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Faith-Based School Leaders' Strategies for Addressing Achievement Gaps Since the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Jolene M. Culver

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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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Faith-Based School Leaders' Strategies for Addressing Achievement Gaps Since the
COVID-19 Pandemic

by

Jolene M. Culver

MA, Wright State University, 2015

BS, The Ohio State University, 2008

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

Walden University

May 2026

Abstract

The problem that was addressed through this study is that faith-based school leaders are challenged to support teachers to address student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. Grounded in Bass's transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate strategies veteran faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in addressing student achievement gaps in six Ohio districts that had a minimum of 50 students. For this basic qualitative design, semistructured interviews were conducted with one faith-based school leader from each of the six Ohio districts. Thematic coding yielded four themes encompassing the strategies that veteran faith-based school leaders provide: (a) academic support, (b) collaboration, (c) communication, and (d) encouragement. The results must be interpreted with caution as data saturation could not be reached. Although each participating school leader indicated some strategies, none provided evidence of all the strategies that emerged from the themes. Therefore, school leaders might be able to strengthen their support of teachers when participating in professional development. Consequently, a 3-day professional development program was developed for school leaders, which focuses on aligning their transformational leadership goals with academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. School leaders who are better trained might be able to support teachers, which, in turn, might benefit the students.

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Dedication

I want to begin by honoring God for His inspiration of this project study, giving me the courage to pursue my dream of a doctoral degree, and the strength to complete this work. I believe in education, and I believe academic success is a Biblical principle that faith-based schools can hold as a high priority, as well as moral and spiritual well-being. I want to honor my husband, Scott E. Culver, for his love and support throughout this entire process. He encouraged me and inspired me to keep going when the work became difficult. To my children, Justin Miller, Brandon Miller, and Paige Mackenzie, who are my joy and my world. Thank you for being my constant. Thank you for having faith in me and supporting all my academic efforts from my associate's degree all the way to this moment. I pray you always pursue education and continue to be a lifelong learner. Finally, I want to honor my friend and role model, Nelie Abayisenga. You encouraged and carried me through this entire process when I did not think I could go any further. You are and will always be my friend. To each of you, thank you for what you gave of yourselves so I could accomplish my dream.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to all my friends and family who have supported me and my dream. My time has been limited, and I missed important events to work on this degree. Thank you for your patience and understanding. Thank you to Dr. Flanders for your time and dedication to my work. Your help in this study and your unlimited advice led to a successful project study for which I am very proud.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The problem that was addressed through this study is that faith-based school leaders are challenged to support teachers to address student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the achievement gap widened for students because of inconsistent educational settings, technology challenges, and resource inequality (Horn et al., 2023). As restrictions from the pandemic were lifted, many faith-based schools experienced an increase in enrollment (Johnston, 2023). Parents found faith-based schools had smaller class sizes, opened sooner, and had educators with a holistic mindset who cared for the entire child (Bachrach, 2021; Marshall et al., 2023). With an increase in enrollment, the student academic population in faith-based schools became more diverse (Harmey & Moss, 2023).

According to Larson (2022), students in a faith-based school in Ohio scored almost 20% lower in core subjects on the NWEA MAPP assessment in 2021–2022. Educators in faith-based schools are often noncertified teachers with less pay and less experience than public school teachers (Witwer, 2023). Their strength is in their personal connection and moral influence on the holistic child (Witwer, 2023). Floyd (2023) claimed that a teacher's confidence or efficacy directly affects student learning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the in-person teaching model and holistic learning environments were replaced with isolated individual learning experiences in faith-based schools (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023). Extended school closures and changes in daily

educational procedures resulted in learning loss or delayed learning for many students (Horn et al., 2023).

Rationale

According to the Ohio Department of Education (2023), the Ohio state assessments in 2021 show an overall 8% decrease in English Language Arts and a 15% decrease in mathematics from the prior year's results (see Table 1). Furthermore, the third-grade reading assessment showed a 20% decrease from the results of the prior year.

Table 1

Spring 2021 Assessment Results in the State of Ohio

Demographic group	English Language Arts			Mathematics		
	2017– 2018	2018– 2019	2020– 2021	2017– 2018	2018– 2019	2020– 2021
			%			
All students	63.7	64.6	57.0	60.4	61.0	48.2
Economically disadvantaged	48.4	49.5	39.5	44.9	45.5	30.0
Students with disabilities	28.3	28.9	20.3	27.7	28.2	17.0
English learners	41.8	43.7	35.3	45.4	45.7	31.1
White, non-Hispanic	71.0	71.7	64.9	68.1	68.9	56.9
Black, non-Hispanic	37.3	39.3	28.9	31.6	32.5	17.1
Hispanic	49.6	51.2	42.0	47.2	47.9	32.6
Multiracial	58.9	59.6	50.4	53.9	54.6	38.9

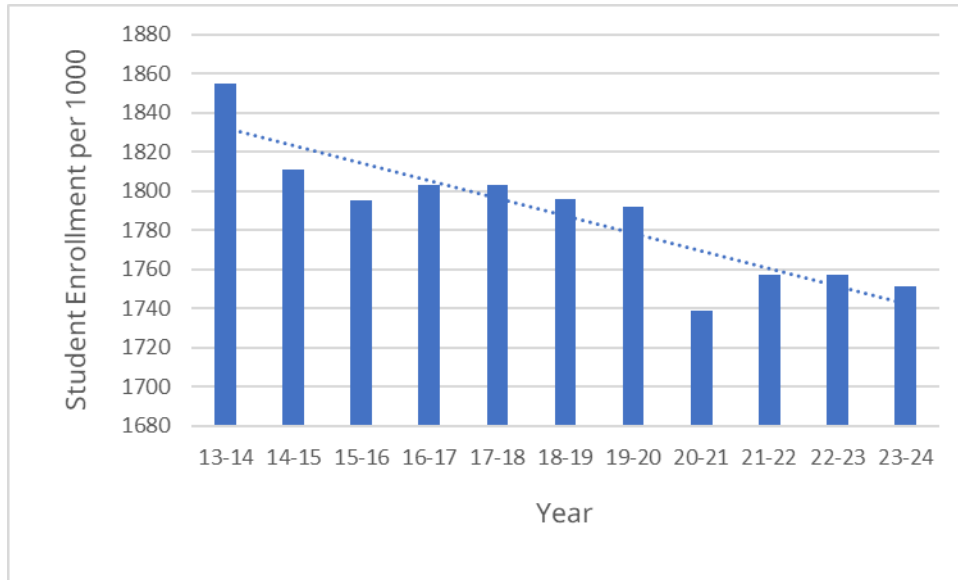
Note. Adapted from *School & District Results 2020–2021* (p. 2), by Ohio Department of Education, n.d.

(https://reportcardstorage.education.ohio.gov/2021appsettings/State_Report_Card.pdf?sv=2020-08-04&ss=b&srt=sco&sp=rlx&se=2031-07-28T05:10:18Z&st=2021-07-

[27T21:10:18Z&spr=https&sig=nPOvW%2Br2caitHi%2F8WhYwU7xqalHo0dFrudeJq%2B%2Bmyuo%3D](https://www.ohio.gov/ohio-department-of-education/achievements/2023-2024-annual-report)). In the public domain.

For decades, educational leaders have discussed strategies to reduce the student achievement gaps in Ohio K-12 schools (Ford, 2020). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to close the academic achievement gap has intensified as the achievement gap has become wider (Horn et al., 2023). One researcher explained that school leaders are challenged to support teachers in addressing student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic (Atha, 2022).

Public schools in Ohio decreased in enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2020 by about 3%, which is higher than prior years that averaged a decrease in enrollment between 0.03% to 0.4% as shown in Figure 1 (Ohio Department of Education, 2023). These students moved to other educational settings (Harmey & Moss, 2023). According to the Ohio Department of Education (2024), as seen in Figure 2, in the 2019–2020 school year, 426 faith-based schools were opened in Ohio. By the 2022–2023 school year, 620 faith-based schools were actively operating in Ohio (Ohio Department of Education, 2024). A school leader in a private, faith-based school stated that while student enrollment is increasing, so is the demand for strategies to educate a wider range of academic abilities within the classroom. Faith-based school leaders are challenged to support the increase in student enrollment as a more academically diverse population fills classrooms in these faith-based schools, the principal stated.

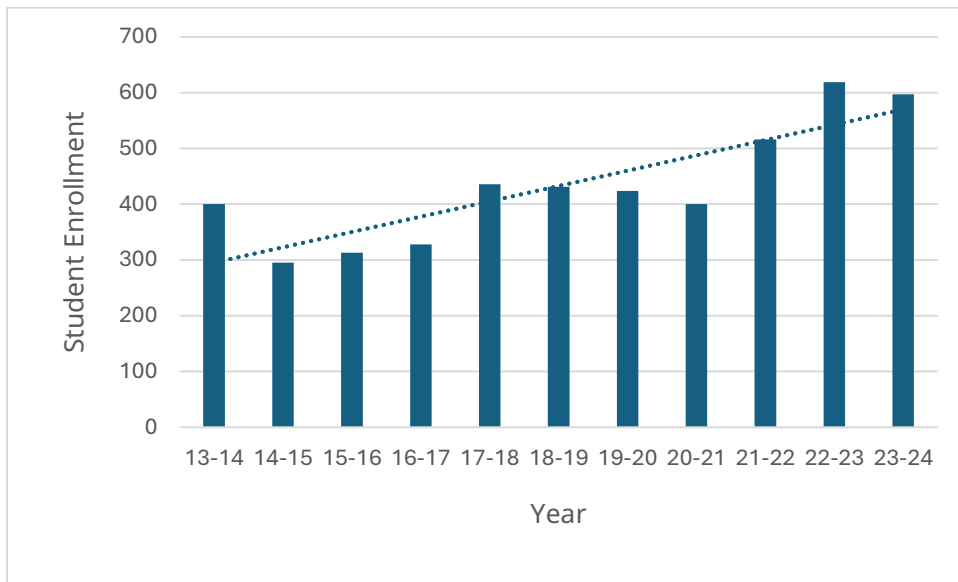
Figure 1*Student Enrollment in Public Ohio Schools*

Note. Adapted from *Traditional Report Cards*, by Ohio Department of Education, n.d.

([https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Data/Report-Card-Resources/Traditional-Report-](https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Data/Report-Card-Resources/Traditional-Report-Cards)

[Cards](https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Data/Report-Card-Resources/Traditional-Report-Cards)). In the public domain.

Figure 2*Student Enrollment in Nonchartered, Nonpublic Ohio Schools*



Note. Adapted from *Non-chartered Nonpublic Schools*, by Ohio Department of Education, n.d. (<https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Ohio-Education-Options/Private-Schools/Non-Chartered-Non-Tax-School-Information>). In public domain.

The lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event in which educators in faith-based schools were unprepared and lacked strategies to transition into online instruction effectively (Shula et al., 2022). A greater number of children are enrolling in faith-based schools and come to school academically underprepared since the COVID-19 pandemic (Johnston, 2023; Shula et al., 2022). One school leader emphasized the need for more differentiation as children attending faith-based schools have greater mathematics and reading deficiencies (Floyd, 2023). According to faith-based school leaders, students have significant achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic (Floyd, 2023). One school leader claimed the students who were enrolled in public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic are further

behind than the students in faith-based schools during this same time, thus widening the academic achievement gap in classrooms. The purpose of this basic qualitative project study was to investigate strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in addressing student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Definition of Terms

The following are key terms for this study:

Extended school closures: School closures of 5 or more unplanned days, not including breaks (Jahan et al., 2022).

Faith-based schools: Schools in the United States that are nontaxed, nonchartered, nonpublic educational institutions (Ohio Department of Education, 2024).

Learning loss: “The reduction of performance of skills that have already been learned by a student” (Horn et al., 2023, p. 127)

School leader: An educational authority that can make daily decisions regarding the academic, social, and physical well-being of the student population (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Significance of the Study

Faith-based school leaders are challenged to support teachers in addressing the academic achievement gap following the COVID-19 pandemic for several reasons, as outlined in the literature review (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). In faith-based schools, school leaders are challenged with the academic achievement gap because there is a lack of government funding and less highly qualified teaching staff than in public schools (Witwer, 2023). The results of this basic qualitative project study could provide

knowledge and instructional strategies that school leaders can use to support teachers in closing current and future academic achievement gaps. When the academic achievement gaps are closed in school districts, students are successful and able to grow in academic and social areas, such as furthering their educational path to college and career readiness. Social change takes place when academic achievement gaps are closed by improving mental health and reducing stress in families, increasing confidence among teachers, school leaders, and the community (Harmey & Moss, 2023). The results of this study could be transferred to other types of schools, such as charter schools, private schools, and public schools, because transformational leadership is a framework that is not specifically used in faith-based schools exclusively. The results of this study could be beneficial in any setting that has achievement gaps in K-12 schools.

Research Question

The purpose of the basic qualitative project study was to investigate strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in addressing the student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the achievement gap widened for students because of the inconsistent educational settings, technology challenges, and resource inequality (Horn et al., 2023). As the restrictions from the pandemic were lifted, many faith-based schools experienced an increase in enrollment (Johnston, 2023). With an increase in enrollment, the student population became more diverse in faith-based schools (Harmey & Moss, 2023). For these reasons, in this project study I used the following research question: What strategies do faith-

based school leaders use to support teachers to address student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic?

Review of the Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenging time for students and educators in the educational realm (Swindle, 2024). Academic achievement gaps widened for many reasons following the COVID-19 pandemic (Sorkin et al., 2023). Lack of technology accessibility was one barrier to student learning (Sorkin et al., 2023). The lack of skills to work remotely for students and teachers also made student learning difficult (Harmey & Moss, 2023). Teachers were not trained to teach remotely, students were not taught how to learn solely from screen time and computer work, and parents were untrained in supporting their children through the technology transition (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Finally, indirect factors such as the increase in mental illness due to isolation, anxiety from fear of sickness and death, the rise in family violence, and food insecurities affected the student academic achievement gaps that followed the COVID-19 pandemic (Engzell et al., 2021). The problem that was addressed in this basic qualitative project study was that faith-based school leaders are challenged to support teachers in addressing student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Search Strategy

According to Pantic and Hamilton (2024), conducting a review of the literature should be exhaustive, extensive, and replicable. Substantial amounts of information are gathered by searching broad topics. As I narrowed the scope, I used more concise terms. To find applicable literature for this basic qualitative project study, I began my search

through the Walden University library database and Google Scholar. Other databases I used included ERIC, Sage, ProQuest, Taylor Francis Online, and Academic Search Complete. I searched for peer-reviewed articles that were published between 2019 and 2025. I used key terms that focused on an overarching topic. Entering the terms: *academic achievement OR academic performance OR academic success, and COVID-19 OR coronavirus OR 2019 pandemic*, 14,061 results ensued. I reduced the search to *student achievement gap AND faith-based schools*. This produced no results. Reconfiguring the search with various combinations of *faith-based schools, Christian schools, religious schools, and parochial schools* offered results that, when paired with *COVID-19 OR pandemic*, provided results between 52-341 that were articles usable in this literature study. Additionally, the following key terms were used: *academic achievement gap, challenges, children, Christianity in schools, Christian schools, coronavirus, COVID-19, effects of COVID-19, faith-based schools, history of education, k-12 schools, learning loss, pandemic, parents, parochial schools, principals, private schools, public schools, school leaders, student success, teachers, and technology*. These terms resulted in combinations of articles that were significant in the literature study. I also used terms for the conceptual framework, such as *Bernard Bass, idealized influence, individual consideration, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and transformational leadership*. Online search engines such as the *Ohio Department of Education and the United States Department of Education* were included in the search as well. Finally, I specifically searched journals such as *Educational Researcher, Journal of*

Cases in Educational Leadership, Journal of Research on Christian Education, and Journal of School Choice.

