaustive coding and analysis, saturation, and peer review. (Burkholder et al., 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility was also established through member checking. Respondents had the

chance to review their responses to guarantee that the data were a true representation of their perspectives.

Saturation refers to the point in the research where no new themes or ideas emerge (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In this study, saturation was reached by interviewing multiple participants with differing levels of experience and unique perspectives about the topic being discussed in the study. To ensure credibility, this study followed a highly structured protocol, and connections that facilitate peer review were a priority. The study involved field testing, practice interviews, and collaboration with experts. Through these measures, the credibility of the research questions, as well as the coding and analysis of the collected data, was upheld.

Transferability, or external validity, refers to the ability to replicate or apply the results of the study to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While the circumstances surrounding standards implementation may be specific to education and may differ from grade to grade, there are commonalities that administrators face both with their support of teachers and from their perspective as a building leader. To ensure that there was external validity, the participant selection process confirmed that participants came from different grade levels, had differing levels of experience and familiarity with the standards and their implementation, and came from varied sizes of rural districts. In addition, the study design, participants, and their experiences were clearly defined and described.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), an audit trail details a study's design, the data collection process, the coding and organization of the data, and the decision-

making throughout the study. Confirmability, which is closely related to dependability, requires the researcher to be mindful of any potential biases or assumptions that may influence the interview process or data analysis. Given the researcher's familiarity with standards implementation in local districts, there was a solid understanding of the frustrations and challenges faced by teachers and students. This awareness contributed to a deeper understanding of similar challenges faced by administrators, without leading or coercing the data.

### **Ethical Procedures**

It is important to safeguard the data in a qualitative study, but it is equally critical to consider the ethical treatment of participants in every aspect of the study, both transactional and procedural (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University had a strong role in ensuring that ethics were incorporated in all stages of the study, including the collection and dissemination of data. Prior to any contact with participants, the research proposal was shared with and approved by the IRB. All policies and procedures required by Walden were followed.

Throughout the proposal process, the well-being and safety of participants was central to the work. Ethical considerations were multifaceted and included in every step of the study. The researcher was not employed in any of the districts in the sample pool and did not hold a position of authority with any potential participants. No incentives for participation were used. When participants were recruited, an email letter was sent from an official Walden email account that detailed the study and its implications and that outlined the interview process, including participant roles and the purpose for the data

that was collected. Once administrators agreed to participate, they were sent an email detailing their informed consent. There were clear directions for refusal to participate as well as how to withdraw from the study at any point in the process. While the interview process had no potential for adverse events, study participants knew that their welfare was central to the study, and that whatever the occurrence, they had final say in both their participation and the inclusion of their data in the results.

Participation in the study at all stages was anonymous. Letters were assigned to each participant so that at no time were their names, school districts, or location visible or possible to determine. In addition, only the researcher had access to the data files, no data were shared with or between districts or participants, and all data will be destroyed after five years of secure storage following the publication of the study. As discussed earlier, all administrators were given copies of their transcribed interviews to make additional comments or suggestions before being used in the final analysis.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 detailed critical aspects of this basic qualitative study, including the study design and the roles of both the participants and the researcher. Trustworthiness was also included in this chapter, including credibility, transferability, and dependability, all of which were integral to the design and implementation of the data collection and analysis. Finally, ethical considerations were included that provided safeguards for the treatment of both the respondents and the data. Chapter 4 will incorporate all these elements in a review of the results of the data and will describe the setting, the interview

process, the coding process, and the themes and analysis of the data, along with any potential for future application of the results.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms at the study sites. Principals and assistant principals may play a more management-oriented role instead of an instructional leadership role and find themselves distanced from critical instructional shifts (O'Shea & Zuckerman, 2022; Schrik & Wasonga, 2019; Somoza-Norton & Neuman, 2021). This study sought to fill the gap between district-level expectations for standards implementation and the needs of teachers for support. The study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences and challenges faced by principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in supporting content-area teachers in the implementation of standards-based learning in classrooms?

RQ2: What resources do principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 need to support content-area teachers in the implementation of standards-based instructional practices?

RQ3: How do the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 frame the perceived influence of transactional and transformational leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms?

Chapter 4 includes the purpose of this study, the research questions, and a detailed examination of the setting where the data were collected. Furthermore, it provides a comprehensive discussion of the data collection procedures and methods of analysis. This

chapter also includes an evaluation of the fidelity of the data and provides evidence and rigor of methodology to address both trustworthiness and transferability of the data.

### **Setting**

This study took place in mid-sized rural K-12 school districts in a single midwestern state in the United States. There were no significant personal or institutional factors that influenced participants or their experiences during the study period, which in turn did not impact the interpretation of the study results. Participants were building principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12, including middle schools (grades 6-8), high schools (grades 9-12), and combined junior and senior high school buildings (grades 6-12). Principals and assistant principals from 15 school districts were invited to participate in this study. All participants were required to be currently implementing, or have previously implemented, state academic standards and to require standards-based learning from teachers in all content areas.

Data were collected through semistructured interviews either face-to-face or through the Zoom conferencing platform, based on the method preferred by the respondent. To ensure confidentiality, no identifying markers were included for district or buildings, and participants were given alphanumeric codes (See Table 1). For example, the first principal was PP1, the second principal was PP2, and so on. A total of 48 invitations were sent, and 11 principals and two assistant principals who met the qualifications responded and were chosen to participate. Interviews were completed in February and July 2025.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Role	School Level
PP1	Principal	High School
PP2	Principal	High School
PP3	Principal	Middle School
PP4	Principal	Grades 6-12 JH/High School
PP5	Principal	Middle School
PP6	Principal	High School
PP7	Assistant Principal	High School
PP8	Assistant Principal	High School
PP9	Principal	High School
PP10	Principal	Middle School
PP11	Principal	High School
PP12	Principal	Middle School
PP13	Principal	High School

*Note.* Table 1 contains the school level and role for each of the 13 participants.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process was initiated in January 2025 after I received Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (12-10-24-1063470). Fifteen K-12 school districts were identified within a 50-mile radius that met the study's guidelines. From these districts, 37 building-level administrators (principals and assistant principals) were identified. Each prospective participant was emailed a personal invitation to participate (See Appendix A). The invitation sent to each administrator was identical and followed the required IRB wording and structure, including a summary of the study, requirements for participants, and my contact information. Interested participants were requested to reply directly to the researcher's email. Six principals responded to the initial email, including two middle school principals, three high school principals, and one principal from a combined 6-12 building. No assistant principals responded. Each of the six

respondents was then sent a letter of informed consent and a link to a Google form with a calendar. From the link, each participant could choose up to three potential times and dates for their interview and select their preferred method of interview (in-person or via Zoom video conferencing). Three respondents chose to meet in person, and those face-to-face interviews took place in private offices or conference rooms in their respective school buildings. Three respondents chose Zoom video interviews outside of typical school hours. Interviews were scheduled based on respondents' choice of date and time and either a calendar invitation that included the location for the face-to-face interview or a Zoom link was sent to each participant. All six of the initial respondents replied and agreed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted in January and early February of 2025.

A second round of interviews was conducted to provide more depth to the data and to meet the required minimum number of participants for the study. The circle of districts was expanded to 75 miles, and an additional nine school districts meeting the study's guidelines were identified in May 2025. Letters of invitation were sent to an additional 36 administrators. Eight administrators responded, including two high school assistant principals, three high school principals, and three middle school principals. Each of the eight respondents was sent a letter of informed consent and a link to a calendar invite for an interview. One of the eight respondents, a high school principal, was unable to schedule during the interview window and was dismissed from the study. All seven of the remaining respondents elected to be interviewed through Zoom video conferencing. Interviews were conducted during the first two weeks of June 2025.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021) it is not the goal of qualitative research to generalize; therefore, the recommended sample size should be between five and 25, with deep saturation possible with homogenous populations at around 12. For this study, the minimum number of participants was met with 13, and interviews were conducted using semistructured questions with follow-up prompts or questions. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked if they had received the letter of informed consent, if they had any questions before beginning, and to confirm that they agreed to participate in the study. There were no questions, and all respondents confirmed they agreed to participate. Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes.

During one of the face-to-face interviews, the participant needed to handle an emergent family situation. The recording was paused while they addressed the problem. A later date was discussed to continue the interview, but the situation was resolved within a reasonable timeframe. After a pause of 45 minutes, the participant elected to continue the interview; the recording was restarted, and the interview continued from where it left off. No unusual circumstances were encountered in any of the other interviews.

A small hand-held audio recording device was used to record each interview. The record and transcribe feature of Zoom was not used at any time in the interview process to protect the anonymity of the participants. Only the audio recording device was used during all interviews. Audio files were saved in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. Audio files of each interview were independently uploaded to Office 365 Word and transcribed using the Word transcription feature. Transcripts were saved to a password-protected file on the researcher's computer. Files contained no identifying

marks or features. Data will remain in password-protected files for five years, after which time both the audio files and the transcripts will be deleted.

### **Data Analysis**

Completed transcripts were reviewed for inaccuracies and reread against the audio recording multiple times. One participant spoke very quickly, and the transcription software had difficulty picking up the nuances of their speech. This transcript was read in short, 30-second chunks to allow the researcher to accurately transcribe what was said in the interview. It took many hours to validate the transcript against the audio recording. The Word transcription feature worked very well for the other participants; however, each audio recording was reviewed multiple times to ensure the written transcript accurately reflected the interview and the participants' responses. Once the transcripts were verified as accurate, each participant received a copy of their transcript via email for review and feedback. Participants were invited to review the transcript for accuracy, share any additional comments, and ask any additional questions. They were asked to reply to the email within 5 working days. It was assumed that any response not received within 5 working days would be accepted as written. All transcripts were approved by the respondents within the allotted time.

### **Pre-Coding**

Using the framework detailed in Saldana (2021), each transcript was independently reviewed and coded. After conducting interviews and completing transcriptions, all transcripts were thoroughly read multiple times and cross-checked against the corresponding audio recordings to ensure a comprehensive understanding of

participants' comments and perspectives. The initial stage of data analysis involved pre-coding to assign labels to words, phrases, sentences, and short text fragments based on participants' responses to each interview question. Labels were chosen based on identified keywords and phrases within each research question. Each individual transcript was evaluated, and color coding was used to distinguish between the keywords and phrases. If new labels were found in a subsequent transcript, the previous transcripts were reevaluated for the new labels. For example, RQ1 addresses the experiences and challenges that principals and assistant principals encounter in implementing standards-based learning. Labels included learning, focus, time, standards, foundational thinking, etc. Each transcript was read multiple times throughout the process. Identified labels for each research question were independently color-coded and highlighted on the transcripts.

### **In Vivo Coding: Stage 1**

In vivo Coding is a qualitative research method that uses participants' actual spoken or written words as codes. This approach helps to preserve the authenticity and depth of participants' experiences and perspectives (Saldana, 2021). In vivo coding was used in this study to develop codes and explore themes based on participants' wording choices and experiences. Throughout the initial coding, previously identified color-coded labels were used to identify phrases and sentences that accurately reflected participants' wording choices and experiences as they responded to the different interview questions. I built a table (See Appendix C) that was organized by the individual interview questions that corresponded to each research question. Questions were listed in column one.

Column two contained the accurate responses of the participants as identified during in vivo coding and retained the participants' original language. By the end of this stage, many detailed phrases that followed the color-coded labels had been identified.

### **Pattern Coding: Stage 2**

In the next stage, pattern coding was used to identify similarly coded data and to group the data into common categories and themes (see Appendix C; column 3). Pattern codes are analytical tools that serve to identify overarching themes, configurations, or explanations within the data (Saldana, 2021). They condense substantial content from first-cycle coding into more concise and meaningful units of analysis. In this study, pattern coding analysis involved further grouping the data into broad categories, relationships, and patterns. Prior to this stage of analysis, several patterns emerged in the data, including how to focus the learning for teachers, the need for foundational understanding, and the need to support the elements of change. Using the in vivo coded data supported those initial assumptions and exposed additional groupings. Any coded data from the in vivo stage that appeared similar or related were grouped to discover overarching patterns based on meaning or context (See Appendix C; column 3). All categories were carefully examined multiple times to find similarities and connections between the pieces of data.

### **Thematic Analysis**

From the data collected in the pattern coding stage, a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by participants was gathered in the thematic analysis stage. Saldana (2021) suggests that themes extend beyond simple description to represent

patterns of understanding within the data. Themes are critical for answering the research questions and achieving a complete and extensive analysis. At this point in the analysis, all grouping was aligned to the three research questions and the conceptual framework for the study. Within each question, nine different codes were identified. For example, in RQ1, there were two critical components: experiences and challenges. Within each of those components, the data collected included changing the mindset, focusing on the learning, collaborative conversations, differentiation, etc. (See Appendix C; column 4). The data for each question were carefully and repeatedly reviewed for commonalities and narrowed based on identifiable themes.

Themes represent the researcher's interpretation and conceptualization of the underlying ideas reflected in consistent patterns in the data (Saldana, 2021). The initial nine themes for each research question (a total of 27) were combined into 12 broad themes (see Table 2, column 2) and then further narrowed into six major themes, two for each research question (See Table 2). For example, the data for RQ3 revealed two different components of leadership that were important: intentionality and the importance of balancing leadership style. The two ideas were combined into a single, narrowed theme on leadership practices: intentional and balanced leadership practices (See Table 2, column 3). This same process was followed throughout this thematic analysis stage of data collection. Transcripts were read one final time, and tables were reviewed to ensure data saturation and that no critical elements of data were missing.

**Table 2***Thematic Analysis*

Thematic Analysis	Broad Thematic Coding	Narrowed Themes
RQ1: Experiences and challenges	Mindset and Cultural Shifts	Building Capacity through Professional Development and Collaboration
Experiences		
*Change the mindset		
*Focus on the learning	Professional Growth and Expertise	Supporting Teachers with Time and Differentiated Resources
*Utilize professional learning to build shared understanding		
*Collaborative conversation	Collaboration and Communication	
*Differentiate learning	Effective Decision-Making Processes	
*Lean on experts		
Challenges		
*Time		
*Decision-making		
*Not listening		
RQ 2: Resources	Time as a Critical Resource	Time and Support for Implementation
*Time		
*Personnel to help	Access to Professional Learning and Guidance	Access to Aligned Professional Resources
*Book studies		
*Conferences/Trainings	Personnel and Consistency in Support	
*Consistent expectations	Aligning Resources to Needs	
Challenges		
*Too many choices		
*No guidance from state		
*Matching the resources to what is needed		
*Not enough time		
RQ 3: Leadership Roles/responsibilities	Intentional and Purposeful Leadership	Intentional and Balanced Leadership Practices
*Be intentional	Knowledge Building and Focusing on Learning	Building Capacity through Knowledge and Relationships
*Go slow		
*Build foundational knowledge	Balancing Leadership Styles	
*Focus on the learning	Modeling and Relational Practices	
Challenges		
*Create the balance		
*Set expectations		
*Be a strong model		
*Show vulnerability		

## **Results**

The experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 and the challenges they face implementing standards-based learning were explored with 13 participants through semistructured interview questions framed around the three research questions for this study. This section is organized by the study's three research questions and guided by the themes that emerged from each question. Six major themes emerged from the data, with two themes developed for each research question.

### **RQ 1**

Research Question 1 (RQ1) explored the experiences and challenges faced by principals and assistant principals as they implemented standards-based learning in their schools. This question aimed to uncover not only the logistical and structural barriers to implementation but also the personal and professional dynamics that influenced how principals led this shift. Through a thorough analysis of the data, two major themes consistently emerged across all participants. These themes reflected shared patterns in leadership approaches, support systems, and the evolving roles of administrators during the transition. The repetition and consistency of these findings across interviews indicated data saturation, suggesting that the core challenges and experiences related to standards-based learning had been sufficiently explored and that the central research question had been clearly answered. The two key themes identified in analysis of RQ1 include Building Capacity Through Professional Development and Collaboration and Supporting Teachers with Time and Differentiated Resources.