Conceptual Framework

Transformational leadership theory originated from James Burns in 1978, who focused on shared leadership in politics (Bass, 1999a). Bernard Bass expanded the theory when he incorporated the four charismatic components (Bass, 1999b). The four components of the transformational leadership theory include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Catalano et al., 2024). This theory was later modified to be aligned with the educational setting by Leithwood in 1999 (Benson, 2022). The business model. According to Townsend (2024), transformational leadership emphasizes building relationships between school leaders and teachers to work together instead of simply supervising teacher work. In his adaptation of transformational leadership, Leithwood developed four components: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program (J. Benson et al., 2024). Transformational leadership is a leadership style that promotes staff morale and motivation through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Corbin et al., 2024). Transformational leadership shares the vision of the district and encourages personal growth through challenging staff (Corbin et al., 2024).

Transformational school leaders communicate in ways that develop teachers and empower them to make changes (Catalano et al., 2024). Idealized influence is the notion that the leader is someone with whom others want to associate and identify (Catalano et

al., 2024). Charismatic personality and moral modeling are among the highest attributes of a transformational leader (Corbin et al., 2024). The leader is confident in his or her ability to lead; therefore, others will be confident in the leader as well (Serin & Akkaya, 2020).

Inspirational motivation is the ability the leader possesses to motivate others to join the mission because their emotional conscience is affected by the leader (Catalano et al., 2024). Transformational leaders affect individuals through motivation and positively change the social system in which they influence (Mlinarevic et al., 2022).

Transformational school leaders openly provide the vision and create a sense of purpose for the teachers in the classrooms (Serin & Akkaya, 2020). Through motivation, transformational school leaders allow teachers to make changes, withholding restrictions and allowing failure along the path to success (Serin & Akkaya, 2020).

Individual consideration is the personal attention and development the leader invests in others independently (Mlinarevic et al., 2022). When a transformational school leader considers the growth of the teacher, collaboration and support are the result (Serin & Akkaya, 2020). Serin and Akkaya (2020) determined that a transformational school leader is someone who encourages the teachers to improve, which, in turn, improves the overall school. As teachers grow and develop professionally, they can contribute collaboratively to the overall goals of the district (Serin & Akkaya, 2020). As a result of idealized influence, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation occurs (Mlinarevic et al., 2022). Intellectual stimulation is the act of the

leader encouraging others to strive intellectually toward innovation, creativity, and problem-solving (Catalano et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership theory suggests that educational leaders cultivate a climate in which teachers collaborate with school leaders to bring about positive school change (Catalano et al., 2024). Transformational leadership theory frames this study as it relates to school leadership to generate higher levels of fidelity from teachers and form a shared vision with teachers (Mahmud, 2022). Transformational leadership helps school leaders motivate teachers as they find ways to use the strengths of teachers to develop the school's effectiveness in academic success (Corbin et al., 2024).

Review of the Broader Problem

Schools across the country were academically behind the rest of the world at the end of the 20th century (Ford, 2020). *A Nation at Risk* became the forerunner for federal involvement in the public education system, in which the 1989 National Education Summit set goals for the country to regain superiority in a world of academic excellence (Benson, 2022). The business model emerged in education as school choice initiatives gave parents the ability to move their children to alternate public schools or charter schools if their current district was labeled a failing school (Ford, 2020). Standardized testing became the benchmark of accountability to determine the level of success of a given district (Hinnant-Crawford, 2023). Competition was prevalent in public schools, and inequality gaps widened even more (Ford, 2020).

The term mediocrity was used to define education during this era, and striving toward excellence was the goal of educational institutions (Benson, 2022). Areas such as

curriculum, expectations, time management, teaching protocols, and leadership were under scrutiny across the nation (Ford, 2020). In the report, recommendations were made for more rigor, measurable standards, teacher accountability, higher-quality teachers, and better use of time in and out of school (Benson, 2022). These recommendations were put into action in the 1990s with the rise of standardized tests, common state standards, and family options in high-failing areas (Ford, 2020). The century ended with the No Child Left Behind initiative brought about by Congress and signed by G.W. Bush in 2001 (Iacob & Groza, 2019).

The Educational Divide Between U.S. Public and Faith-Based Schools in the 21st Century

The purpose of education has changed dramatically since the end of the 20th century (Ilie, 2020). Students were learning to learn before the 21st century, whereas today, students are expected to prepare for life and the challenges in the economy, health, and environment (Ilie, 2020). In the 20th century, education was a means to dominate the less educated (Iacob & Groza, 2019). The 21st century began a time of technological advancements in which education became a place of interdependent opportunities to connect with the global world and learn to question all information (Ilie, 2020). While the idea of becoming positive contributors to society is still part of the democratic education system, the focus on human success leaves religious teachings out of the curriculum in the 21st century in public schools (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023).

In faith-based schools in the 21st century, education is executed through a Christian worldview (Bachrach, 2021). This holistic educational framework is how faith-

based educators bring awareness to others and empower students to contribute daily in ways that reflect Christ-like attributes (Huizenga & Mitchell, 2021). Students develop a growth mindset based on the purpose of education that aligns with Christian principles, therefore doing all they do with pleasure and for God (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023). As the 21st-century educational differences became evident to parents, students were often enrolled in faith-based schools for the Christian principles; thus, increasing enrollment (Huizenga & Mitchell, 2021).

School Choice in Public and Faith-Based Schools. School choice has elicited a variety of responses from parents who feel the public school system has declined in the moral, academic, and religious aspects of education (Johnston, 2023). Some parents choose to remove their children, others speak as advocates to bring change, and still others remain silent and stay loyal to the public education system (Dills & Norton, 2022). Ford (2020) acknowledged the conflicts of such decisions. Parents have a right to choose the educational path for their children, especially when a district is failing (Johnston, 2023). This encourages competition and may eliminate those failing institutions (Dills & Norton, 2022). On the other hand, Ford (2020) argued that private schools are not accountable for standardized testing, and these school leaders can choose their population; therefore, any funding provided from the state level is a violation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution by not separating church and state. The fluidity of student enrollment between public and faith-based schools contributes to the increase of the academic achievement gap across all educational institutions (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Therefore, school leaders are challenged with supporting teachers as they

address the achievement gaps. This study investigated these gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Faith-based school leaders are challenged with the responsibility to support teachers to address the achievement gap that has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, academic achievement gaps existed in the areas of mathematics and reading due to the inequalities in schools amongst various groups, such as low socioeconomic students, students of color, and students with learning disabilities (Miller, 2022). The academic achievement gap widened for the same group of students since the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Alejo et al. (2023) suggested students in the third-grade's poorest quartile are nearly 16% below the wealthiest quartile in reading and 9% below the wealthiest quartile in numeracy. Researchers found that the wider the achievement gap was before the onset of COVID-19, the wider it grew due to the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). On the contrary, those students who were near or at grade level were more apt to recover academically from the interruption during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Alejo et al. (2023) reported UNICEF calculated two trillion hours of in-person learning lost between February 2020 and June 2022 because of school closures. This averages 20 weeks of instructional time with teachers face-to-face. Harmeiy and Moss (2023) claimed that 1.5 billion students were removed from the brick-and-mortar school in the spring of 2020. By November of the same year, 12.8% of those students were still unable to go back to a physical school building (Harmeiy & Moss, 2023). The result of student hours lost correlates to between one-third and one-half a school year in learning

loss (Alejo et al., 2023). In another study, in faith-based schools, grades one and two exhibited a 5–6 month learning loss because of 12 months of distance learning (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023).

Schools across America provide more than academic support (deMuynck, 2020). Food substance, mental health support, supervision, and structure are indirect resources that schools offer to students in all grades (deMuynck, 2020). While students were not going to a physical school building, families that were dependent on meals from government programs and mental health support were struggling to maintain sufficient provisions for their children (Raccanello et al., 2023). Alejo et al. (2023) reported that about thirty-nine billion school meals were undelivered in 2020. Additionally, major depressive disorders increased 34% in children between the ages of 10 and 19 (Alejo et al., 2023).

As schools across America battled for the proper time and way to reopen school buildings safely, parents also debated what would be best for their own families (Marshall et al., 2023). Some homes had multigenerational residents, and if a child contracted COVID-19 it could potentially harm other family members (Meghani et al., 2022). On the other side of the debate, families struggled to maintain educational support while managing home and work responsibilities (Engzell et al., 2021). In single-parent households or families with jobs having little flexibility, older children were expected to carry such responsibilities as childcare, meal prep, and household chores (Meghani et al., 2022). These situations reduced the time older children had to dedicate to their studies and left older children unsupervised (Alejo et al., 2023).

Enrollment in public schools dropped when the restrictions began to loosen, and students were allowed to attend brick-and-mortar schools again (Cohen, 2023). According to Dee (2023), parents found alternative options for schooling that would better support their children during the pandemic. A 2022 national tracking survey reported that over one million students left the public-school systems following the COVID-19 pandemic (Cohen, 2023). This educational shift took place for several reasons. Some families transitioned their children to private or Christian schools because they reopened sooner than public schools (Meghani et al., 2022). Other families decided to either transition to another type of educational institution or simply disenroll their children from any form of education altogether because they opened sooner than parents thought appropriate (Meghani et al., 2022). Additionally, as parents placed their children in these alternative educational environments, they found that the mental, physical, moral, and academic benefits outweighed the decision to place them back into a public school (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2024).

A Comparison Between Public and Faith-Based Schools Before COVID-19

In the United States, students are required to attend school from kindergarten through 12th grade in most states (Lawal, 2022). Students in the 21st century have been the product of educational reforms on the state and federal levels (Iacob & Groza, 2019). With the No Child Left Behind Act signed by President G.W. Bush in 2001, students were expected to reach a minimum set of standards in mathematics and reading by the year 2014 (Lawal, 2022). This increased standardized testing as it became the measure of accountability (Lawal, 2022). President Obama continued the work by signing the Every

Student Succeeds Act in 2015 (Ydesen & Dorn, 2022). Since these acts were put into place, graduation rates have risen significantly and dropout rates have dropped substantially as well (Iacob & Groza, 2019). Additionally, more students have taken the college-bound path in high schools nationally (Lawal, 2022).

The Roles of Leadership in Public and Faith-Based Schools Before COVID-

19. School leaders in public schools and faith-based schools share similar responsibilities.

School leaders set the direction of the school and lay the foundation for the culture and vision that all others will follow (Grooms & Childs, 2021). They build relationships between the school and its community (Grooms & Childs, 2021). School leaders are required to maintain the daily operations of the schools and follow basic regulations such as safety, attendance protocols, and advancement practices (Lee & Cheng, 2021). Shula et al. (2022) claimed that the responsibilities of effective school leaders are to build relationships and create a collaborative atmosphere. Furthermore, school leaders who provide opportunities for staff to grow and share in the common vision promote strong moral conditions in which staff retention is greatest (Shula et al., 2022).

School leaders are responsible for choosing the curriculum and ensuring high standards are taught by educators and achieved by students (Lee & Cheng, 2021). School leaders are charged with the task of ensuring academic, social, and emotional needs are met (Wortham & Forgety Grimm, 2022). This requires several sources of data and organized data collection processes (Wortham & Forgety Grimm, 2022). School leaders are responsible for overseeing the design and implementation of interventions when student needs are not met (Wortham & Forgety Grimm, 2022). Lee and Cheng (2021)

explained school leaders play a vital role in instructional leadership, a school climate that increases teacher retention, and positive influences on student learning in effective but highly disadvantaged schools. The balance between the needs of the school and ensuring the legal guidelines are upheld is another demand of school leaders (Grooms & Childs, 2021). They are responsible for improving academic outcomes and providing resources for various types of instruction (Grooms & Childs, 2021).

School leadership differs between public and faith-based schools in several ways. The characteristics of faith-based school leaders include spiritual and moral traits that align with the school's religious beliefs (Lee & Cheng, 2021). While leadership training can be similar in school law, instructional leadership, and personal management, school leaders in faith-based schools have less formal postsecondary training in credible institutions (Lee & Cheng, 2021). The educational goals, philosophies, culture, and pedagogical practices differ between public and faith-based schools (Huizenga & Mitchell, 2021). Faith-based school leaders have a servant mindset as they provide a spiritual and moral example to staff, students, and the community (Lee & Cheng, 2021). Faith-based school leaders are taxed with hiring and retaining teachers who are spiritually aligned with their school mission (Atha, 2022). They are given fewer government funding opportunities, if any; therefore, they are required to seek other means to finance the school (Atha, 2022). These school leaders often fill the role of multiple positions as faith-based schools do not have the staff or financial means to hire support staff (deMuyneck, 2020).

The Roles of Teachers in Public and Faith-Based Schools Before COVID-19.

The primary role of teachers across the United States is to teach a consistent curriculum and make fair assessments while preparing students to be active participants and contributors to society (Huizenga & Mitchell, 2021). Teachers support students and teach self-reflection while differentiating material based on abilities (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023). Teachers in the 21st century are given the task of producing high levels of student engagement in which students interact with the content through activities (Floyd, 2023). Teachers are expected to create situations in which students learn appropriate social skills through cooperative learning beginning in early elementary grades (Yang, 2023). Finally, teachers strive to teach critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Yang, 2023). Ilie (2020) explained education in the 21st century is different than that of the 20th century in which teachers taught students to simply learn. Technology is a recent platform that has opened opportunities to interact with the global world and become interdependent on international cultural experiences (Ilie, 2020). Teachers are given the challenging task of teaching students to face challenges that are not presented yet in areas of economy, health, and the environment (Ilie, 2020).

Public school teachers and faith-based teachers work in different environments that affect their opportunities to contribute to student success (Floyd, 2023). Public school teachers comply with government mandates, have a diverse population of students, and typically have larger class sizes than in faith-based schools (Floyd, 2023). Faith-based schoolteachers have fewer resources but are often not accountable to government mandates such as state-regulated testing (Ford, 2020). Faith-based schools

have selective enrollment; therefore, they are not required to take all students, leaving the population exclusive (Ford, 2020). In faith-based schools, less professionally trained teachers fill the classroom than in public schools (Witwer, 2023).