### *Theme One*

The first theme identified was Building Capacity Through Professional Development. Theme one highlighted the significance of providing teachers with essential knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement standards-based learning. This included developing a shared understanding of what standards-based learning entails and how it differs from more traditional models. To support this shift, expert guidance and professional development were identified as critical components. Respondents suggested that professional development is needed to incorporate time to process and collaborate so that the new learning could be applied within teachers' unique learning environments. In addition, a variety of methods were necessary to meet the learning needs of all teachers: book studies, workshops, conferences, team-level learning, etc.

Additionally, this first theme emphasized the importance of fostering open communication among administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders. Hord (1992) posited that for long-term decision-making and systemic change to occur, a balance of leadership must exist across the system. For a true shared and distributed leadership to happen, collaboration was viewed as a key driver of consistency and support across the system, especially when educators must navigate instructional change. Clear and consistent decision-making processes were also noted as vital for ensuring alignment with the goals of standards-based learning. The responses clearly underscored the need to reorient perspectives toward standards-based learning, emphasizing the prioritization of learning outcomes over traditional educational practices. PP6 spoke of sharing their "...level of passion for and belief in SBL." PP4 discussed the need to "...build an

intentional focus” and “create the why.” Each respondent spoke of the importance of collaboration throughout the process. PP8, an assistant principal, spoke of the value of collaborating with the principal to create a common vision. Both PP1 and PP5 emphasized the importance of not only collaborating with others who had done this work but also listening to their teachers to understand their current stage in the process and what they needed.

### ***Theme Two***

The second theme identified was Supporting Teachers with Time and Differentiated Resources. Theme two focused on addressing the practical and emotional needs of teachers as they transition to a standards-based learning framework. PP4 discussed building an intentional focus and foundational knowledge; PP11 stated that leaders need to meet teachers where they are and provide the necessary training and expertise to create a shared and consistent understanding. A recurring message throughout the interviews was the need to provide educators with sufficient time to learn, plan, and implement the necessary changes. Tailored support, such as individualized coaching, resource sharing, or job-embedded professional learning, was also identified as critical for helping teachers to navigate this shift effectively. These supports were seen not only as tools for instructional change but also as ways to promote a broader mindset shift, one that centers student learning and growth rather than compliance with traditional grading or instructional norms

One concept that appeared in multiple interviews was the importance of listening to their teachers. For example, PP9 spoke of being ready to move on in the process but

waiting because teachers did not feel they were ready. Leaders who took time to listen and to understand where their staff were in the implementation process, and what specific needs they had, were more successful in fostering trust and encouraging progress.

Teachers who were heard and supported were more confident and invested in the shift to standards-based learning. Whole-staff meetings, unless they were intentionally designated for standards work, were not seen as an effective means of gathering input due to the meeting's structure; instead, more personal and intimate opportunities allowed teachers to feel safe sharing their thoughts and concerns. Participants discussed the use of multiple means to gather teacher input, including surveys, collaborative discussion, PLC meetings, check-ins, etc.

Administrator guidance played a pivotal role in supporting educators during this transition. Clear, inclusive, and well-informed processes were seen as essential for aligning school-wide decisions regarding standards-based learning. When principals provided strong leadership, marked by consistent communication, collaborative decision-making, and a clear vision, teachers reported a greater sense of direction and cohesion. In contrast, schools where leadership was inconsistent or absent experienced frustration, confusion, and a lack of buy-in from staff. For example, several respondents spoke of confusion teachers had around the organization of the proficiency scale, but as the leaders of the initiative, they did not feel qualified or knowledgeable enough to address the confusion. Respondents shared that teachers in these environments often felt overwhelmed and unsupported, making it more difficult to implement changes with fidelity. For example, PP2 discussed the frustration of "...trying to mold traditional

grades into a proficiency scale or standards” because teachers did not understand the purpose behind the scale. Decision-making was also considered a challenge because of the need to create and support consistent expectations (PP1; PP10).

### *Analysis For RQ1*

These two themes comprehensively address the experiences and challenges principals faced supporting teachers in implementing standards-based learning. Together, they reflect both the professional and practical dimensions of this shift. The first theme underscores the necessity of reorienting perspectives away from traditional educational practices and toward a model that prioritizes clear learning outcomes. This shift required a foundational understanding of standards-based learning, which was fostered through expert guidance, ongoing professional development, and intentional efforts to build a shared vision among educators. Creating a shared vision reinforced the organization’s purpose and provided direction and motivation (Senge, 2006); in addition, it supported highly effective instructional practices and the belief in learning that meets the needs of all students.

The second theme focused on the more immediate and logistical needs of teachers: building opportunities for personal mastery (Senge, 2006), including adequate time, individualized support, and responsive leadership. It emphasized the importance of listening to teachers, recognizing where they were in the change process, and addressing their concerns in a meaningful way. Administrator guidance played a crucial role in this process, as principals were responsible for establishing inclusive and transparent decision-making structures that aligned with the goals of standards-based learning. In

schools where this guidance was lacking, teachers reported frustration and resistance, highlighting the importance of clear and consistent leadership and team learning that extends across and within stakeholder groups (Senge, 2006).

Taken together, these themes not only illustrate the complex nature of leading change in educational settings but also point to the essential conditions needed for successful implementation; conditions that can inform future leadership practices and policy decisions as schools continue to move toward standards-based approaches.

## **RQ2**

Research Question 2 (RQ2) examined the resources that principals deemed necessary to support teachers in implementing standards-based instructional practices. The goal was to identify both commonly cited and potentially unexpected resources that principals viewed as essential for fostering a deep understanding of standards-based learning. Through a comprehensive analysis of participant responses, two prominent themes emerged: time and support for implementation, and access to aligned professional resources. These themes reflect the shared experiences and perceptions of the participants, emphasizing the importance of both adequate time and targeted support in transforming instructional practices. The consistency of responses from all participants, regardless of grade level, supports the concept of data saturation and indicates that time and high-quality professional learning are key resources for successful implementation. The findings highlight a clear and unified message from principals about what resources are needed to effectively support teachers in implementing standards-based learning.

### *Theme One*

Time emerged as both a recurring challenge and a foundational resource for the effective implementation of standards-based learning. Participants from all interviews consistently emphasized the critical need for dedicated time to engage in planning, collaborating with colleagues, and participating in ongoing professional development. This theme underscores the reality that meaningful instructional shifts require not just knowledge but also the space and time to thoughtfully apply that knowledge in the classroom context. PP2 noted that teachers needed time specifically set aside for collaborative learning to ensure consistency and alignment in instructional practices. PP10 also noted that the time spent should be guided and purposeful to ensure that all stakeholders embraced the value of the change.

In addition to time for teachers, principals expressed a sense of limitation in their ability to provide support due to time constraints. PP4 felt that there was never enough time to be everywhere they wanted (and needed) to be, reflecting a tension between administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership. This insight reveals the dual need for time at multiple levels of the school system: for educators to plan and grow, and for school leaders to observe, guide, and support those efforts in real time. In addition, PP11 spoke of distributive leadership; sharing not only the responsibility but also the time spent reaching each group of teachers. This approach made it possible to better address the specific needs of each group.

Participants also emphasized that time alone was not sufficient unless paired with a well-structured support system. PP9 spoke of “investing time to do the work right” and

“giving people the support to make the transition.” PP3 stated that a foundational understanding and clear expectations were necessary to create a purposeful use of time. The importance of utilizing consistent and well-trained personnel (like instructional coaches or mentors), was a recurring point across all interviews. These roles help alleviate the pressure on principals and offer sustained, job embedded support for teachers. Additionally, the need for clear and stable expectations was noted as crucial for reducing confusion and frustration during implementation. When time, personnel, and expectations aligned, schools were better positioned to foster lasting instructional change (Senge, 2006).

### ***Theme Two***

The second theme in RQ2, Access to Professional Learning and Guidance, emphasized the importance of structured and purposeful professional learning experiences to support the effective implementation of standards-based learning. Participants consistently indicated that foundational training such as unpacking the standards, understanding their intent, and aligning them with instructional practices was critical for teacher success. Interview responses highlighted that when this foundational understanding is missing, teachers often struggle to make meaningful instructional shifts. Clear guidance, in combination with well-curated learning materials, was cited as essential to navigate the complexities of standards-based instruction.

This theme also encompassed both logistical and resource-related challenges. Participants noted that while professional learning was crucial, it must be timely, focused, and aligned to teachers’ specific needs. Several principals cautioned against

overwhelming educators with too many options or supplying materials that did not directly relate to their instructional context. Instead, they advocated for professional development that was targeted and relevant. The most valuable resources identified by participants included book studies, expert-led training sessions, and support from regional and national consultants. Collaboration with local and statewide education service agencies also emerged as a vital resource, helping to bridge knowledge gaps and provide ongoing support (PP1, PP3, PP4, & PP6). Larger districts had greater in-house resources and personnel to support the change initiatives and relied less on outside sources of support than the smaller districts (PP5, PP9, PP10, PP12), but all agreed that having a consistent and structured approach was critical.

Additionally, participants expressed frustration with the inadequacy of state-provided materials and resources. PP1 noted that “state resources do not support the change,” emphasizing the disconnect between official materials and classroom needs. In response, several principals described how reaching out to colleagues and neighboring districts who were further along in the implementation process was a key strategy for overcoming confusion and for building momentum. These collaborative networks offered practical advice, real-world examples, and a sense of shared progress, making professional learning more productive and more relevant to the everyday realities of teaching in a standards-based system.

### ***Analysis of RQ2***

RQ2 explored the resources principals identified as essential for supporting teachers in implementing standards-based instructional practices. Two major themes

emerged from the data: Time and Support for Implementation and Access to Aligned Professional Resources. These themes encapsulate critical areas of focus, addressing the availability and alignment of resources as well as the challenges that arise when resources are insufficient or misaligned. Together, they reflect a comprehensive view of what educators need to create the conditions for meaningful instructional change.

The first theme, Time and Support for Implementation, pointed to the dual necessity of adequate time and structured support systems. Participants consistently noted that teachers required protected time to plan, collaborate, and engage in professional learning in order to successfully apply new instructional approaches. Having administrators present throughout the process is important. However, principals highlighted their own time constraints, often struggling to be present in classrooms or provide the hands-on leadership they felt was necessary. PP5 talked of not being as strong an instructional leader as they would want; that the day-to-day management as principal often limited their ability to be present in team or department meetings. PP10 said that teachers in his building have had a challenging time seeing them as the instructional leader, but as more of a manager. “The content area teacher believes that they are the content experts and that the administrators are only responsible for keeping the hallways clear, ... taking care of discipline issues... So, we’re more of the building manager instead of being in classrooms, giving feedback, doing walkthroughs, and saying this is what I saw, here are some ideas that maybe you can try to do to better connect kids to content. But if you’re not viewed as an instructional leader, you lack the credibility. I wanted to make it abundantly clear that my administrators, my leadership team, are

definitely instructional decision makers.” In response, many participants emphasized the importance of instructional coaches, mentors, and other support personnel who could offer sustained, embedded guidance. The data suggest that when schools allocate time strategically and invest in well-trained personnel, they create the space for real, lasting change.

The second theme, Access to Professional Learning and Guidance, emphasized the need for high-quality, relevant training and materials that align with the goals of standards-based instruction. Participants stressed that foundational understanding of the standards, and how they connect to student learning, was critical, and that teachers were best served by professional learning tailored to their specific needs. Principals expressed concern about the ineffectiveness of generic or state-provided resources, which often lacked clarity or practical application. Instead, they found value in book studies, external consultants, and collaboration with other districts, which provided more meaningful and actionable support. The data revealed that without access to well-aligned resources and expert guidance, even the most motivated educators may struggle to move forward effectively.

The findings from RQ2 emphasize that time and access to aligned professional learning are not just helpful supports; they are essential components for successfully implementing of standards-based instructional practices. Principals consistently identified these resources as foundational to building teacher capacity, fostering collaboration, and sustaining instructional growth. The challenges highlighted, including limited time, misaligned materials, and lack of clarity from state-provided resources, point to the need

for strategic planning and investment in tailored support systems. As schools continue to shift toward standards-based learning, ensuring that educators are equipped with the right resources and the time to use them meaningfully will be critical to achieving long-term instructional success.

### **RQ3**

Research Question 3 (RQ3) explored how the experiences of grades 6-12 principals shape their perceptions of the influence of both transformational and transactional leadership in implementing standards-based learning within content-area classrooms. In addition to examining leadership styles, RQ3 aimed to uncover the leadership dynamics principals believe are necessary to effectively guide instructional reform. Analysis of the data revealed two clear and interconnected themes: Intentional and Balanced Leadership Practices and Building Capacity through Knowledge and Relationships. Together, these themes highlight how principals navigate the complexities of instructional leadership by strategically balancing accountability with support, while fostering trust, collaboration, and shared understanding among their staff.

#### ***Theme One***

The first theme, Intentional and Balanced Leadership Practices, underscores the importance of principals taking deliberate, thoughtful actions to support teachers while navigating the demands of standards-based instructional reform. Participants emphasized the need for leaders to balance transactional elements (such as setting clear expectations and monitoring progress) with transformational practices that inspire, empower, and build trust among staff. This balance reflects deliberate choices informed by a clear

understanding of instructional goals and teacher needs. For example, PP1 described their leadership style as one that "...emphasizes learning," reflecting a mindset focused on growth and improvement. Other participants (PP2, PP3, PP4, PP8) echoed this sentiment, noting that creating a culture where learning from mistakes is safe and encouraged is essential for meaningful change. These responses highlight that effective leadership requires not only direction and accountability, but also vulnerability, reflection, and relational trust. PP7 and PP9 both discussed the perception of teachers that they are content experts, and administrators are managers, not instructional leaders. To be successful, it is necessary to establish a culture where everyone is vulnerable and focused on a shared vision.

Closely related is the concept of balancing leadership styles which builds on the idea that principals must carefully navigate the tension between structure and inspiration. While transformational leadership fosters collaboration, motivation, and a shared vision, participants also acknowledged the necessity of transactional practices, particularly in ensuring clarity, consistency, and follow-through. Several principals (PP1, PP2, PP4, PP13) spoke candidly about the challenges that arise when expectations are not clearly established, including confusion, uneven implementation, and teacher frustration. They stressed that transformational leadership alone is insufficient without a strong foundation of clearly communicated goals and processes. Together, these two elements capture the complex role of the principal as instructional leader and change manager, emphasizing the need for a strategic and balanced approach to leadership that supports teachers, maintains momentum, and ultimately advances standards-based learning initiatives.

*Theme Two*

The second theme, Building Capacity through Knowledge and Relationships, highlights the dual responsibility of school leaders to both develop teacher expertise and foster a culture of trust and support. Principals emphasized that successfully implementing standards-based learning begins with ensuring that teachers possess the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to understand and apply the standards effectively. This includes not only familiarity with the standards themselves but also strategies for designing instruction, assessing student learning, and adapting practices to meet diverse needs. As several principals noted, professional learning must be ongoing and embedded in day-to-day work, rather than limited to isolated training sessions. Building teacher capacity was widely viewed as a prerequisite for extending learning to students in meaningful and lasting ways.

Clearly connected to this is the idea that leadership must maintain a clear instructional focus. Throughout the interviews, principals described their efforts to prioritize teacher learning in service of student outcomes. They spoke of creating environments where professional growth was both expected and supported, and where on-going learning was aligned with school goals. This approach both strengthened teachers' instructional practices and promoted coherence and consistency in classroom implementation. Principals recognized that by investing in teachers' knowledge, they laid the groundwork for improved student achievement and sustained instructional improvement.

The concepts of modeling and building relational practices further illustrate how leadership behaviors can directly influence school culture and instructional effectiveness. Principals stressed the importance of modeling the values, attitudes, and behaviors they expected from their teachers. This included demonstrating a willingness to learn, being transparent about challenges, and showing vulnerability as a way to build trust and foster authentic relationships. PP3 shared, “Motivation is great, but if we expect kids to have deadlines and follow expectations, we have to be willing to do our end of the deal and model the behavior.” This sentiment was echoed across interviews, as principals consistently connected effective leadership to authenticity, visibility, and the ability to form strong, supportive relationships. Ultimately, building capacity through both knowledge and connection emerged as a cornerstone of leadership in standards-based instructional reform.