Zandroto and Indriani (2023) stated that in public schools, the focus is on academic and social-emotional success, whereas, in a faith-based school, the education is Christ-centered and through the lens of spirituality. Lee and Cheng (2021) agreed that Christian principles are central in a faith-based school in which students are taught to apply new learning to how they relate to others. Biblical principles are embedded in many aspects of a faith-based classroom; however, Witwer (2023) stated that teachers influence students through Biblical content rather than the integration of Biblical principles in instructional strategies. While both seek to teach global competence and social awareness, faith-based teachers lean on Biblical principles to guide their content and daily procedures (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023). Many faith-based schools have not offered enrollment to students of diverse ability levels; however, this trend is changing in the 21st century (Bachrach, 2021). With this change, teaching has become a challenge to maintain high educational standards and keep a high level of academic excellence as well as the spiritual cultural environment (Witwer, 2023).

The Role of Families in Public and Faith-Based Schools Before COVID-19. In the 21st century, parents send their children to school with the expectation that they will receive an education to prepare for a productive and successful adult career (deMuynck, 2020). In return, school leaders expect parents to support the educational process by being involved, creating a conducive environment at home for their children to learn, and

providing the basic needs for their children (Luminita & Mircla, 20223). Parents who seek out faith-based schools are looking for an education with a Christian worldview (Bachrach, 2021). Additionally, parents who send their children to faith-based schools desire less exposure to controversial topics and worldliness (Fleming, 2021).

Before the 21st century, students were expected to attend school to gain an education from those who knew the problems and the answers (Bachrach, 2021). Jacob and Groza (2019) claimed “education is the organized, deliberate, attempt to help people become intelligent” (p. 169). Today, students are challenged to learn to think critically about problems that do not yet exist (Holland et al., 2021). Academic expectations such as standardized testing, high school credit requirements, and curriculum content have increased since The No Child Left Behind Act was put into action (Holland et al., 2021). Academic subject matter is only one area students are challenged to balance in the 21st century (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021). Students are given an overwhelming amount of homework which creates an achievement gap because of the differences in family support, resources, and environment in which students can work (Holland et al., 2021).

The pressures that come from outside academic expectations include mental health challenges, family strains, negative peer influence, adverse school climate, and bullying (Montero-Carretero et al., 2021). West et al. (2022) studied students in low-income rural areas of the United States and found that between the ages of 13 and 18, students tend to struggle with depression and experiment with risky behaviors such as drugs and alcohol. In these areas, suicide rates are 1.5% higher than in urban school districts and students are two times more likely to drop out of school in rural areas (West

et al., 2022). Parents who choose to send their children to faith-based schools report a decline in bullying and an improvement in mental health (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2024). However, the pressures on students in faith-based schools still exist in the expectation of perfectionism whether that is self-inflicted or external (Wilson et al., 2023).

Inequalities in parental resources, financial stability, social-emotional health, academic achievement, and physical well-being all contribute to the academic achievement gap (Alejo et al., 2023). A breakdown in responsibilities creates barriers between teachers and parents (Luminita & Mircela, 2023). Other barriers include a lack of communication and limited resources provided by the teachers or from home to support in-class learning (Luminita & Mircela, 2023). Furthermore, the state and federal mandates on accountability put pressure on parents as well as teachers (Ford, 2020). Lastly, teachers who have a middle-class mindset often do not understand the limitations of lower socioeconomic families; therefore, the barriers become the excuse for the achievement gap rather than opportunities to come together and provide community support (Luminita & Mircela, 2023).

Parents who choose to send their children to faith-based schools want their children to have a Christian worldview rather than a secular worldview (Bachrach, 2021). In faith-based schools, parents are still the primary educators; however, the teachers provide the service to offer a holistic education that aligns with the parents' beliefs (deMuynck, 2020). Parents who disagree with the public school practices will either voice their disapproval and try to influence policy change or they will remove their children from public school and enroll them in a school that aligns with their beliefs

(Fleming, 2021). In the 21st century, this demonstrates one reason faith-based schools are increasing in enrollment (Leukert, 2022).

The Immediate Effect of COVID-19 on the U.S. Education System. When natural disasters or other tragedies happen, immediate and prolonged school closures are the result and school leaders become crisis managers (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Examples of situations that school leaders can look for guidance are Hurricane Katrina, the tornadoes in Joplin, Missouri, and flooding in West Virginia (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Plein, 2022). While these are natural disasters and physically displaced students because of structural damage, the actions of school leaders are similar to the actions of school leaders at the onset of COVID-19 (Grooms & Childs, 2021). The response to a natural disaster or pandemic is the immediate reaction; whereas the recovery is how one moves forward after the initial experience has subsided to restore the environment (Wortham & Forgety, 2022). Immediately after the announcement of COVID-19, like the aftermath of a natural disaster, school leaders were responsible for informing staff, students, and families of the next steps (Wortham & Forgety, 2022). They made decisions about the operation of the school, family needs, and the safety of staff and students (Heisel, 2024).

As the recovery phase began, schools became a central location for information and food distribution (Heisel, 2024). School leaders were responsible for shifting resources to accommodate the educational process (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Decisions about attendance policies, virtual instruction, and technology accessibility were among the many challenges school leaders faced (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Another major

component of the recovery process was the mental health needs of staff and students (Harmey & Moss, 2023). The illnesses and death tolls of the communities as well as isolation were difficult for everyone (Harmey & Moss, 2023).

Teachers were also put into challenging situations (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). They were not adequately prepared for virtual teaching, and many did not have the proper technology to be successful (Marshall et al., 2023). Accountability for students was loosely enforced because of the many extenuating circumstances; therefore, effective instruction was sparse at best (Horn et al., 2023). Teachers were not prepared to adjust for high attendance issues or mental health concerns from their students (Harmey & Moss, 2023). The students and parents were just as unprepared for the shutdown, making the educational process a very difficult transition in 2020 (Sorkin et al., 2023).

A Comparison Between Public and Faith-Based Schools Since the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 brought a new set of challenges to schools across the country (Alejo et al., 2023). Educational inequalities increased, social isolation and family distress increased, and instructional pedagogies were immediately changed with little to no professional training (Alejo et al., 2023; Raccanello et al., 2023). The role of all staff within the school changed to make health protocols the priority (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). The increased workload and additional concerns for students and their families caused burnout within the education field (Marshall et al., 2023). Mental stress increased as educational staff, students, and families attempted to make sense of the uncertainty that each day brought as the pandemic continued (Imran et al., 2022).

Public school enrollment dropped, and the state governments struggled to track the enrollment status of students (Harmey & Moss, 2023). On the other hand, enrollment increased for faith-based schools and the need to readjust long-term planning was inevitable (Atha, 2022). The country's technology infrastructure was overloaded as districts made an immediate transition into the digital world (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Classroom management and engagement as well as teaching abstract ideas were difficult for teachers and students (Bright et al., 2022). The longer the pandemic continued, the more obvious student learning loss was increasing the academic achievement gaps (Alejo et al., 2023).

The Effect of COVID-19 on Educational Leadership in Public and Faith-Based Schools. After the initial start of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed, and people went into isolation (Horn et al., 2023). School leaders in all districts looked for ways to best support their staff, students, and communities (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Enrollment and attendance were a great concern for school leaders (Alejo et al., 2023). School leaders attempted to hear the concerns of the community and parents; however, they were required to meet the safety guidelines of the state and federal governments (Lewis-Spector, 2022). Families struggled with their own opinions of mask mandates, social distancing, and vaccinations, as they decided whether their children should go back to school in brick-and-mortar buildings or attend school in an alternative setting (Lewis-Spector, 2022). According to Dee (2023), public schools in the United States dropped enrollment by one million students between the 2020 and 2021 school year. During this

same time, homeschool cohorts and private schools, including faith-based schools, grew by 26% and 15%, respectively (Dee, 2023).

The longer schools were closed, the more school leaders needed to develop professional development opportunities for teachers to provide effective instruction (Horn et al., 2023). The structure of the school was dismantled, and school leaders had to recreate ways to maintain a new normal (Grooms & Childs, 2021). The hiring process, curriculum decisions, discipline procedures, and student accountability were adjusted to remote learning and then to social distancing within the school when they were reopened (Grooms & Childs, 2021). New procedures in which school leadership was unfamiliar became their responsibility such as managing the health and safety of students and staff on a daily, and sometimes hourly, basis (Heisel, 2024). While communication with the parents and the community has always been a responsibility for school leaders, after the onset of the pandemic, there was a greater need for daily transparency and reporting (Harmey & Moss, 2023).

Academic learning loss was an immediate concern for school leaders and has grown to become a national issue (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). As research continues, academic achievement levels are low in mathematics and reading compared to before the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Academic learning loss happens at different levels for different students (Horn et al., 2023). Short-term learning loss occurs over a few days or weeks, whereas long-term learning loss occurs over an extended period such as summer break or, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic (Horn et al., 2023). School leaders are responsible for finding ways to replenish this learning loss (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Alejo et al. (2023)

explained that the goal of school leaders is to work to keep every student in school using safety precautions and develop ways to assess often to see where achievement gaps are greatest.

Assessment results show that the wider the achievement gap was before the pandemic, the greater it became during the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). If students were on track with their grade level content before the pandemic began, they were able to continue closely to that academic norm; however, the further behind, the wider the academic achievement gap became during the COVID-19 shutdown (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). School leaders in communities with high poverty, and greater COVID-19 infection rates were more likely to have higher academic achievement gaps because of the psychological effects (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). School leaders were accountable for interventions based on assessment results (Wortham & Forgety, 2022). Data from assessments were controversial because of the student attendance and enrollment data (Bright et al., 2022). Many external factors skewed the assessment results, thereby the inaccuracy contributing to some misalignment of interventions (Wortham & Forgety, 2022). However, some supports were profitable regardless of the data, such as reducing class sizes and increasing professional development for teachers (Horn et al., 2023).

Faith-based school leaders had similar challenges as they entered the recovery process after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sorkin et al., 2023). INOVASI & Ministry of Education's Policy Researcher Centre found faith-based school students in first and second grade experienced 5 to 6 months of learning loss based on the 12 months of distance learning (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023). Additionally, first through third grade

had significant learning loss in numeracy and literacy (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023). Bright et al. (2022) claimed these results are problematic because younger students who are strong in mathematics are more likely to graduate high school and attend college.

As faith-based school leaders address the challenges of the pandemic, detailed, long-term planning is a priority (Atha, 2022). Educators require flexibility and patience as they work with students (Atha, 2022). In faith-based schools, leaders are tasked with addressing how the school's mission, vision, and values continue to align with the instructional environment as they keep students and families at the forefront of their priorities (Sorkin et al., 2023). Sorkin et al. (2023) stated that when school leaders are resilient, they have a deep commitment to the mission and provide hope for those they lead. Adaptability, attentiveness, and fluidity are also characteristics of faith-based leaders; therefore, when school leaders can adapt to the current conditions, they are better able to lead (Sorkin et al., 2023). Alejo et al. (2023) explained the ability to prioritize essential instruction and assess students' and staff's overall well-being are recovery actions that promote stability and decrease academic achievement loss and learning loss. When faith-based school leaders are attentive to the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of the school community, they can minister to individual needs (Lee & Cheng, 2021). This is often difficult when they are working independently; however, a fluid leader embraces the support and leadership of the other staff members (Shula et al., 2022). These school leaders see situations holistically; therefore, they anticipate multiple scenarios (Sorkin et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic created uncertain and ambiguous circumstances that required critical thinking (Atha, 2022). When school

leaders invite strong educators and support staff to voice their thoughts, they can examine all viewpoints before making important decisions (Sorkin et al., 2023).

The Effect of COVID-19 on Teachers in Public and Faith-Based Schools.

Teaching in the United States has become a challenging profession as the purpose of the public school system has changed since the 20th century (Iacob & Groza, 2019). When the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in school closures and remote learning, many teachers were overwhelmed (Marshall et al., 2023). Before the pandemic, teachers were leaving the education profession at a rate of 8% to 16% annually; however, by the end of the 2021–2022 school year, 75% of educators considered exiting their careers (Marshall et al., 2023). According to the *State of Ohio Schools* report, nearly 10,000 educators left the public school system with only 5,388 new teachers licensed in the year 2021 (Pruitt & Mohr, 2023). The reasons vary from compensation, working conditions, teacher burnout, and the decline in professional support (Marshall et al., 2023).

Teachers were considered essential workers during the pandemic as they continued to work with major challenges in student and family dynamics (Marshall et al., 2023). As front-line workers, teachers continued instruction in a new and foreign arena of remote learning (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). They struggled with their concerns of contracting the virus, keeping students engaged, and balancing their own increased workload as well as their family responsibilities (Marshall et al., 2023). The COVID-19 virus was affecting families in every community, and teachers felt the emotional toll of this as students were struggling emotionally (Crawford et al., 2021). Absenteeism, even with remote instruction, made instruction difficult because students were unable to keep up with the

daily content and assignments (Bright et al., 2022). Teachers found abstract concepts a challenge to teach through remote instruction, especially for younger students (Bright et al., 2022). Swindle (2024) reported the risk factors for teachers' health, new cleaning procedures, the constantly changing rules, and the challenge to enforce distancing protocols upon returning to brick-and-mortar schools created stress that caused extreme burnout.

As the pandemic continued, school leaders worked with teachers by providing professional development in areas of technology, classroom management, and closing the academic achievement gap (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Zandroto and Indriani (2023) found in younger grades, the lack of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students contributed to the learning loss. School leaders reduced class sizes and implemented positive interventions to restore the relationship between teachers and students as the pandemic subsided (Horn et al., 2023). Collaboration amongst school leaders and teachers provided a dialogue that supported teacher challenges in the post COVID-19 era; however, for some educators, the burnout had already prompted them to exit the profession (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Curriculum adjustments were made to support the learning loss and new ways of learning through technology (Horn et al., 2023). School leaders have redistributed time and space as they doubled time in mathematics, provided concentrated tutoring directly connected to class content, and redefined fundamental standards (Wortham & Forgety, 2022). Some teachers claim the post-COVID changes such as improved technology platforms and interventions that focus on the fundamentals have reduced some workload stress (Crawford et al., 2021).

Faith-based schoolteachers have seen the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in the increase in student enrollment as parents look for alternative educational environments (Floyd, 2023). Teachers in public schools feel the burden of adhering to government mandates as policymakers attempt to impose interventions in the classroom, whereas faith-based teachers are often removed from this type of pressure (Floyd, 2023). Faith-based teachers are hired to be spiritual examples and are encouraged to teach from a faith-based perspective (Floyd, 2023). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, public school teachers have been burnt out with low morale because of the academic achievement gap, continued attendance issues, financial cutbacks that require greater class sizes, and government mandates (Swindle, 2024). Faith-based schoolteachers are encouraged by the higher enrollments, continued parental support and involvement, and the ability to freely express Christian worldviews (Imran et al., 2022).