### *Analysis of RQ3*

The analysis of the data from RQ3 revealed two central themes, Intentional and Balanced Leadership Practices and Building Capacity through Knowledge and Relationships, which together encapsulate the leadership practices necessary to support teachers in implementing standards-based learning. These themes reflect the complex role principals play in balancing strategic, transactional leadership, including setting clear expectations and ensuring accountability, with transformational practices that empower, inspire, and cultivate trust among staff. Principals emphasized the importance of being deliberate in their leadership choices, adapting their approaches based on context, and creating a culture where it is safe to learn from mistakes. This intentional blending of

structure and support allows leaders to guide instructional change while fostering ownership and resilience among teachers.

Equally important was the emphasis on building capacity through strong relationships and professional knowledge. Principals recognized that long-term instructional change depends not only on compliance with new expectations but also on deep teacher understanding and confidence. To that end, they prioritized ongoing professional learning, modeled the behaviors they expected, and demonstrated vulnerability to strengthen relational trust. These leadership actions helped create a culture of continuous growth, where educators felt supported and equipped to take instructional risks. Together, these themes highlight that effective leadership in standards-based reform is rooted in both strategy and humanity; an intentional, balanced effort to move systems forward while uplifting the people within them.

The analysis of RQ3 highlighted that effective leadership in implementing standards-based learning requires a thoughtful balance of strategy, support, and relational trust. When examined through the lens of Senge's (1990) disciplines, to be effective, principals must navigate both transformational and transactional leadership practices, setting clear expectations (systems thinking) while also inspiring and empowering teachers (personal mastery) through ongoing learning and authentic relationships (team learning). By intentionally modeling desired behaviors (mental models), building capacity through professional knowledge, and fostering a culture of trust (shared vision), school leaders create the conditions necessary for meaningful and sustainable instructional change.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

A critical responsibility of the researcher is establishing the trustworthiness of the data. The qualitative equivalent of validity and reliability in quantitative research, trustworthiness ensures that a study's results are rigorous and can be trusted by readers and other researchers (Stahl & King, 2020). In other words, when readers analyze a written work, they will have confidence in the information the researcher has presented. While qualitative research is not intended to be replicated – descriptive data can be interpreted multiple ways – there are four critical elements in trustworthiness that must be met to establish confidence in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A detailed discussion of these follows.

#### **Credibility**

Establishing credibility in qualitative research ensures alignment between the data collected and the research questions posed. According to Burkholder et al., (2020), a study is considered credible when it accurately and authentically represents the perspectives of its participants. In this study, multiple strategies were employed to enhance credibility. First, the data presented accurately reflected participants' experiences. Each participant demonstrated expertise on the topic under investigation, and the interview questions were designed to elicit information pertinent to the research focus. Transcripts remained unaltered, and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and provide feedback to ensure accuracy. In addition, peer debriefing was employed as an additional measure to enhance credibility. Together these approaches contributed to the rigor and trustworthiness of the study

**Transferability**

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be applied or extended to other contexts, populations, or settings. According to Burkholder et al., (2020), a study should have relevance beyond its immediate setting. In this study, thick descriptions were utilized to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the research context and participant expectations. Direct quotations from participant interviews were included in the analysis, and sufficient evidence was presented to substantiate the findings for each research question. These strategies collectively ensure that readers can evaluate the potential applicability of the study's findings to other contexts or settings.

**Dependability**

Dependability is established by demonstrating consistency and reliability throughout the processes of data collection, analysis, and reporting (Stahl & King, 2020). Dependability in research can be effectively strengthened through peer review or debriefing. In this study, a colleague examined the raw data and engaged in discussions with the researcher regarding the analysis and findings. This process enhances dependability by fostering accountability, ensuring the researcher adheres to a rigorous and careful approach. Additionally, the professional expertise of the peer reviewer not only reinforces the researcher's credibility but also instills trust in the integrity of the data and the research process.

## **Confirmability**

In qualitative research, confirmability pertains to the extent to which study findings can be validated or substantiated by other researchers. Confirmability ensures that results are shaped by the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's biases or assumptions (Burkholder et al., 2020). In this study, clear documentation was provided throughout the research process, upholding the integrity of the data and confirming that the findings emerge from the participants' experiences and narratives and not the researcher's predispositions. This ensures that the conclusions are grounded in the data and not in the researcher's biases.

## **Summary**

This basic qualitative study examined the experiences and challenges of grades 6-12 principals as they support standards-based learning. The research was guided by three key questions and examined the perspectives of 13 grades 6-12 principals and assistant principals from a single midwestern state, utilizing Peter Senge's five disciplines of effective learning organizations as the conceptual framework. Data collection involved semistructured interviews conducted using both Zoom video conferencing and face-to-face interactions. The audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed using in vivo coding, with pattern coding employed to identify overarching categories and key themes. Thick descriptions were used to enhance both transferability of the findings and the achievement of data saturation. Data saturation was met in 11 interviews; however, two additional interviews were conducted for a total of 13. Coding was iterative, and codes and categories evolved throughout the analysis. The final codes effectively captured the

participants' experiences and challenges, addressing the research questions. The results, along with conclusions and recommendations, will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms at the study sites. Thirteen middle school, high school, and combined grades 6-12 building principals and assistant principals were interviewed using semistructured questions based on three research questions. The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

RQ1: What are the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 in supporting content-area teachers in implementing standards-based learning in content-area classrooms, and what challenges were experienced?

RQ2: What resources do principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 need to support content-area teachers in the implementation of standards-based instructional practices?

RQ3: How do the experiences of principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 frame the perceived influence of transactional and transformational leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms?

While perceptions of district-level leadership and teachers concerning standards-based learning had been explored in prior research, there was a gap in practice regarding the experiences of the instructional leaders responsible at the building level (principals and assistant principals). These questions allowed for an in-depth analysis of the experiences of principals.

The results indicated that effective implementation of standards-based learning depends on strategic leadership and sustainable support systems. Principals should balance transformational and transactional leadership by setting clear expectations, modeling best practices, and fostering trust through authentic relationships. Building a shared vision and utilizing distributed leadership practices were identified as both challenging and essential for achieving systemic change success. Time and access to aligned professional learning emerged as critical for building teacher capacity and sustaining instructional growth. Challenges such as limited time and misaligned resources underscore the need for intentional planning and tailored support. Overall, the findings highlight the complex nature of educational change and offer valuable insights for shaping future leadership practices and policies. Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and a conclusion.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Thirteen principals and assistant principals from 11 different mid-sized rural K-12 school districts in a single midwestern state were interviewed for this study. Participant responses were analyzed, sorted, coded, and organized into six major themes: building capacity through professional development and collaboration, supporting teachers with time and differentiated resources, providing time and support for implementation, accessing aligned professional resources, practicing intentional and balanced leadership, and building capacity through knowledge and relationships. Although participants shared a range of anecdotes and experiences related to standards-based learning, six overarching themes consistently emerged as the most prominent patterns in their discussions. These

six themes provide insight into the challenges, successes, and outcomes of implementing standards-based learning in 6-12 schools.

### **Building Capacity Through Professional Development and Collaboration**

Theme one emerged in response to the semistructured questions asked for RQ1. This theme emphasizes the importance of building teacher capacity. In other words, providing teachers with the tools and strategies they need to be both responsible and accountable for the learning in the classroom, especially as it relates to academic standards, is essential to creating distributed leadership and building a shared vision. A solution may involve identifying strategies that enable educators to make informed and effective decisions grounded in pertinent data that guide student learning.

This theme encompasses two essential components. First, all respondents interviewed expressed the necessity of high-quality and relevant professional development. Establishing a foundational understanding of not only the standards but also of district, school, and content-specific expectations is crucial for facilitating standards-based student learning. Having a plan in place that encourages systemic thinking and engages all buildings and grade levels creates consistency in purpose and expectations. Involving experts with prior experience in implementing these practices ensures that teachers and stakeholders receive consistent knowledge, which can then be adapted to specific content areas and classroom contexts. Several respondents highlighted the importance of cultivating an intentional focus and a clear sense of purpose. Moreover, fostering a shared vision is vital not only for professional growth but also for embracing and sustaining educational change.

Second, respondents emphasized that collaboration is a critical component of any change initiative, particularly in the implementation of standards-based learning. Engaging in collaborative discussions within professional learning contexts focused on team learning and contributed to the development of a stronger shared vision and a deeper understanding of the rationale behind the change. The exchange of challenges and successes allowed for the recognition of individual needs, fostering a more inclusive and responsive approach. Furthermore, instructional leaders serve as key facilitators in this process by demonstrating a strong commitment to standards-based learning and actively engaging with teachers to address their concerns. Collaboration not only provides stakeholders with opportunities to share their own challenges but also enables them to gather understanding from others' experiences, thereby strengthening collective capacity for change.

The findings indicate that building teacher capacity through professional development and collaboration is essential to successfully implement standards-based learning (Basque et al., 2025; DuFour & Fullan, 2020; Hord & Tobia, 2021). Respondents emphasized the need for high-quality, relevant professional development to establish a strong foundation in academic standards and institutional expectations. Engaging experienced experts ensures consistency in knowledge dissemination, allowing educators to effectively apply learning to their specific contexts. In addition, collaboration emerged as a critical factor in fostering a shared vision and facilitating meaningful change. Professional learning discussions provided opportunities for educators to exchange challenges and successes, promoting an inclusive and responsive

approach to instructional improvement. Instructional leaders play a key role in this process by demonstrating their commitment to standards-based learning and addressing teachers' concerns. By integrating targeted professional development with intentional collaboration, schools can create a more cohesive and effective approach to implementing standards-based learning, ensuring long-term success and continuous improvement.

### **Supporting Teachers with Time and Differentiated Resources and Time and Support for Implementation**

Themes two and three emerged from responses to questions targeting both RQ1 and RQ2, highlighting the critical role of time and differentiated resources in facilitating systemic change. A key challenge identified by respondents was that meaningful and sustainable change requires sufficient time for implementation (Winn et al., 2021). Establishing a shared understanding of the change process, including its purpose, relevance, and expected outcomes, is essential for ensuring stakeholder engagement and commitment. Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of recognizing the diverse needs of educators and providing resources that will support them at various stages of the transition.

Participants stressed the necessity of laying a robust foundational understanding before advancing a change initiative, advocating for a “go slow to go fast” approach. This strategy involves integrating new practices with existing knowledge and instructional strategies to promote seamless adoption and long-term success. Furthermore, instructional leaders play a pivotal role in the process by first deepening their own understanding of the change before guiding teachers through implementation. By

prioritizing intentional learning and gradual progression, schools can foster a more effective and sustainable transformation that aligns with the needs of both educators and students.

### **Access to Aligned Professional Resources**

Theme four emerged from the responses to questions 5, 6, and 7, which examined both the logistical and resource-based aspects of supporting teachers in standards-based learning while also examining the challenges that arise when these elements are lacking. A prominent concern from multiple respondents was the inadequacy of the resources provided by the state in the initial rollout of state academic standards. Specifically, district stakeholders, including administrators and teachers, reported insufficient background knowledge and a lack of comprehensive resources to fully understand either the structure or the intended purpose of the standards.

As a result of these deficiencies, respondents sought alternative resources to support their implementation efforts. Strategies included engaging in book studies, consulting outside experts, and collaborating with colleagues who had more experience with standards-based learning. These supplementary resources were perceived as essential for bridging the gaps left by state-provided materials, allowing educators to develop a more thorough understanding of the standards and their application in classroom instruction.

All respondents indicated that printed resources played a role in their experience with standards-based learning. Book studies and research articles authored by experts were the most frequently utilized materials, with several key scholars being referenced

across multiple discussions. A primary challenge identified was the need to carefully curate and limit the resources that were presented to teachers. Too many materials without a clearly defined purpose were perceived as overwhelming, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of the change initiative.

Respondents emphasized that the most effective approach to utilizing printed resources, particularly book studies, involved a core group of teachers and administrators engaging in the study first and then facilitating discussions with staff in smaller groups. This structured approach fostered greater collaboration and minimized resistance to change by creating an environment that promoted learning and growth. Additionally, the use of printed resources provided opportunities to analyze and compare the perspectives of multiple experts, allowing districts to tailor their implementation strategies to best align with their specific needs and contexts.

As previously discussed, limited time was identified as a significant resource constraint. While small groups, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and content-area teams were identified as the most effective structures for introducing new learning and facilitating change, respondents noted that it was not feasible for the principal to be actively engaged with each group on a weekly basis. The time demands associated with direct involvement with multiple teams necessitated the inclusion of additional stakeholders, such as the assistant principal, department heads, and instructional coaches, to support the process and ensure the dissemination of key information. However, a challenge that emerged was the need to establish effective communication pathways so that insights, experiences, and knowledge gained within these groups were consistently

shared with the principal. Without intentional strategies for knowledge transfer, there was a risk of fragmented alignment between leadership and decision-making, which could potentially hinder the coherence and effectiveness of the change initiative.

One of the most impactful external resources identified by respondents was the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in other districts that were farther along in the implementation process. Several respondents highlighted the value of taking teacher teams to observe professional development sessions and the practical application of standards-based learning within classroom settings. Direct exposure to these instructional practices allowed educators to visualize how the changes could be effectively implemented in their own classrooms, fostering greater engagement and buy-in for the initiative.

However, a key challenge noted was the need to carefully select observation sites. Respondents emphasized that schools or classrooms visited must align with the same instructional philosophy and set of expectations to ensure consistent messaging and avoid confusion among teachers. Despite this challenge, the ability to witness standards-based learning in practice was identified as a critical component in the change process, reinforcing the importance of experiential learning in fostering meaningful instructional change. Overall, the findings underscore the need for a strategic and intentional approach to professional learning, resource allocation, and collaborative structures to sustain meaningful educational change. Ensuring that all stakeholders are equipped with the necessary knowledge and support is essential for fostering long-term success in standards-based learning initiatives.

### **Intentional and Balanced Leadership Practices**

Questions 8, 9, and 10 served as the foundation for the development of themes five and six. Theme five centered on principals' leadership styles and practices, particularly in relation to the implementation of standards-based learning. A recurring theme across all categories was the necessity of sufficient time to ensure effective implementation. Numerous participants emphasized that establishing and faithfully executing leadership practices required intentionality. Having a clear and systemic plan was necessary to create consistency and purpose. Specifically, effective leadership entailed a deep understanding of academic standards, engagement with instructional practices, active participation in teachers' professional activities, and the courage to advocate for what leaders perceived to be the most beneficial outcome for students. A widely shared perspective among respondents was that implementing academic standards was an essential step in enhancing student learning, reinforcing the belief that if an initiative was in the best interest of students, it warranted meticulous and thoughtful consideration.

Another key aspect of theme five was the significance of a balanced leadership approach. In discussions regarding transactional and transformational leadership, multiple respondents indicated that transformational leadership was characterized by fostering a shared vision and cultivating relationships with stakeholders. These components were viewed as crucial for securing teacher buy-in and fostering a sense of personal accountability among teachers. However, respondents also acknowledged the indispensable role of transactional leadership in ensuring organizational effectiveness.

Transactional leadership was associated with establishing clear expectations and a structured framework designed to promote uniformity in outcomes (Davis et al., 2022). From an educational perspective, the principle that students should adhere to deadlines and expectations necessitates a parallel structure for teachers. While many participants acknowledged that enforcing accountability was challenging and, at times, uncomfortable, there was a consensus that maintaining a consistent and school-wide expectation for instructional processes was vital to achieving equitable and meaningful learning outcomes. Overall, theme five highlights the necessity of a balanced leadership approach that combines vision-driven engagement and structured accountability, ensuring that the implementation of academic standards is both effective and sustainable in supporting student success.