The Effect of COVID-19 on Families in Public and Faith-Based Schools. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the educational environment of children in the United States, as school-age children were required to immediately begin virtual learning through online platforms (Harmey & Moss, 2023). School leaders, teachers, families, and students were not prepared for this environmental shift in education (Engzell et al., 2021). Zhan et al. (2022) found that major challenges for students at home included irregular schedules, lack of physical exercise, strain on eyesight, unfocused and fragmented learning, parent-child conflict, and a lack of systematic content delivery. Resource inequality created a substantial barrier, widening the achievement gap as well (Alejo et al., 2023). Students were taken from the structure and security of daily school procedures

to homes that had varied levels of stability (Alejo et al., 2023). Students who were self-disciplined and had strong parental involvement were less likely to struggle academically (Mbaluka et al., 2021). Students who were self-motivated and had an intrinsic drive to learn were able to self-regulate regardless of the supervision; therefore, they were more likely to continue to learn and grow academically (Mbaluka et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, many students did not have support at home or intrinsic motivation (Alejo et al., 2023). Mbaluka et al. (2021) found that distractions, especially with boys, negatively affected student learning. Social isolation led to depression and anxiety as it disrupted daily routines (Raccanello et al., 2023). As the pandemic stretched into weeks of isolation, the interactions between low-achieving students and their higher-achieving peers were limited (Alejo et al., 2023). Some students who were significantly below grade level or in high-needs special education classes were left out entirely of the remote learning process (Alejo et al., 2023). Students were distracted with responsibilities at home as well (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Older students became primary caregivers for younger siblings, many were concerned for the health of their loved ones contracting COVID-19, and a lack of time management skills all contributed to learning loss during the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Students struggled with motivation and an internal desire to learn in remote environments as they procrastinated in academic areas, and were less likely to complete assignments (Mbaluka et al., 2021).

On the contrary, faith-based schools promoted the growth mindset as it connected to all aspects of life, creating confidence that contradicts feelings of despair amidst traumatic events such as COVID-19 (Zandroto & Indriani, 2023). Students were able to

relate their faith to areas of instability and unsure futures (Imran et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, while faith-based schools closed, the students in these schools typically had greater parental involvement, which led to greater student achievement (Mbaluka et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity for parents to take back their original responsibility of transmitting cultural values across generations, including the value of academic achievement (Dills & Norton, 2022).

Parents across the United States dealt with new stressors regardless of socioeconomic status including economic uncertainty, health risks, and the overall future as the world tried to navigate the pandemic in 2020 (Engzell et al., 2021). Schools closing for an unforeseen length of time added to the complexity of parent challenges (Meghani et al., 2022). Families that relied on extracurricular activities within the school to keep their children active were required to find alternative options at home (Meghani et al., 2022). Technology became the primary means of educating students and communicating via some form of media platform (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Higher-income families were often more equipped to support technological needs and internet access (Harmey & Moss, 2023). Alejo et al. (2023) discussed the inequalities that existed in the educational process during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as technology challenges, parental education, location, and economic distress. In some areas, children from lower-income families had limited access as well as little support in the remote learning process (Sorkin et al., 2023). In severe areas or cases with higher disabilities, children were left completely out of the learning plan (Alejo et al., 2023). Dee (2023) continued that because of the remote learning experience, parents began to look for other educational

opportunities. Learning pods, a small group of students learning in a remote learning environment, became a popular alternative (Cohen, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic created a new set of challenges for parents and children, especially children from a marginal group (Alejo et al., 2023). Parents from low-income families were frontline workers (Bailey et al., 2021). They held jobs that had little flexibility, struggled with finding childcare, and could not support students academically (Bailey et al., 2021). Parents were challenged to provide essential needs such as meals, counseling, and a normal daily schedule (Meghani et al., 2022). These times were difficult for families with multigenerational members as parents attempted to make decisions that were best for their household such as vaccinations, social distancing, and financial decisions (Lewis-Spector, 2022).

Parents began to look for alternative education for their children (Marshall et al., 2023). Faith-based schools had a rise in enrollment post the COVID-19 pandemic. (www.education.ohio.gov). Johnston (2023) reported a 2.1% increase from 2019 to 2021 in faith-based schools across the United States. Marshall et al. (2023) attributed these increases to more faith-based schools opening sooner than many public schools. Johnston (2023) believed that while children and parents were at home, parents were more attentive to the school curriculum, which dissatisfied many families. Lewis-Spector (2022) went further to suggest that mask mandates, social distancing concerns, and controversy over vaccinations contributed to the exodus in public schools. Regardless of the motive, with the rise in faith-based schools in the United States, academically diverse students infiltrated faith-based classrooms, creating challenges for teachers, parents, and

students (Floyd, 2023). Therefore, this study focused on strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers to address student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research has been done to examine the academic achievement gaps and the COVID-19 pandemic; however, few connections have been made concerning the strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in addressing the student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. Alejo et al. (2023) explained that third-grade reading and mathematics scores are further below in lower socioeconomic students since the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Kuhfeld et al. (2022) claimed the pandemic created a wider academic achievement gap for students who were already below grade level. Other researchers found interventions to close the academic achievement gap in public schools with government support through funding and other resources (Wortham & Forgety, 2022).

According to the Ohio Department of Education (2024), there has been an increase in student enrollment in faith-based schools since 2020. Many parents questioned the actions of public schools such as the controversy over mask mandates, social distancing, and vaccinations (Lewis-Spector, 2022). Some parents needed their children to go back to school sooner than the public schools opened; therefore, they sought alternative options (Marshall et al., 2023). Still others took this opportunity to search out other options for their children before they entered the public school systems altogether, causing kindergarten enrollment to be lower than the average enrollment for the 2021 school year (Cohen, 2023).

Cohen (2023) offered the statistics that 500,000 students did not return to the public schools between September 2019 and September 2020 collectively in 33 states; furthermore, 1.2 million students left the public schools since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. Lewis-Spector (2022) claimed that the changes in curriculum and school activities have challenged morals, and Christian principles have lowered parents' support and confidence in the public schools. Parents have the option to either take their children out of the school system, attempt to change the policies, or stay loyal to the school system (Dills & Norton, 2022). Those parents who remove their children because they want their children to be educated through a lens of a Christian worldview have created a surge in faith-based schools (Bachrach, 2021).

Implications

Academic achievement is vital to student success. The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenging time for educators and school leaders. The academic achievement gap was widened for several reasons, as outlined in the literature review. The results of this basic qualitative project study could provide knowledge and instructional strategies that school leaders can use to support teachers in closing current and future achievement gaps. The findings in this basic qualitative project study were the basis for a professional development training with faith-based school leaders and teachers (see Appendix A). When the academic achievement gaps are closed in school districts, students are successful and able to grow in academic and social areas, such as furthering their educational path to college and career readiness. Communities flourish and grow when schools produce high-achieving students, which provides social change.

Summary

The purpose of the basic qualitative project study was to investigate strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers to address student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. Faith-based schools have been challenged as the purpose of education in America has shifted from a moral priority to individual growth and academic independence (Iacob & Groza, 2019). Student enrollment has increased in faith-based schools since the COVID-19 pandemic (Ohio Department of Education, 2024). With the increase in enrollment, classes are composed of wider ability levels and greater academic achievement gaps (Johnston, 2023). Faith-based school leaders are taxed with the responsibility of student achievement. Little research has been conducted to determine how faith-based school leaders support teachers to address achievement gaps.

The transformational leadership theory was the conceptual framework I used in this basic qualitative project study. Transformational leadership is a shared leadership style that was developed by Bass (1985) in which four key components are used for effective leadership: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individual consideration. Transformational leadership shares the vision of the district while promoting individual growth (Corbin et al., 2024).

This chapter included a review of the broader problem that examined several themes surrounding the academic achievement gap in students in the United States. The first theme is that the academic achievement gap was present in schools in the United States at the end of the 20th century and leading into the 21st century (Iacob & Groza,

2019). The second theme is the change in enrollment in faith-based schools over time (Bachrach, 2021). The third theme is the effect COVID-19 had on academic achievement gaps (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). The final theme is how the academic achievement gaps were transferred into faith-based schools since the COVID-19 pandemic (Floyd, 2023).

Several gaps in research are identified from the literature review. First, while there is research to identify ways public school leaders supported teachers in closing the academic achievement gap in the 20th century, little is known about how faith-based school leaders have supported teachers in closing the achievement gap during the same time. Second, there is research to identify causes for an increase in enrollment in faith-based schools; however, there is no research surrounding the way faith-based school leaders adjust to the increase in academic diversity because of the increase in enrollment. Third, there is a great amount of research regarding COVID-19 and its effect on students; however, research is limited on the effects of COVID-19 on students specifically in faith-based schools. Finally, the research identifies how public school leaders have supported teachers in closing the academic achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic; but no research has been found to explain how faith-based school leaders have supported teachers in closing the academic achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

This basic qualitative project study investigated how faith-based school leaders are challenged to support teachers in addressing student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. A basic qualitative design focuses on individual attitudes and behaviors toward a particular problem (J. Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In this qualitative project study, I investigated the perspectives of faith-based school leaders on how they support teachers in addressing the student achievement gap following the COVID-19 pandemic from multiple viewpoints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained that basic qualitative design is the overarching approach to understanding participants' way of interpreting their own experiences. The purpose of using a basic qualitative design was to focus on how faith-based school leaders construct their leadership and perceive their experiences. This qualitative approach aligned with the purpose of my study.

Qualitative research design encourages personal engagement with participants who are present in the natural setting (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The qualitative methodology I used was semistructured interviews that directly addressed strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in addressing the student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic through an authentic lens (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I chose this qualitative methodology approach to focus on faith-based school leaders through semistructured interviews because this approach provided the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and elaborate on answers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative research design was the most effective design for this study because it encourages authentic participants to share their perspectives on a local problem (J. Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Quantitative research design is more effective for statistical analysis and numerical data rather than relationships and perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Within the constraints of qualitative research designs, I used semistructured interviews as the basis for my research. Other options in qualitative research include ethnography, focus groups, and grounded theory.

Ethnography, focus groups, and grounded theory were not the most effective design for this study. Ethnography is a design in which the researcher participates in the setting for a cultural experience, spending time within the confines of the field, in this case, the faith-based school (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This research design did not align with the study as the study did not focus on cultural experiences, but rather the strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers. In this case, ethnography would not provide the opportunity for school leaders to present their perspectives on how they support teachers. Focus groups are designed to use interviews in a group setting in which the group gains insight from other perspectives and adds to their own experiences through the reactions of other group members (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A focus group does not align with the study, as the purpose of this study was to investigate what individual faith-based school leaders use to support the teachers in their local schools. A focus group would not benefit the individual school leaders as they provide their personal perspectives on supporting teachers. Grounded theory is a design that looks for a new theory based on research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The study had a local problem and was

seeking to investigate the problem already identified; therefore, a new theory is not ideal for this study.

Participants

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a qualitative research design using 12-15 participants provides adequate information to exhaust a research question. The participants I invited for this basic qualitative research project were faith-based school leaders in Ohio who have been working in their current district for a minimum of 3 years. The schools came from districts that are listed as nonchartered, nonpublic schools on the department of education website. Schools that are listed as nonchartered, nonpublic have religious beliefs that separate their educational institution from others in the state of Ohio (Ohio Department of Education, 2024).

According to Hossain et al. (2024), the smaller the sample size in a study, the stronger the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Ravitch and Carl (2021) claimed that the fewer participants, the deeper the inquiry. For these reasons, I used the six participants who responded to the invitation. Upon completion of the interviews, I was unable to reach the point of complete saturation. I will discuss the concept of saturation further in the Data Collection section.

I sent potential participants, to whom I gained access through the Ohio Department of Education public website, an email with the purpose of the study, rationale, criteria, and my contact information (see Appendix B). I found email information and enrollment criteria on the Ohio Department of Education website for nonchartered, nonpublic Schools. To determine if participants met the criteria, I gave

them a brief survey in the initial email. This survey verified the number of years as a faith-based school leader and the student enrollment of the current district in which the school leader works. I followed up with telephone calls to invite participants who did not respond to the emails. After contacting all participants either by telephone or through a response in email response, I had six participants who agreed to be interviewed.

Researcher and Participant Working Relationship

Building relationships with potential participants will improve the possibility of participation and provide answers to sensitive questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To develop a positive rapport with potential participants, I introduced the project study and the purpose of the study in the initial email. I sent interview questions to the chosen school leaders to show transparency and allowed the school leaders time to reflect on their answers (King et al., 2019). I gained written or verbal consent and informed the participants they could withdraw at any point in the process and the data they provided will be held in confidence (King et al., 2019). Finally, I allowed the participants to review the findings when this project study was completed.

Measures for the Protection of Participants

King et al. (2019) explained the purpose of ethical consideration in a project study as an important factor concerning the rights and dignity of participants. Ethical codes are a set of principles established by an organization or research group to maintain safety measures and confidentiality within a research project (King et al., 2019). To ensure ethical practices are followed for this project study, I obtained informed consent before collecting any data. I established transparency in the confidentiality of all gathered

information, redacting names for the project. Finally, I allowed the participants to be informed of the final findings when the project was completed.

Data Collection

In this section, I will discuss the data collection processes that I undertook for this study. First, I will discuss the justification for this data and the data collection process. Next, I will explain the sufficiency of the data collection and identify the data collection instrument and sources. Finally, I will describe the data tracking system I used when I collected the data.

Data Justification and Data Collection

Qualitative research design allows the researcher to explore behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Prior to contacting any potential participants, I received IRB approval to complete this study. Before the interviews, I emailed a copy of the consent form, and then I read the consent form to the participants to ensure they understood the confidentiality and ability to opt out of any question being asked. This ensured participants fully understood their rights, any risks, and benefits in participating in the study. The data collection for this basic qualitative project study consisted of interview questions (see Appendix C). The interview questions align with the local problem, purpose, and question. A semistructured interview provides opportunities to ask follow-up and clarifying questions as needed (King et al., 2019). I created seven interview questions that align with the research question: What strategies do faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in addressing student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic? All the participants were given the same questions in the same

order to be consistent with the collection process; however, follow-up questions were asked as participants elaborated on each question. All six interviews were completed by phone interviews.

Sufficiency of Data Collection

Saturation of data happens when an exhaustive collection of new data has been reached (Ahmed, 2025). Data saturation is important to the data collection process as it means the researcher thoroughly investigated all aspects of the participants' perspectives (Ahmed, 2025). The interview questions were directly related to the local problem, purpose, and research question to focus on the purpose of the project study. The semistructured interviews were conducted with six participants from a list of potential participants who responded to the invitation through email. After the initial interviews were conducted, I determined that complete saturation had not been achieved. However, no additional participants could be recruited.