### **Building Capacity through Knowledge and Relationships**

Theme six underscores the importance of building stakeholder capacity to collectively assume leadership responsibilities. Providing opportunities for stakeholders to build personal mastery and growth regarding the standards-based changes was necessary for both understanding and engagement in the process. Facilitating collaboration and providing educators with the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions highlight the importance of professional growth and the development of trust within the learning environment. The demonstration of vulnerability in leadership reinforces the notion that the process of leadership is equally important as the outcomes because it ensures that all stakeholders comprehend both the relevance and application of academic standards in student learning. Furthermore, a shared vision prevents any single

individual from becoming the sole authority on knowledge; instead, leadership is approached as a collaborative, team-driven process where shared responsibility and collective decision-making shape the outcome. Ultimately, Theme six emphasized that fostering a collaborative, capacity-building approach to leadership not only strengthens professional growth and trust but also ensures that decision-making remains a shared, inclusive process that enhances student learning and institutional effectiveness.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The transferability of this study was limited by its specific context and scope, which focused on 13 principals and assistant principals from middle schools, high schools, and institutions serving grades 6-12 within rural K-12 districts in a single midwestern state. To diminish this limitation, thick descriptions were incorporated to provide sufficient context, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the study's findings to their own settings. Another limitation of this study was the small sample size of the participant pool. Both principals and assistant principals were invited to participate in this study as per established parameters; however, only two assistant principals responded. While data saturation was effectively demonstrated with 13 active participants, a lack of respondents to the request for interviews was a significant limiting factor for transferability. Finally, although the participants came from 11 different districts in a single midwestern state, only rural districts were included in the study. For deeper consideration, including urban districts in the study could have provided different perspectives in the data. Researcher bias did not prove to be a limiting factor.

## Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine grades 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' experiences and challenges, the resources needed, and the perceived influence of their leadership in the implementation of standards-based learning in content-area classrooms at the study sites. All participants were principals and assistant principals serving in mid-sized rural K-12 schools, specifically in middle schools (6-8), high schools (9-12), and combined grade 6-12 buildings. Given that assistant principals often collaborate closely with teachers and may have more direct engagement in instructional support than principals (Somoza-Norton & Neuman, 2021), future research should consider expanding the focus to include the perspectives of the assistant principal as a core instructional leader and to consider assistant principals from larger districts in addition to other similar rural contexts (Martinez-Garcia et al., 2025). Examining their perspectives could provide deeper insights into the complexities of supporting teachers in implementing academic standards-based learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Additionally, another recommendation for future research is to broaden the scope of the study to include urban school districts. The diverse student populations of these districts may present unique instructional leadership challenges for principals and assistant or associate principals (Peters et al., 2025). Investigating experiences and challenges in urban schools could contribute further to the understanding of leadership practices in varied educational contexts, enriching the discourse on instructional leadership in standards-based education (Burg et al., 2023).

### **Implications**

The outcomes of this research may contribute to positive social change by equipping principals and assistant principals of grades 6-12 with defined practices to more effectively support teachers in implementing standards-based learning. Outcomes of the study identify and define the challenges encountered by principals in grades 6-12 and delineate practices and strategies to effectively support leadership practices within a standards-based curriculum. These understandings may facilitate stronger and more consistent instruction that ensures students are college- and career-ready and prepared to compete in a global marketplace.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight several effective instructional and leadership practices that can enhance teacher support in implementing standards-based learning. As instructional leaders, principals and assistant principals must cultivate teacher capacity by fostering a shared vision for change, promoting a deep understanding of the significance of standards-based learning, and creating a collaborative environment where vulnerability is both accepted and encouraged. Ensuring that professional development opportunities are accessible, consistent, and relevant is essential, as is allowing for sufficient time for meaningful change to take place. Furthermore, effective leadership must be intentional, integrating both transactional and transformational approaches; transactional to establish expectations and structure the change process, and transformational to strengthen relationships and create a culture of trust and continuous learning. By strategically blending these leadership practices, principals can create a supportive and sustainable

framework for standards-based learning, encouraging improved instructional outcomes and professional growth within their schools.

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Appendix A: Email Invitation to Participate

Subject Line: Research study regarding 6-12 principals' and assistant principals' role in the implementation of standards-based learning

You are invited to share your views for a study titled: Experiences and Challenges of Grades 6-12 Principals Implementing Standards-Based Learning

One 30 minute interview that will be audio recorded (no video recording)

To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

Interviews will take place during January,

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

Currently working as a building principal or assistant principal in grades 6-12

Working in a school district that has or is currently implementing standards-based learning

Please respond to this email or directly email XXX@XXXX.XXX to let the researcher know of your interest.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Describe the strategies or approaches you use to support content-area teachers in implementing standards-based learning in their classrooms. How do you determine which supports are most effective?
2. What role does professional development play in helping content-area teachers implement standards-based learning? Can you share specific examples of training or initiatives that have been impactful?
3. What challenges have you encountered when supporting teachers with standards-based learning implementation? How have you addressed these challenges, and what lessons have you learned from these experiences?
4. How do you assess the effectiveness of standards-based learning implementation in content-area classrooms? What evidence or feedback informs your understanding of its impact on student learning?
5. What specific resources do you feel are currently lacking or insufficient to effectively support content-area teachers in implementing standards-based instructional practices? How do these gaps affect your ability to provide support?
6. If you could prioritize the types of resources - such as time, funding, materials, or training - needed to support teachers in standards-based instruction, what would those priorities be, and why?
7. What external resources, such as district support, professional organizations, or technology tools, would be most beneficial for helping you and your teachers

succeed with standards-based practices? Can you describe any instances where such resources made a difference?

8. Can you describe how your leadership style – whether transactional, transformational, or a combination – has influenced your approach to supporting standards-based learning in content-area classrooms? Can you share specific examples?
9. How do you think your leadership practices affect teachers' motivation, engagement, and willingness to adopt standards-based learning? What differences have you observed when employing transactional vs. transformational strategies?
10. Looking back on your experiences, how would you compare the effectiveness of transactional and transformational leadership in overcoming challenges and achieving success in implementing standards-based learning? What lessons have you drawn from these experiences?

## Appendix C: Table of Codes Extracted from Interview Questions

## Codes Extracted from Interview Questions

Interview Questions	In Vivo Coding	Pattern Coding	Thematic Analysis
IQ 1 Describe the strategies/ approaches you use to support content-area teachers in SBL.	PP1: "Essential standards are guided by the state academic standards." "Helping teachers work through what students need to learn." "How do we know that students are learning" PP2: Make it more real world" "I would rather explain it in a way that makes sense, and it's practical, but also it's the best thing we have right now." PP3: "Year one has to be very foundational, very factual, very tight on what we are learning" "We need to know the standards." PP4: "Building an intentional focus" "Build foundational knowledge." "Creating the why" "Time to wrap their heads around the purpose" PP5: "Take the long way to get there" "Changing the mindset" "Identifying and unpacking standards" PP6: "my level of passion for and belief in SBL" "Collegial leadership to support change."	What students need to learn Very tight on what students are learning  Intentional focus Build foundational knowledge Change the mindset  Know the standards Identify and unpack  Collegial leadership to support the change Passion for the change	RQ1: Experiences and challenges Experiences *Change the mindset *Focus on the learning *Utilize professional learning to build shared understanding *Collaborative conversation *Differentiate learning *Lean on experts  Challenges *Time *Decision-making *Not listening

<p>IQ 2 What role does professional development play?</p>	<p>PP1: "Professional learning is an absolute vital part of change." "A huge part was the collaborative conversations that took part during professional development." PP2: "It plays a critical role at the beginning" "Build a foundation" PP3: "Important to give everyone the same basic understanding" "Talk to the experts in the field." PP5 "We have learning to do" "Build shared learning." PP6: "Professional learning is huge" "Taking the time to get the foundational elements in place." "Reframing the mind" Professional learning is necessary to make a change."</p>	<p>Professional learning is vital for change Huge Build shared learning Talk to experts in the field  Critical role for building foundational understanding Give everyone same basic understanding  Collaborative conversations Change the thinking</p>
<p>IQ 3 Specific examples of training or initiatives that have been important. How do you assess the effectiveness of implementation practices?</p>	<p>PP1: "Bring in the experts" "Differentiated professional learning for teachers based on where they are in the process." PP2: "Consultation and support for teachers" area" PP5: "A significant amount of sharing with schools in the" "Collaborating with people who have done this before." "Multiple conferences with experts" PP6: "This is a better way of communicating" "Students are using the language we are using (academic vocabulary)"</p>	<p>Bring in the experts Collaborate with people who have done this before Conferences  Differentiated learning</p>