Data Collection Process

I began sending the participant invitations after I gained IRB approval from Walden University. Upon agreement to participate, I scheduled interviews through a Google calendar invitation with options that accommodated both the participant and me. The interviews were conducted through audio calls. I asked for permission from the participant to audio-record the interview for future reference. I provided a copy of the interview questions for the participants and informed them they could decline to answer if they chose. Before the interview, I reread the confidentiality agreement and explained

the rights, risks, and benefits to the participants. I asked if they had any questions or concerns about the study. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes.

Data Tracking System

According to King et al. (2019), data confidentiality is an important part of the research collection process. Ethical expectations are required to store the research data with respect and discretion (King et al., 2019). I stored the recordings and notes from the interviews on a hard drive with a backup external hard drive. I kept a reflective journal for the participant interviews in a separate digital file. The transcripts were made by using the recordings and saved in a Microsoft document after each interview to keep the information accurate and identifiable per participant.

Role of the Researcher

The purpose of an interview is to glean perspective from the participants to answer the research question (Collins & Stockton, 2022). The role of the researcher is to remove personal bias and beliefs to collect the beliefs of the participant (Collins & Stockton, 2022). The participants used in this study were school leaders whom I did not know personally before the interview. This was one way I managed bias. My role as the researcher was to collect data in a nonbiased way. To alleviate research bias, I used a semistructured interview with questions that were focused on the research question. I also used a reflective journal to be aware of how my experiences could influence the results as I interpreted them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A reflective journal was useful in keeping my biases and feelings regarding personal assumptions on record during the interview process.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for qualitative research is continuous throughout the collection process (Bingham, 2023). I took each interview recording and transcribed it into a Word document before moving on to the next interview. Bingham (2023) explained that through inductive analysis, themes and patterns emerge. This is contrary to deductive analysis, in which themes are created before the data collection process begins (Bingham, 2023). After the interviews were completed, I used deductive analysis to identify themes and patterns that align with the research question and local problem based on the transformational leadership framework.

According to Williams and Moser (2019), coding is an important process that thematically sorts information to find purposeful meaning in the collected data. From this information, I used transformational leadership as the lens through which I developed themes. I charted text segments from the interviews on a spreadsheet to make sense of the data. For example, one participant stated he “allows teachers to be the specialists,” while another stated he “gave teachers liberty in their classrooms.” Using text segments from the interviews, I considered the central ideas and recorded them in a table (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The central ideas were based on transformational leadership: (a) individualized consideration, (b) idealized influence, (c) inspirational motivation, and (d) intellectual stimulation. I identified strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in addressing the student achievement gap following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reflective journaling enhances the credibility of the researcher by documenting data throughout the collection process (Ahmed, 2024). Using a reflective journal

organizes the researcher's thoughts and field notes, storing them in a secure place for later analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), I created a reflective journal to record personal biases and assumptions, as well as collected notes throughout the data collection process. I used a Word document to keep the journal with notes and reflections on each interview.

Accuracy and Credibility

According to Bingham (2023), trustworthiness comes from credibility, dependability, and transferability. Trustworthiness shows research and data analysis are consistent and have saturated all possible perspectives (Bingham, 2023). Credibility is the interpretation of the findings from the participants (King et al., 2019). To ensure credibility, I used processes to remain unbiased, such as coding for each participant and a reflective journal to document my assumptions. Triangulation is another way to ensure credibility. Triangulation is using data collection, theories, and existing literature to study a topic (King et al., 2019). I used triangulation as I analyzed data from my reflective journal, participant interviews, transformational leadership theory, and literature review. Dependability is the consistency of the data (Bingham, 2023). To keep the research dependable, I recorded data and transcribed the audio recordings immediately. I used accuracy in recording the findings. Transferability is providing rich data so other researchers can use the results of the study in a different setting (King et al., 2019). I used a sample of six participants to gain rich data; however, complete saturation of the themes of transformational leadership was not attained.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases are situations in which participants have perspectives contrary to the research. As the primary instrument in the research process, identifying discrepancies in data collection is my ethical responsibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To reduce discrepancies, I carefully tracked and coded the data with transparency and full awareness of the limitations of the study. I also adhered to the guidelines for data collection, avoiding research bias, and data analysis protocols.

Limitations

The limitations of the basic qualitative study were: (a) the sample size of the faith-based schools that are included in the study, (b) the perceptions of the school leaders that may be limited to their scope of unfamiliarity with other types of schools, (c) faith-based schools that can choose the student population, and (d) transferability as it relates to a unique faith-based school setting. To address these limitations, I used open-ended interview questions to provide in-depth, rich discussions from the participants. I involved schools that are widely diverse with a range of faith-based school leaders from diverse backgrounds of professionalism.

Data Analysis Results

For this qualitative project study, I collected data from faith-based school leaders in Ohio who provided insight into what strategies faith-based school leaders used to support teachers to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. I invited 48 faith-based school leaders from nonchartered, nonpublic schools. I obtained this list of school leaders from the Ohio Department of Education website (Ohio Department of

Education, 2024). The educational leaders met the criteria of working in a nonchartered nonpublic Ohio school for 3 years with at least 50 students enrolled. I emailed the approved letter from the IRB to the 48 faith-based school leaders and received five responses declining participation. Furthermore, six email recipients replied with agreement to participate. These participants included three K-12 principals, one grammar school principal, one superintendent, and a K-12 principal/teacher. I scheduled interviews with the participants. Upon completion of the interviews, I began to use thematic coding to find patterns that aligned with the transformational leadership framework. I started with 90 general statements that I designated for each of the components of transformational leadership. For example, “help when I can”, “utilize help from others”, and “check in on teachers” were able to be combined into individual considerations and emotional, social, academic, and personal support. These codes were then combined into 12 themes. The themes were further combined into four final themes that aligned with the transformational leadership framework.

Results

To gather data for this project study, I asked seven open-ended interview questions during the six semistructured interviews I conducted with faith-based school leaders. The seven questions correlated with the research question: What strategies do faith-based school leaders use to support teachers to address student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic? The research question correlates with the transformational leadership framework by Bernard Bass, which has four basic

components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Catalano et al., 2024).

The interviews were conducted via an audio platform and were recorded using a digital recorder. Upon completing the interviews, I manually transcribed each interview and saved the files in a secure location, along with the journal notes. After transcribing the interviews, I manually coded each transcription using predetermined codes that aligned with the transformational leadership framework using a Word document. A total of 90 codes were associated with transformational leadership. After the initial coding, I reviewed my journal notes and transcriptions several times, and 12 themes emerged within the codes that specifically aligned with the research question. Codes referring to discipline and attendance were removed as they did not pertain to the research question. These themes were shared amongst the participants based on the transformational leadership framework. Table 2 shows the themes and their alignment with the four components of transformational leadership.

Table 2

Themes Corresponding to Transformational Leadership Components

Transformational leadership component	Theme
Individual considerations	Volunteers, aides, and outside assistance Flexible scheduling One-on-one meetings Emotional, social, academic, and personal support
Intellectual stimulation	Professionalism Collaboration Individual education plans Professional development Curriculum adjustments
Inspirational motivation	Encouragement

Idealized influence

Ministry
Communication

I reexamined the themes and transcriptions to find relationships that were closely connected to the research question and project study. In the end, I combined volunteers, flexible scheduling, curriculum adjustments, and individual education plans as they were all academic supports. Additionally, one-on-one meetings and collaboration could be merged with professionalism. Encouragement is an overarching theme for emotional, social, and personal support as well as motivation and ministry. Finally, communication is a theme that crosses among staff, students, and parents. The final themes for this study were academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement.

Theme 1: Academic Support

The participants in this study identified ways academic support was important to closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. One component of the transformational leadership theory is individualized consideration. A teacher is given a limited amount of time in a school day to meet the academic needs of the students. All six participants stated the need to consider the teacher and worked to find ways to assist the teacher in the task of closing the achievement gap in that given amount of time. Five out of six participants clearly stated the need for volunteers and outside tutoring to support teachers. Participant 3 discussed his role in being a tutor for students to support the classroom teacher. Participant 6 explained he works to secure grant money to pay the classroom teachers to tutor after school to assist in closing the achievement gap.

Participants one, two, and four used teacher aides and individual volunteers from the church congregation to help with tutoring, specifically in mathematics and reading. While tutoring was strongly encouraged, the need for time to use these supports is necessary as well. Three of the six participants mentioned personally adjusting the student and teacher schedules to meet the needs of students who show achievement gaps.

Intellectual stimulation is another component of the transformational leadership theory. Teachers and school leaders are called upon to solve problems and create new ideas to help students grow and develop. School leaders who support teachers as they solve problems encourage intellectual stimulation (Catalano et al., 2024). Four participants discussed at length the freedom they give teachers to create individualized education plans for students who have significant learning gaps. Participant 6 emphasized the importance of teachers overlapping the curriculum from year to year and differentiating based on the needs of the classroom. Participant 2 stated that they gave teachers the “freedom to make decisions about curriculum.”

Theme 2: Collaboration

Working together to address the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic was another theme that emerged from the six interviews. Bass’s transformational leadership theory component, individual consideration, directly aligns with collaboration and one-on-one time spent between school leaders and teachers (Townsend, 2024). Five of the six interviews mentioned collaboration directly, stating they meet with teachers individually to discuss classroom situations, academic needs, and personal issues. According to Participant 3, these meetings are used to ask questions and understand

changes made to the curriculum and individual education plans that support students with achievement gaps.

Townsend (2024) explained that intellectual stimulation comes when a school leader encourages the teacher to think critically about the problems at hand. The school leaders in this study agreed that professionalism was an important concept in collaboration. Six out of six participants explained that the teachers were professional and could create learning environments to close the achievement gaps since the COVID-19 pandemic. Four participants mentioned that their role is to encourage teachers to be the specialists in the educational success of the classroom. Participant 1 stated, “I talk to the teachers, and the teachers have a really good idea about where the students are, and they’ll know what concepts the students are struggling with.” Participant 6 explained that he “lets the professionals do what they’re professional at and what their expertise is.”

Inspirational motivation is a leader sharing the vision and future goals of the organization (Zhan et al., 2022). The participants in this project study discussed the importance of professional development for future growth and the need to revisit challenges with the achievement gaps since the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant 1 mentioned providing teacher training through peer observations. Participant 6 stated that professional development opportunities gave leaders a way to reiterate the vision of the school district.

Theme 3: Communication

Communication is a theme that correlates with the transformational framework. Participants mentioned that the communication skills they use with parents are a model

for their expectations that staff will use as well. Idealized influence is the charismatic attitude that others want to attain (Corbin et al., 2024). When a leader models behaviors that others seek to follow, transformational leadership takes place. Communication with teachers was also mentioned, as participants used this to model the way they want teachers to communicate with students and parents. This is important as teachers work closely with students and parents to close the achievement gap. Participant 5 stated that his role is to create a “faculty of friends,” which aligns with the idealized influence component of the transformational leadership theory. The participants emphasized the need for staff to work together and communicate with others to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to Participant 3, a direct connection between the church and the school is a necessity to communicate to keep the future vision and goals aligned with the purpose of the school. He stated that “our school is a ministry directly out of our church.” Participant 4 discussed the need for compassion and strength from the church to be a successful school, using the volunteers and additional support. Finally, Participant 6 mentions the need to be a spiritual role model and shows the need for reliance on each other.

Theme 4: Encouragement

All six participants discussed ways in which encouragement aligned with the transformational leadership theory. According to all six participants, intellectual stimulation is encouraged through collaboration and freedom to oversee their classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to be part of the solutions and give input when decisions are

made. Teachers are trusted to create paths for students to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inspirational motivation is a component that encourages teachers to set goals and attain them through a shared vision. According to Participant 1, using encouragement to face challenges and grow through training is one way he motivates staff. Participant 3 saw a decrease in achievement during the COVID-19 pandemic. He was attuned to the stress of the staff and encouraged the other school leaders to take a step back in areas of enrollment and academic rigor to move students forward when the pandemic ended.

The component, idealized influence, in the transformational leadership theory was mentioned by all six participants. The participants discussed the methods they used as encouragement to be role models for the teachers. Four of the six participants led in daily devotions to start the day. Participant 3 stated, "I'm there by God for a reason and as a leader." Participant 5 considered his role with a servant mindset and looks for ways to encourage teachers through personal communication and managing as much as possible to alleviate extra work for them. Other participants encouraged teachers through an atmosphere of ministry and personal devotion to God and the school.

Encouragement through individual consideration was discussed most by the six participants. The participants used one-on-one meetings and interactions throughout the day to encourage staff. Participant 6 stated, "tending to the emotional needs of my teachers, just making sure that it's good. Everyone gets tired and weary." Participant 2 explained that being visible and available is how he encourages teachers. He checks on them and asks questions to monitor their stress levels. When a school leader provides

encouragement and emotional support, it gives teachers a sense of care from leadership and they can be confident in the work they do with students who have achievement gaps.

Discussion

Challenges in Faith-Based Schools Since the COVID-19 Pandemic

Faith-based school leaders in Ohio have struggled to support teachers to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. Many school leaders have seen an increase in enrollment as the morals and academics decline in public education (Johnston, 2023). According to the Department of Education (2023), a 3% decrease in public school student enrollment took place between the 2019 and 2020 school year. Faith-based schools operating in the 2019–2020 school year were 426 in total; however, by the 2022–2023 school year, 620 schools were in operation.

Participants in the study stated that the increase in student enrollment has led to more demand for teachers. As students move from public to faith-based schools, the achievement gap widens because the pacing and curriculum are not aligned between public schools and faith-based schools. Some teachers may create individual plans to support students; however, more training in developing these plans is needed. While enrollment increases, studies suggest that reducing class size is a needed practice to close the achievement gap (Horn et al., 2023). The participants are working to reduce class size even as enrollment has increased by bringing in volunteers to support teacher instruction through individual or small group tutoring. As stated in the transformational leadership framework, this individual consideration for teacher needs is essential to the academic support of students.

The achievement gap in both public and faith-based Ohio schools has widened since the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Ohio Department of Education (2023), English language arts assessment scores decreased by 8% and mathematics assessment scores decreased by 15% from the years before the pandemic. Alejo et al. (2023) claimed that while instructional pedagogies changed, there was no professional development to assist teachers in making these changes. This became taxing on the teachers, and the increased workload and stressors to close the achievement gap created teacher burnout; thus, losing teachers in the profession (Marshall et al., 2023).

Participants in the study discussed the need to provide professional development to teachers, offering more effective opportunities for teachers to grow and learn new strategies. Most faith-based school leaders attempt to collaborate with teachers one-on-one or throughout the day to encourage and support them because they are aware of the importance of effective mentorship and the desire teachers have to grow professionally, as well as support student achievement.

Characteristics of Faith-Based School Leaders Since the COVID-19 Pandemic

School leaders should have a clear understanding of the mission, vision, and values of the instructional environment to provide strategies to teachers to close the achievement gap (Sorkin et al., 2023). When school leaders have a holistic educational framework that reflects attributes of Christ, then academic success occurs (Huizenga & Mitchell, 2021). Zandroto and Indriani (2023) further stated that a growth mindset aligning with the Christian principles should also be a characteristic of a faith-based school leader.

One transformational leadership framework component is idealized influence. This influence is essential for faith-based school leaders to convey the instructional environment and growth mindset that holds academic achievement and Christ-centered attributes at the forefront of student success. Participants in the study emphasized their idealized influence through modeling communication with teachers, parents, and students. Some participants mentioned the importance of the school being an extension of the church ministry; thus, embracing the principles of the denomination in which they are affiliated. While the participants were fully immersed in their desire to keep Christian values a priority, no participant mentioned how the holistic educational framework supported strategies to help teachers close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another component of the transformational leadership framework is individualized consideration. Lee and Cheng (2021) stated that to minister to the individual needs of the teacher, they must be attentive to their emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual well-being in a school community. Participants in the study discussed ways they help relieve stress and instructional burnout in teachers through volunteers and tutors to supplement instruction. One participant mentioned that he is visible daily to show support and be available to assist when a teacher needs additional assistance in the classroom. Furthermore, several participants use one-on-one conversations to collaborate on instructional strategies, address student concerns, and discuss personal stressors.

Being an *encourager* was a characteristic that all participants discussed at length. They expressed their desire to be an advocate for teachers and support their needs so they can teach and work to close the achievement gaps. In the transformational leadership framework, inspirational motivation is a component that encourages. Shula et al. (2022) explained that collaboration is a way to encourage teachers. Participants use collaboration with teachers to solve problems, such as teaching a larger number of students and assisting students who have achievement gaps.

The transformational leadership framework component, intellectual stimulation, can have a positive effect on teachers. Some participants emphasized the importance of allowing teachers to have the freedom to make academic decisions and instructional changes to the curriculum as they deem necessary. One participant mentioned that teachers are encouraged to set their personal goals for the school year and student achievement. When teachers are given the freedom to set goals for their class, they are owning the growth and are more likely to close the achievement gap (Atha, 2022). While instructional freedom is valued and shows support and faith in teachers, providing professional development to guide them could offer more effective changes in the classroom.

Needs of Faith-Based School Leaders

Faith-based school leaders expressed their desire to share the mission of Christian education and effective teaching strategies with teachers through academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. They indicated the need for further understanding of how these four components could be used to create a holistic

educational experience to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders shared their strategies in these areas, which were closely connected to the transformational leadership framework. However, additional strategies could increase the confidence that faith-based school leaders have in working with teachers to close the achievement gap.

Professional development is an opportunity for professionals to grow in their areas of expertise (Sahlin, 2023). Continuous professional development for experienced school leaders is often not available, as training is geared toward new leaders or new programs (Sahlin, 2023). Participants in this study expressed the dependence of teacher expertise on closing the achievement gap, providing few authentic strategies from their own knowledge. Furthermore, communication was the only area in which the transformational leadership framework, idealized influence, surfaced as a remarkable trait. Faith-based school leaders would benefit from professional development opportunities in which they learn to use the four areas of transformational leadership in creating a holistic educational experience for teachers and students and communicate strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap.

Summary

Results from this qualitative project study addressed the challenges faith-based school leaders face in supporting teachers to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. Faith-based school leaders identified four areas in which they supported teachers: academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. Some participants identified ways they supported teachers academically,

such as providing tutors and volunteers. Participants also shared their ideas of collaboration through one-on-one conversations and problem-solving student needs. Finally, participants discussed their greatest strength as encouragers. All participants used encouragement as the main area of teacher support.

Using the four components of the transformational leadership framework: Idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation, faith-based school leaders showed a need for additional training in leadership strategies. Some participants noted their lack of confidence in providing strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gaps since the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant stated he allowed the teachers to do whatever they deemed necessary to make changes, expressing the lack of leadership strategies to provide for the teachers.

Professional development is an effective way to support faith-based school leaders (Sahlin, 2023). This approach could be a way to enhance the strategies faith-based school leaders are already using, further supporting teacher growth and professionalism within the school community (Sahlin, 2023). Through professional development, faith-based school leaders could learn to connect holistic educational practices that reflect the attributes of Christ as well as align the growth mindset of Christian principles to strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic (Huizenga & Mitchell, 2021; Zandroto & Indriani, 2023).

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Effective school leadership is the most crucial factor in student success beyond classroom teaching (Sahlin, 2023). This study addressed strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this qualitative project study show a need for professional development for faith-based school leaders in collaboration, academic support, communication, and encouragement. These areas are based on the survey results derived from the transformational leadership theory and the four components: intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration. There are limited studies that discuss professional development for school leaders beyond the initial training (Acton, 2020). For this reason, the project described in Section 3 will be a 3-day professional development plan for faith-based school leaders. The goal for this project is for faith-based school leaders to continue to develop their own skills in leadership to support teachers in this ever-changing world.

Rationale

Professional development is a necessary part of successful school leadership (Piala et al., 2024). Through the semistructured surveys, evidence of four themes emerged: academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. These themes were aligned with the transformational leadership framework; however, gaps emerged within the analysis of these themes. Because the data showed that leaders' strategies in academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement were

uneven/limited, a professional development focused on transformational leadership was selected to strengthen these four areas.

A professional development project is the best choice for this study because other options will not satisfy the needs of the faith-based school leaders. An evaluation study would not be productive, as the study is not based on evaluation, but rather on the perspectives of faith-based school leaders. A policy recommendation would not be an appropriate project, as transformational leadership is not based on policies in the state of Ohio regarding faith-based schools. Finally, a curriculum would not fit the project because the purpose of the project is to improve leadership of faith-based school leaders rather than the teaching components of a classroom.

Several survey participants mentioned ways they believed they were intellectually stimulating the teachers through academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement; however, they could not confidently provide professional development for them about strategies to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. Idealized influence, one of the components of the transformational leadership framework, was evident in the study through positive communication and encouragement; however, the influence was Christ-centered with no mention of academic influence. All the participants spoke of individual consideration through communication and encouragement, but they left the academic strategies and instructional methods to the teacher. Finally, inspirational motivation was mentioned through collaboration and encouragement; however, these areas were more spiritually centered and not academic strategies to close the achievement gap. For these reasons, faith-based school leaders

could benefit from professional development to support transformational leadership strategies to support teachers to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Review of the Literature

In this qualitative project study, I investigated strategies faith-based school leaders used to support teachers to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the analysis of the semistructured surveys, I discovered a need for professional development for faith-based school leaders in areas that align with the transformational leadership framework. This analysis showed gaps in academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. I used the Walden library and Google Scholar to search for peer-reviewed articles using keywords such as *professional development, faith-based school leaders, effective school leaders, academic achievement gap, transformational leadership, and leadership training*.

Importance of Professional Development

Professional development for effective faith-based school leaders is essential in the development of the leader and strongly correlates with positive student outcomes (Anwar et al., 2022). Professional development for leaders should be conducted through opportunities to learn, reflect, practice, and receive feedback (Jacobsen et al., 2022). Although training for school leaders is often only received at the onset of their career, professional development should be differentiated by the leaders' stage of their career and the environment in which they serve (Brauckmann et al., 2023). Jerdborg (2023) claimed that school leaders should engage in professional development that is relevant to

the circumstances in which they encounter, including content-specific and scaffolded material. Each school has a unique set of challenges; thus, professional development should be unique to the school leaders it serves (Gonzales et al., 2024; Jerdborg, 2023).

Needs Analysis for Transformational Leadership

The results of the qualitative project study show a need for faith-based school leaders to support teachers as they address the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. Brown (2022) claimed that a principal's leadership style can affect the academic and cultural attitudes of a teacher. Using the transformational leadership framework, one area of need is inspirational motivation. Brown (2022) stated that school leaders are tasked with shaping the working environment of teachers, which sets the tone for success in the classroom. Mullen and Hall (2024) claimed principal professional development should prioritize practices that motivate teachers and focus on an environment that will bring student success. This relationship between principals and teachers directly affects student motivation and school success (Pisriwati et al., 2024). According to Westberry and Zhao (2021), a lack of trust between the teacher and the principal can have a negative effect on the culture of the school. Furthermore, this relationship influences the teachers' motivation to contribute to a positive school culture (Pisriwati et al., 2024).

A study conducted in Pennsylvania shows that principal professional development affects the teacher's effectiveness (Steinberg & Yang, 2022). When school leaders can support teachers individually through collaboration, teachers have higher rates of effectiveness (Pisriwati et al., 2024). Results of this project study suggest that

intellectual stimulation can be achieved through academic support and collaboration. Intellectual stimulation occurs when teachers are encouraged to expand their own skill set to bring about positive change in the environment (Kilinc et al., 2024). Pisriwati et al. (2024) stated that the responsibility of a school leader is to possess strong communication skills and have an expert level of knowledge in educational matters, as well as a clear school vision, which, in turn, provides an optimal setting for teacher growth. Because of the complexity of these responsibilities, professional development is needed to develop such skill sets in the educational settings since the COVID-19 pandemic (Collins et al., 2025).

School leaders can influence teachers and set the trajectory of the school vision (Acton, 2020). Through professional development, school leaders can develop the skills to reshape personal competence in leading teachers (Sahlin, 2023). Principals who take advantage of professional development opportunities often hire more effective and qualified teachers (Gumus et al., 2024). This idealized influence, a component of transformational leadership, is one way to lower teacher turnover and should be coupled with the other elements of transformational leadership (Skousen et al., 2025). Eckert and Iselin (2025) emphasized the exceptional opportunity a faith-based school leader has in enhancing the skills and the effectiveness of teachers; however, the school leader must be intentional. Professional development using Biblical principles is one way to improve the school leaders' approach to empower others and develop relationships in a faith-based school setting (Eckert & Iselin, 2025). Collaboration is a vital part of idealized influence because it involves building a shared purpose and reaching goals together as school

leaders use the skills they develop through professional development to grow teachers and the school community collectively (Skousen et al., 2025).

The ability to lead schools and create safe environments for students and teachers requires skill as well as sensitivity to individual needs (Kilinc et al., 2024). Another key component of transformational leadership is individual consideration (Kilinc et al., 2024). School leaders who use the transformational leadership framework are generally more successful in developing a school community in which all participants feel valued (Jhonshon et al., 2024). For this reason, it is imperative that faith-based school leaders work intentionally to form effective communication skills (Jhonshon et al., 2024). According to this project study, individual consideration was an important area in relation to academic support. While most participants in the study provided volunteers and tutors to assist students and teachers, additional knowledge and skill sets could be fostered through professional development (Piala et al., 2024). Tan et al. (2024) claimed that school leaders have an indirect influence on student achievement by creating conducive learning environments and providing academic support through well-managed resources. Individual consideration through academic support can be challenging because resources are not readily available or there is resistance to change from teachers; therefore, professional development is needed to grow school leaders in providing this support (Paganin et al., 2025).

Barriers to Professional Development

Faith-based school leaders have barriers to overcome when attempting to attend professional development (Smith et al., 2025). These barriers include but are not limited

to time restraints, resources, applicability, and awareness of the need for personal growth (Smith et al., 2025). Only 5% of school funding nationally is allotted to principals for professional development (Meyers et al., 2023). This is detrimental to the success of students as investing in principals' performance is one way to increase effectiveness in schools (Master et al., 2022).

As faith-based school leaders begin their careers in a leadership position, they lack a network of support and interconnectedness (Carpenter et al., 2022)). Professional connectedness with other school leaders should exist outside their schools and districts (Carpenter et al., 2022). Collaboration is a key component for school leaders in professional development (Meyers et al., 2023). This is one way to ensure principals have support through a network of ongoing resources (Smith-Woofter et al., 2024). When professional development needs are addressed and collaboration exists, principals can excel as leaders (Smith-Woofter et al., 2024). Time to reflect and collaborate with a network of other school leaders is a necessary component of professional development that is often lacking (Johnson et al., 2021). Faith-based school leaders are required to create professional development for teachers and support staff while they are maintaining their own growth in the leadership field (Smith et al., 2025).

While professional development focuses on addressing the mindset of the participants, best practices and leadership frameworks also should be implemented in the training (Wells et al., 2021). For school leadership professional development to be successful, the leaders should buy-in to the purpose and participation of the activities (Master et al., 2022). Professional development should be focused and have clear

expected outcomes (Mullen et al., 2024). Mullen and Hall (2024) continued to state that professional development should be personalized to meet the needs and goals of the participants.

Justification for Professional Development Project

The importance of professional development for school leaders is evident in the literature review. School leaders have great responsibilities and challenges that surfaced in the changing education world, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Nhlumayo & Mabeleng, 2025). Faith-based school leaders are essential to the success of faith-based schools. When a school community takes the initiative in professional development for school leaders, challenges can be overcome, and the entire school community benefits (Skousen et al., 2025). Based on the research, very few systematic professional development methods are in place, especially for faith-based school leaders (Rodriguez et al., 2021). For these reasons, I will provide a 3-day professional development on how transformational leadership can improve academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement.

Project Description

Based on the results of this study, I will implement a 3-day professional development training course for faith-based school leaders in Ohio (see Appendix A). Participants who are listed on the nonchartered, nonpublic school list will be invited through email. They will be able to register for the training through a Google Form. The training will be during the summer as preparation for the coming school year. This

training will be conducted to provide faith-based school leaders with strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The learning objectives for this professional development will result in participants being able to (a) develop transformational leadership skills; (b) create a plan to implement idealized influence, individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation; and (c) align their transformational leadership goals with academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. The components of this professional development will be divided into 3 days. On the 1st day, the facilitator will create an understanding of how education came to be what it is today and where faith-based schools fit into the educational structure. The key components will emphasize what a leader means, including the role of a transformational leader in a faith-based school. The 2nd day, the facilitator will delve deeper into the components of transformational leadership and how they connect with the outcomes of the study including academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. The 3rd day, participants will review scenarios in small groups that align with transformational leadership. This activity will support transferring the awareness of what transformational leadership is to how these components can be applied in the daily life of a faith-based school leader. Finally, participants will reflect on what they learned about a transformational leader and how they can apply this to their own profession.

Resources for a Successful Professional Development

Human resources, material resources, and financial resources will be needed to make this professional development feasible. Human resources include a facilitator, a

team for technology and media, and security. Material resources needed for professional development will include large Post-it paper, markers, handouts that include the scenarios of transformational leadership, and individual reflection sheets. Financial resources include providing water and snacks for the 3 days, as well as payment for the facilitator. The training will take place at a local church in which I am a member, and I will have free access to use the facilities. This facility has a faith-based school and daycare.