IQ 4 What challenges have you encountered?	<p>PP1: "Time is always a challenge. Change takes time."</p> <p>"Onboarding new staff. How do we bring them up to speed?"</p> <p>"Lots of decision making and having consistent expectations."</p> <p>PP2: "Trying to teach rubrics and how to create rubrics"</p> <p>"Trying to mold traditional grades into a proficiency scale or standard."</p> <p>"Overcoming the break in trust when we did something we had to backtrack."</p> <p>PP3: "Go slow to go fast"</p> <p>"Not listening to teachers and what they were ready to do."</p> <p>PP4: "The autonomy to make decisions for my building"</p> <p>"Keeping things positive as we move forward, especially when the state changes the expectation in the middle."</p> <p>PP5: "We're building the plane as we're flying it. We realized that our assessments are measuring what the standards are asking."</p> <p>"Confusing to teachers when I don't know what I'm talking about."</p> <p>"How do I incorporate the changes into what we know works for us?"</p> <p>PP6: "Resistance to the idea of change"</p> <p>"The feeling of losing control."</p>	<p>Time</p> <p>Going too fast</p> <p>Training new staff</p> <p>Knowing how to support teachers</p> <p>Not listening to teachers</p> <p>Resistance to change</p> <p>The autonomy to make decisions for my building</p> <p>Ensuring what we are assessing is the learning in the standards</p>	
IQ 5	PP1: "State resources do not support the changes.	State resources	RQ 2: Resources

What resources have been insufficient or have you found lacking?	<p>As a district, we don't really go to state resources."</p> <p>PP2: "support for extension or enrichment"</p> <p>PP5: "there is never enough time"</p> <p>"follow-up from the state for changes to the standards"</p> <p>PP6: "We have spent some time with texts. Be careful about the texts you choose, and do not give too many choices."</p> <p>"Going and seeing what other people are doing is great, but I will not send you just anywhere. If I want it to look a certain way and act a certain way, that is what I want you to see."</p>	<p>Support for changes at the state level</p> <p>Time</p> <p>Too many texts/choices</p> <p>Having the resources match what we need</p> <p>Personnel to support instruction</p> <p>Support that knows the state expectations</p> <p>Resources that support the work we want</p> <p>Reading your people and what they need</p> <p>Time for collaboration</p> <p>Time for planning</p> <p>Time to make the changes</p>	<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Time</li> <li>*Personnel to help</li> <li>*Book studies</li> <li>*Conferences/Trainings</li> <li>*Consistent expectations</li> </ul> <p>Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Too many choices</li> <li>*No guidance from state</li> <li>*Matching the resources to what is needed</li> <li>*Not enough time</li> </ul>
IQ 6 Prioritize the types of resources necessary to support teachers.	<p>PP1: "Personnel specifically assigned to support instruction"</p> <p>"Time to make the changes"</p> <p>"Conferences and experts are great, but they are not based on the standards of the state, and the needs of state public school students."</p> <p>PP2: "Time for collaboration"</p> <p>PP3: "Having common planning time for grade-level teams to collaborate"</p> <p>"Don't provide too many resources to overwhelm teachers"</p> <p>PP4: "Time. I can't do everything I want to do or be everywhere I want to be"</p>	<p>Consistent expectations</p> <p>Narrowing the focus</p> <p>Book studies</p> <p>Experts</p> <p>Time and training</p> <p>Mid-level service agency support</p>	

	<p>PP5: “Consistent expectations. How do we build those?”</p> <p>PP6: “Resources that support the work we want, experts, colleagues, etc., and time to make it happen”</p>		
<p>IQ 7</p> <p>What external resources are beneficial for helping support teachers?</p>	<p>PP1: “Book studies”</p> <p>“Mid-level education service agencies to support our work”</p> <p>PP2: “Marzano proficiency scales”</p> <p>PP3: “Getting help from a mid-level service agency”</p> <p>“Narrowing the focus of the resources we use”</p> <p>PP4: “We have not decided on a bigger definition of what a 4 looks like. Where do we get that support?”</p> <p>PP5: “Time and training”</p> <p>“Our leadership team needs some outside learning on how to guide those next steps”</p> <p>PP6: “I think you have to read your people a little bit and understand where you are going to be”</p> <p>“You don’t have to make all your steps at one time</p>	<p>Focusing on learning</p> <p>Taking time for the changes</p> <p>Be intentional about leading</p> <p>Taking time to build foundational understanding</p>	
<p>IQ 8</p> <p>Describe how your leadership style has influenced your support to teachers with SBL?</p>	<p>PP1: “My leadership style emphasizes learning. We make changes over time and embrace SBL through professional learning.”</p> <p>PP2: “It has everything to do with recognizing what your people are good at and letting them be excellent”</p> <p>“Making it a place where we can try things</p>	<p>Recognizing what your people are good at</p> <p>Trusting your teachers</p> <p>Letting them be excellent</p> <p>Making it safe to be vulnerable</p>	<p>RQ 3: Leadership</p> <p>Roles/responsibilities</p> <p>*Be intentional</p> <p>*Go slow</p> <p>*Build foundational knowledge</p> <p>*Focus on the learning</p> <p>Challenges</p> <p>*Create the balance</p> <p>*Set expectations</p> <p>*Be a strong model</p> <p>*Show vulnerability</p>

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and mess up and be okay with that”  
 PP3: “It has helped me be very intentional about leading”  
 “Knowing that I am willing to stand up for what I believe is right helped me get a big win in that first year”  
 PP4: “Teachers hide behaviors that they do not want to change to avoid the penalties. So, I have really tried to, like, no penalties. The only penalty is not trying.”  
 PP5: “We have to make it okay to say that we don’t get this, or we don’t agree with this”  
 PP6: “I believe that there are really great practices that take time for us to get down; but once those foundational elements are in place, the rest of the work is easier because the framework to make changes is already in place”

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<p>IQ 9          How do you think your leadership practices affect teachers’ motivation, engagement, and willingness to adopt SBL?</p>	<p>PP1: “I didn’t tell teachers what to change or revise; I wanted them to figure it out, to use the learning we had done”          “We are taking our time and learning how to measure student achievement based on the learning”          PP2: “I will often admit when I am wrong, how I plan to fix it, and what I would have done differently”          PP3: “If it’s the right thing for kids, it’s what we should be doing”          PP5: “I do. I have a strong relationship with</p>	<p>Give the tools and let them think for themselves          Ask questions, but do not force the answers          Showing vulnerability          Demonstrating it is the right thing for students          Know your priorities</p>
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	<p>them. I am good at bringing people together and asking questions, but I am not a holder of knowledge.”</p> <p>PP6: “If you don’t know what your priorities are, you don’t know what your standards are, and you don’t know what your assessments should be”</p> <p>“Be practical. If we can be practical in the way that we are going to go about the work and why we are doing it, the world really opens up.”</p>	
<p>IQ 10 Looking back on your experiences, how would you compare the effectiveness of your leadership in overcoming challenges and achieving success in implementing SBL?</p>	<p>PP1: “Different people definitely thrive under different styles of leadership and change”</p> <p>“There has to be a balance between transactional and transformational leadership”</p> <p>“Transformational, we tried to motivate; help them find motivation, find inspiration, and to buy in on their own while also letting them know very very clearly that there was a building expectation for students’ learning process”</p> <p>“Putting front and center what our goals are related to student learning in the classroom.”</p> <p>PP2: “I’m probably not as harsh as I should be with that, but I come from a place of assuming everybody’s doing the best they can”</p> <p>PP3: “...if we expect kids to have deadlines and follow expectations, we have to be willing to</p>	<p>Know your people</p> <p>Lean on colleagues who have been through the process</p> <p>Balance between transformational and transactional elements</p> <p>Listen to your teachers but be clear with goals</p> <p>Be very clear with expectations</p> <p>Put goals for student learning at the front of all we do</p> <p>Being strong models for behavior</p>

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do our end of the deal  
and model the behavior”

PP4: “Go slow to go  
far”

PP5: “Lean on people  
who are a lot smarter  
than us – experts and  
colleagues.”

“Don’t go too fast, but  
don’t allow people to  
drag their feet.”

PP6: “I think it’s a  
really symbiotic balance  
between  
transformational  
leadership and  
transactional leadership  
and how you’re trying  
to get those two things  
done.”

“The transformational  
side is the conversations  
and discussions and the  
looking at it together.

The transactional side is  
also critical because if  
you do not tell people  
what you want it to look  
like, you get 1000  
iterations.”

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