Potential Barriers

Three potential barriers could hinder this professional development. The first potential barrier is the location. As potential participants are located throughout the entire state of Ohio, the location of the training could be out of the way and require participants to need overnight accommodations. A hybrid delivery could take place. This could be facilitated by a webinar for the 1st day and in-person training on the 2nd and 3rd day. Virtual follow-ups could reduce the need for extra travel as well. The second potential barrier is notification of the training. Some emails are not reliable for information, such as professional development training. To improve registration opportunities, Flyers could be mailed to faith-based schools in care of the faith-based school leader. The final potential barrier is the diverse group of participants. Differentiated grouping by school size could address this barrier.

Implementation and Timeline

The professional development for faith-based school leaders to develop strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic, using transformational leadership, will be 3 days in length. The training will be conducted

during the summer while faith-based school leaders are not actively working with students and staff. Recruitment will take place beginning 3 months prior to the designated dates of the training. The time for the training will be from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM with a 1-hour lunch break. A pre-assessment will be given at the beginning of the 1st day. A post-assessment will be given at the end of the last day. A follow-up survey will be sent to participants 3 months following the professional development directed by the facilitator. The 1st day will be (a) a discussion regarding the problem with achievement in Ohio and in faith-based schools, (b) an examination of the local problem, and (c) the role of a school leader. The 2nd day will be (a) an overview of transformational leadership, (b) the components of transformational leadership, and (c) the results of the project study, including academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. The final day will (a) work in small groups to examine transformational leadership scenarios and (b) individual reflections on their role as a leader (see Appendix A).

Roles and Responsibilities

The role of the facilitator will be to present the information and guide discussions. The facilitator will be an experienced faith-based school leader who demonstrates the components of transformational leadership and is confident in his/her role in areas of academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. The facilitator will monitor small group activities and assist in individual reflections. The participants will be actively involved in the discussions and small group activities. The district that sponsors this professional development supports faith-based schools. Their role will be to provide the space and resources needed in a facility to properly conduct professional development

for a group of school leaders. The goal of the participants is to gain knowledge on transformational leadership and apply this framework to closing the achievement gap in faith-based schools since the COVID-19 pandemic. The responsibilities of the participants are to be actively engaged during the professional development, provide feedback in the pre-and-post assessments as well as complete the survey within 3 months. Additionally, it will be the responsibility of the participants to return to their respective schools and share their learning with other leaders in their districts.

Project Evaluation Plan

The purpose of evaluation is to determine what participants are learning, how the learning changes instruction, and what effect the learning has on student achievement (Kagaba, 2025). The overall goals for this professional development include (a) developing transformational leadership skills; (b) creating a plan to implement idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation with their staff; and (c) aligning their transformational leadership goals with academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. Finally, the objective for this professional development will be to empower faith-based school leaders to use strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project evaluation will be a goal-based formative survey with summative elements at the end of the three-day training (see Appendix A). This survey will provide feedback on the content of the training, individual growth results, and additional comments from the participants. Additionally, the individual reflection will be a personal

evaluation for each participant to determine if they met the goals of professional development. A follow-up survey will be conducted by each participant within three months of the training to determine if the goals are successful. The evaluation data will be reported back to the facilitator. To determine success, 80% of participants will report increased use of transformational leadership strategies and give examples of specific changes in how their leadership supports teachers. The evaluation findings will be used to refine professional development through recommendations the participants.

Project Implications

The professional development project that focuses on transformational leadership skills could potentially increase faith-based school leaders' ability to lead teachers through a shared vision and collaboration. When teachers are included in the improvement process and can have input in the vision, satisfaction with daily work improves. Teachers who are motivated to improve their own skillset as well as contribute to the greater good create environments that are conducive to learning. Students are more likely to have higher academic achievement. This project could bring positive social change to veteran faith-based school leaders as they support teachers' effectiveness in the classroom and benefit students. The ultimate goal is to provide faith-based school leaders with strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

While this project focuses on faith-based schools in Ohio, the context is transferable. This professional development project could be adapted to meet the needs of other faith-based schools or public schools. The academic achievement gap has widened

since the COVID-19 pandemic in schools throughout the country (Horn et al., 2023). Transformational leadership is a framework that could be applied to leadership in all types of schools, thus improving strategies school leaders use to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

In this section, I will discuss the project strengths and limitations of the three-day professional development created based on the results of the basic qualitative research project. The purpose of the study was to investigate how faith-based school leaders used strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. I will continue the section with recommendations for alternative approaches to support faith-based school leaders in developing strategies to support teachers. Next, I will discuss the scholarship, project development, and evaluation plan, and how change can be implemented. I will reflect on the importance of the work and what implications, applications, and further research are needed.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The results of the basic qualitative project study showed a need for faith-based school leaders to develop skills that aligned with transformational leadership. To support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers need academic support, collaboration and communication with their school leaders, and encouragement. This professional development provides time for faith-based school leaders to collaborate with other peers to learn and develop their skills in transformational leadership. It provides time to reflect on the local problems as well as their own work. Finally, this training offers faith-based school leaders the opportunity to consider their strengths and areas of growth.

The limitations for this professional development include the time frame in which it is conducted. Three days require that participants are committed and dedicated to the

process. Along with time restraints, location can be a limitation, as the cost and inconvenience of overnight accommodations can be taxing on an individual or school district. Lastly, the diversity of student populations, school sizes, and staffing can hinder collaboration as the differences may be too broad to share insights and leadership strategies. To accommodate these limitations, virtual modules could be used. Additionally, regional cohorts could be piloted to create a network of leaders to share ideas for growth.

There are methodological limitations as well. The small sample size resulted in saturation not being reached, and the study was conducted in Ohio faith-based schools exclusively. For these reasons, caution is needed when applying the results to contexts outside the parameters of this study. Further research is needed to apply the results to other contexts.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Through this basic qualitative project study, I investigated what strategies faith-based school leaders used to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. From the results, I discovered a need for academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement through the transformational leadership framework. I chose a three-day professional development training course to address these needs; however, a long-term peer support cohort program could be developed that would provide a network of faith-based school leaders. This possibility would extend the learning over a longer period and provide extended reflections and feedback from peers.

An evaluation plan could be a recommendation for an alternative approach as well. This type of plan could offer insight into the current school leadership and open opportunities to grow through awareness of present practices. For this type of approach, a follow-up plan would need to be put into place to offer insights into growth and development. Additionally, a longitudinal tracking with dedicated surveys on the transformational leadership framework could be an alternative approach that would address the research problem. Finally, comparing faith-based school leaders to public school leaders and investigating strategies they use to support teachers to close the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic would be a method to further explore the research problem.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

This basic qualitative project study gave me insight into how to use research effectively by synthesizing multiple works. I learned how to take a local problem and develop a project that met the needs of those involved. Using faith-based school leaders, I was able to narrow the focus of the problem and learned to use scholarly research strategies to provide solutions for it. Regarding the problem of how faith-based school leaders use strategies to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to reflect on my own leadership skills and find areas of strength and growth through the transformational leadership framework. The findings from this study could inform future professional development initiatives in other educational settings that relate to transformational leadership or achievement gaps in K-12 school districts.

I learned to take a solution and develop a three-day professional development training that entailed all the components necessary to be successful. Using the project, I learned that many variables are needed to implement training that is productive for the participants and goal-oriented towards being considered successful.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

The work that was completed through this project study is important to the academic process of faith-based schools. Faith-based school leaders have faced the challenges of achievement gaps since the COVID-19 pandemic. This project can increase student achievement as faith-based school leaders improve their leadership skills using transformational leadership strategies. The results of this study indicate that teachers need academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement. Faith-based school leaders can learn to channel their skills to invest in teachers and motivate them with a shared vision through professional development.

This work can be transferred to public school leaders as well as other private school leaders. Transformational leadership is a framework that is universal and can be adjusted to the needs of other schools as well. Overall, this project can be used to provide strategies for school leaders to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The potential impact for social change can happen at the individual level as well as the organizational level. The results from this project emphasized academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement as areas of need for improvement in

faith-based school leadership. A three-day professional development will address these needs, resulting in faith-based school leaders being more prepared to support teachers in closing the achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic. Implications for improvement in faith-based schools are academic, spiritual, and cultural. When faith-based school leaders become aware of the potential growth of the teachers through their leadership, then change takes place. These changes occur within the school organization beginning with the school leadership. Teachers are more motivated to become invested in the shared vision as well. Finally, students can learn in a conducive learning environment which results in higher achievement and student success.

The theoretical application is grounded in Bass's transformational leadership framework that includes four components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Townsend, 2024). The three-day professional development is created to incorporate the components of this framework, thus allowing faith-based school leaders the opportunity to grow in each of these areas in practice. I recommend future research to go further into how faith-based school leaders can implement change and make improvements to society through academic achievement and student success. Because of the small sample and limited data, I recommend additional research and furthering this study into a longitudinal study which could deepen the current findings. Furthermore, I recommend extending the study to include public school leaders.

Conclusion

The achievement gap in faith-based schools has widened since the COVID-19 pandemic. School leaders are faced with the challenge of providing strategies to teachers to close the achievement gap. This study supports the idea that faith-based school leaders are an integral part of the learning process. Using semistructured interviews, this study aligned with the transformational leadership framework. The analysis of the data revealed that faith-based school leaders should provide academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement for teachers when trying to close the achievement gap. Using the components of transformational leadership, faith-based school leaders can offer motivation and influence to encourage teachers to invest in the shared vision of the school. When teachers have the support of their school leaders, they can create a conducive learning environment for student success. Students will benefit from a conducive learning environment in which academic support closes the achievement gap. As students succeed, communities flourish and the educational community builds a stronger capacity of leaders.

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[9](#)

Appendix A: The Project

Agenda

Day One

Time	Presentation/ Activity	Slide
9:00-9:15	Welcome	1
	Registration	
	Pre-assessment	
9:15-9:30	Expectations	2
	Objectives	3
	Agenda	4
9:30-9:45	Introduction of Facilitator	5
	Introduction to the topic	
9:45-10:00	Meet-&- Greet	6
10:00-11:00	History of Education	7-10
	Introduction to the Problem	
11:00-12:00	Discuss the Local Problems	11-12
12:00-1:00	LUNCH	13
1:00-1:30	Group Activity: What is a Leader?	14
1:30-2:00	Role of a Leader	15-17
2:00-2:15	Role of a Faith-Based Leader	18
2:15-2:45	Leadership Changes Since COVID-19	19
2:45-3:00	What to Expect Tomorrow	20

Day Two

Time	Presentation/ Activity	Slide
9:00-9:15	Arrival/ Sign In	21
9:15-9:20	Agenda	22
9:20-9:30	What is Transformational Leadership?	23
9:30-10:00	Idealized Influence	24-25
10:00-10:20	Influential motivation	26-27
10:20-10:40	Individual Consideration	28-29
10:40-11:00	Intellectual Stimulation	30
11:00-12:00	Turn & Talk	31
	Whole Group Discussion	
12:00-1:00	LUNCH	32
1:00-1:20	Academic Support	33
1:20-1:40	Collaboration	34
1:40-2:00	Communication	35
2:00-2:30	Encouragement	36
2:30-2:45	Turn & Talk	37
2:45-3:00	What to Expect Tomorrow	38

Day Three

Times	Presentation/ Activities	Slide
9:00-9:15	Arrival/ Sign In	39
9:15-9:20	Agenda	40
9:20-10:00	Recap Transformational Leadership	41
10:00-11:00	Scenarios in Small Group	42
11:00-12:00	Whole Group Discussion About Scenarios	42

12:00-1:00	LUNCH	43
1:00-2:30	Individual Reflection	44
2:30-3:00	Evaluation	45

Preassessment

Registration- Pre-Assessment

* Indicates required question

1. Name *

2. I am familiar with transformational leadership *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not Very familiar

3. I use positive influence to affect my teachers. *

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

4. I am able to motivate my teachers *

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

5. I work with my teachers individually. *

Mark only one oval.

Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

6. I encourage my teachers to grown in their profession. *

Mark only one oval.

strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly Agree

Individual Reflection

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Identify your strengths and areas for growth within each of the four components of transformational leadership. Consider how you engage with teachers and other staff and reflect on how these interactions contribute to student achievement and success.

Leadership Component	Subcategory	Strength	Area of Improvement
Idealized Influence	Academic Support		
	Collaboration		
	Communication		
Inspirational Motivation	Academic Support		
	Collaboration		
	Communication		

	Encouragement
Individualized Consideration	Academic Support
	Collaboration
	Communication
	Encouragement
Intellectual Stimulation	Academic Support
	Collaboration
	Communication
	Encouragement

Evaluation

Post Assessment

* Indicates required question

1. Name *

2. I am familiar with transformational leadership *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not Very familiar

3. I have a plan to use positive influence to affect my teachers. *

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

4. I have a plan to motivate my teachers *

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

5. I have a plan to work with my teachers individually. *

Mark only one oval.

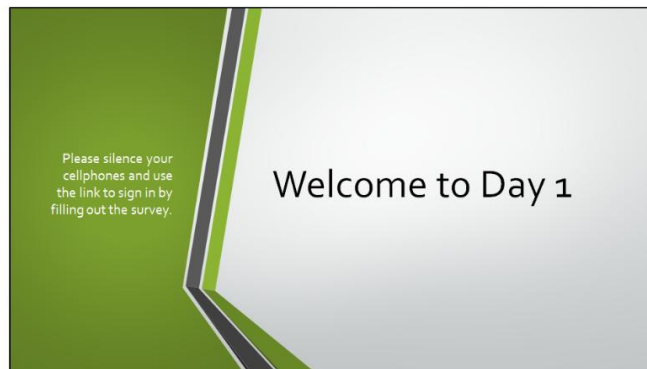
- Strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly agree

6. I have a plan to encourage my teachers to grown in their profession. *

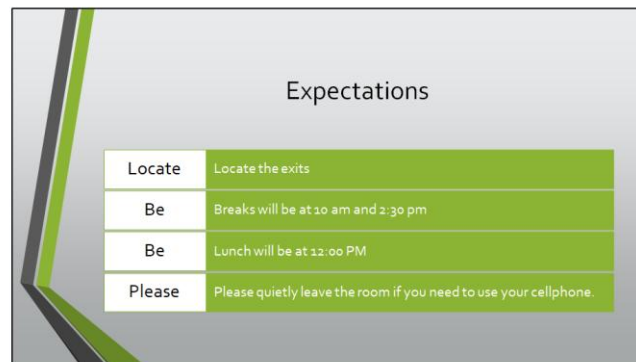
Mark only one oval.

- strongly disagree
 Disagree
 Neutral
 Agree
 Strongly Agree

PowerPoint Presentation



Greet participants as they arrive.
Introduction of the facilitator
Instruct participants to fill out the survey while they are waiting



The facilitator will point out important locations: the restroom, exits, and areas for breaks.

Objectives

- (1) participants will develop transformational leadership skills
- (2) participants will create a plan to implement idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation with their staff
- (3) participants will align their transformational leadership goals with academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement.



Facilitator will review the objectives for the professional development.

Day 1 Agenda

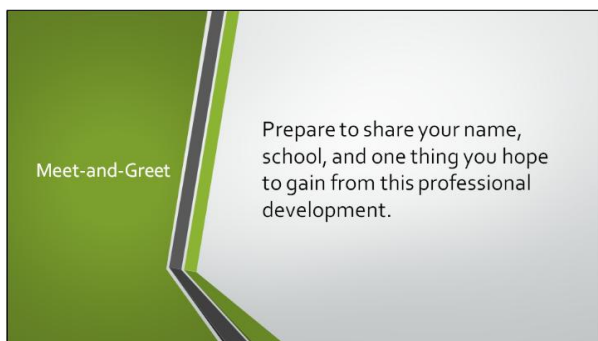
- Introductions
- The Broader Problem
- The Local Problem
- LUNCH
- The Role of a Leader
- The Role of a Faith-Based Leader

The facilitator will go over the agenda for the day.

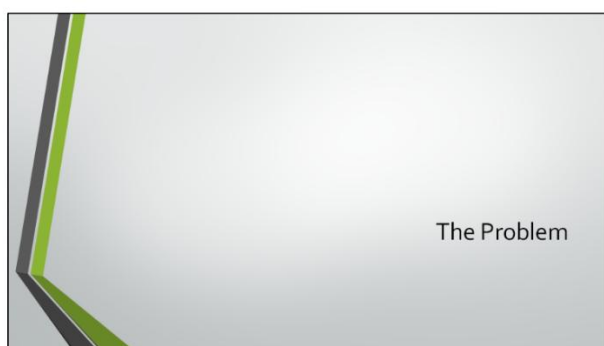
Transformational Leadership: Strategies to Support Teachers to Close the Achievement Gap

Created By: Jolene Culver

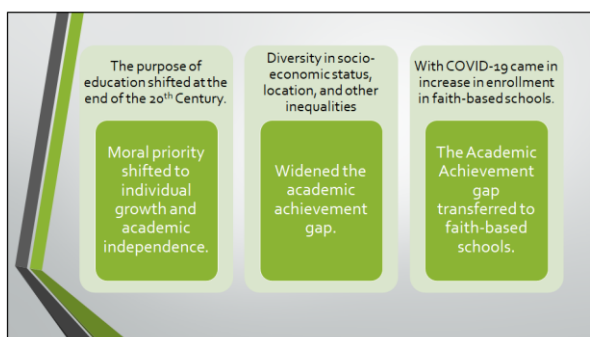
The facilitator will introduce themselves and welcome everyone to the training. The facilitator will briefly explain what his/her background is and how he/she came to invest in this presentation.



The facilitator will give teachers time to share who they are, and what they hope to gain from this PD.



Facilitator will begin by giving an overview of the history of education and how faith-based schools



Give the history of education and how it has progressed from No Child Left Behind to COVID-19.

Problem: Diverse Academic Population in Faith-based Schools

How are we here?

- Covid-19 Pandemic
 - Inconsistent educational settings
 - Technology challenges
 - Resource inequality

Faith-based schools

- Increased Enrollment
 - Smaller class sizes
 - Opened sooner
 - Holistic mindset

The facilitator will explain the problem that is addressed in the study. Why faith-based schools had an increase in enrollment, and the result of that increase.

Ohio Achievement and Enrollment data

Achievement

- OSTs 2021
 - 8% decrease in ELA
 - 15% decrease in Mathematics
 - 20% decrease in 3rd grade Reading

Enrollment

- Public school 3% decrease compared to 0.03% to 0.04% decrease in prior years.

Year	Enrollment per 1000
2014	1800
2015	1780
2016	1760
2017	1740
2018	1720
2019	1700
2020	1680
2021	1660
2022	1640
2023	1620
2024	1600

The achievement data and enrollment data of public schools. Include the problem with these statistics is that children are arriving in faith based schools underprepared to be at grade level.

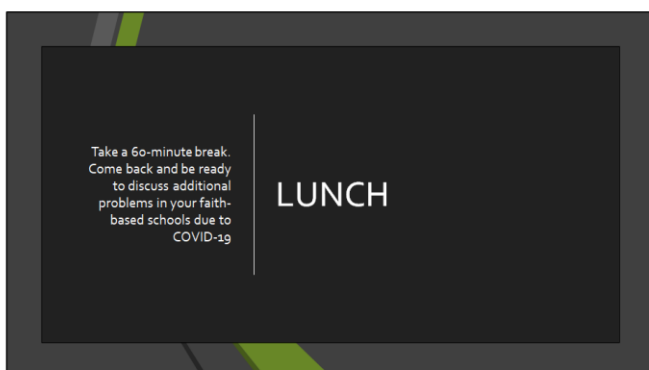
What additional problems do you see in your faith-based schools due to COVID-19?

Turn and Talk


Allow time for participants to discuss problems they see that affect achievement in their schools.



Allow participants 15 minutes to share out additional problems due to COVID-19.




Give participants the opportunity to discuss the roles of a school leader. Give each table a marker and wall size post-it to write their ideas on so they can share out.



Role of a School Leader

1. Sets the direction of the school
2. Lays the foundation for culture and vision
3. Builds the relationship between the school and community
4. Maintains daily operations
5. Follows basic safety regulations and attendance protocols


Describe the roles of a leader in terms of general schools and how these apply to faith-based schools.



Role of a School Leader

1. Creates collaborative atmosphere
2. Provides growth opportunities for staff and students
3. Shares common vision
4. Promotes strong moral conditions
5. Chooses curriculum
6. Ensures high standards are taught and achieved

Describe the roles of a leader in terms of general schools and how these apply to faith-based schools.



Role of a School Leader

1. Ensures academic, social, and emotional needs are met
2. Improves academic outcomes
3. Provides instructional resources

Describe the roles of a leader in terms of general schools and how these apply to faith-based schools.

Role of a Faith-Based School Leader

1. Align spiritual and moral character with the school's religious beliefs
2. Provide spiritual and moral examples for staff, students, and the community
3. Hire staff and retain teachers who spiritually align with religious beliefs
4. Seek funding

Facilitator will discuss the roles of faith-based school leaders. Additional input from participants are welcome.

Leadership Changes Since COVID-19

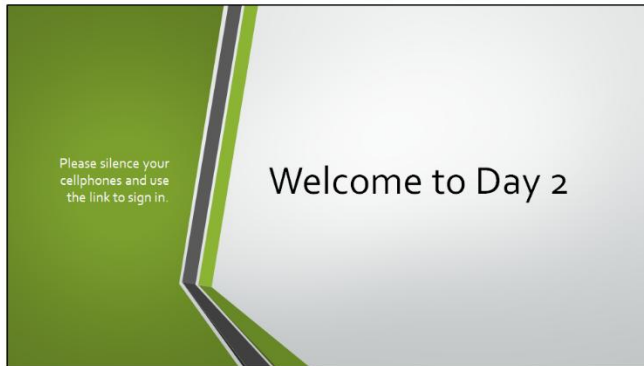
- PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION USING TECHNOLOGY
- RECREATE WAYS TO MAINTAIN THE NEW NORMAL
- MANAGE REMOTE LEARNING PROCESSES WHEN NEEDED
- MAINTAIN HEALTH AND SAFETY STANDARDS FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS
- KEEP DAILY TRANSPARENCY IN COMMUNICATION
- REPLENISH LEARNING LOSS

Identify the changes since COVID-19.

Tomorrow

What is Transformational Leadership?	4 Components to Transformational Leadership
Discussion	LUNCH
Academic Supports, Collaboration, Communication, and Encouragement	

The facilitator will go over the plan for tomorrow and answer any questions from today.



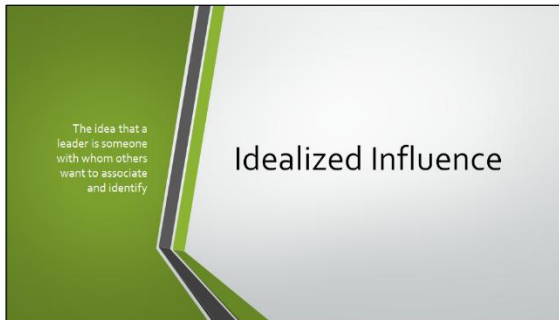
Greet participants as they arrive.
Introduction of the facilitator
Instruct participants to fill out the survey while they are waiting



Facilitator will explain the day's agenda.



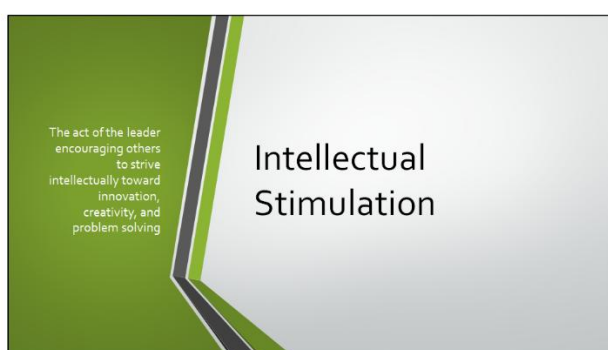
Read the definition of transformational leadership



Describe what idealized influence is.

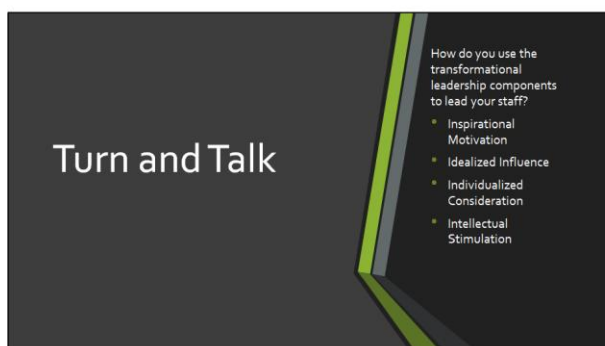


Characteristics of individual consideration

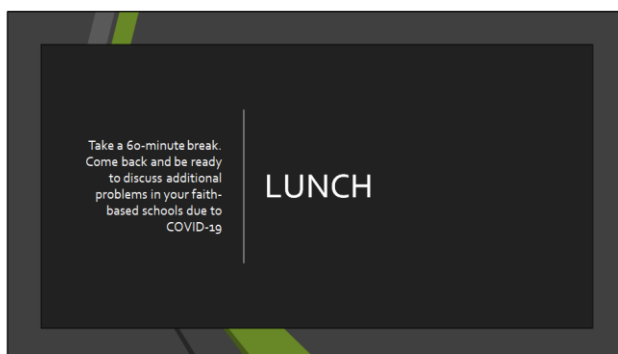


Describe intellectual stimulation.

Explain this component is a result of the other three components



Lead participants in a 15 minute small group table talk about how they use transformational leadership in their schools.



Each of the areas of growth have some elements of the transformational leadership framework. Academic support was emphasized by individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. Discuss the areas of each component.



Collaboration- another area of growth with an emphasis of individual consideration, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation. Discuss each area

Communication

- Idealized Influence
 - Modeling parent, peer, and student communication
 - Faculty of friends
 - Ministry of compassion and strength
 - Spiritual role model
 - Reliance on others
 - Daily devotions

Encouragement

- Individual Consideration
 - Attune to staff stress
 - Alleviate extra work for staff
 - One-on-one meetings
 - Tend to emotional needs
 - Being visible and available
- Intellectual Stimulation
 - Allow teachers freedom to oversee their own classroom
 - Be part of the solution by giving input
 - Trust teachers to create an achievement pathway
- Inspirational Motivation
 - Encourage teachers to set goals and attain them through a shared vision

Encouragement- discuss individual consideration, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation.

Turn and Talk

How do you use the four areas of improvement to lead your staff?

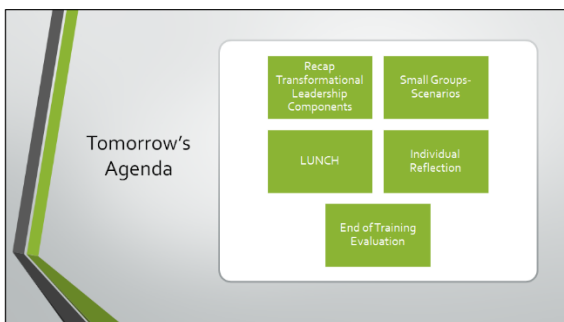
- Academic Support
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Encouragement

Lead participants in a 15 minute small group table talk about how they use transformational leadership in their schools.

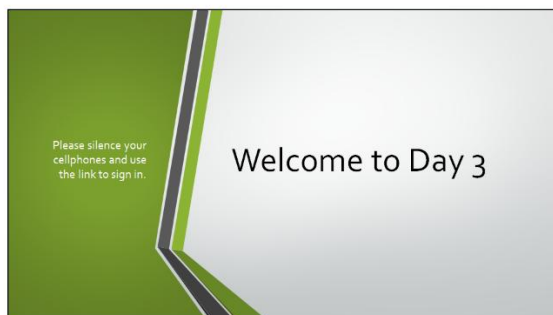
Tomorrow's Agenda

- Recap Transformational Leadership Components
- Small Groups-Scenarios
- LUNCH
- Individual Reflection
- End of Training Evaluation

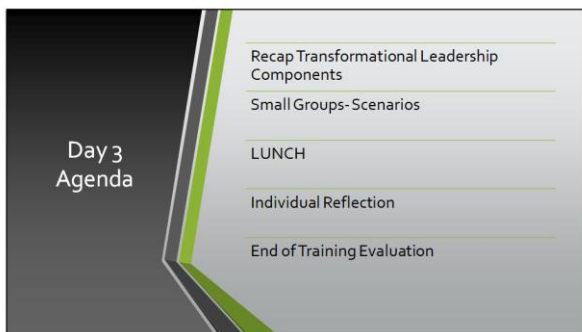
Explain the agenda for today.



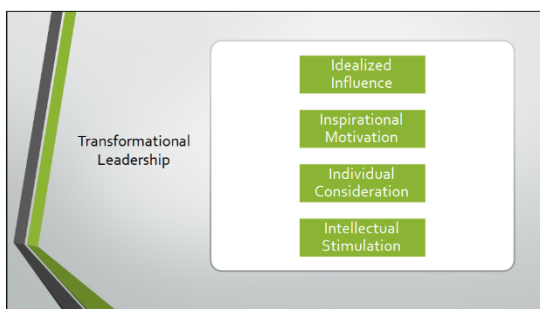
Explain the agenda for today.



Greet participants as they arrive.
 Introduction of the facilitator
 Instruct participants to fill out the survey while they are waiting



Explain the agenda for today.



Recap the components of transformational leadership. Discuss how each one plays a part in the faith-based school leadership.

Small Group Activity



Each group will get a scenario and discuss the opportunities for transformational leadership.



Utilize the four components of transformational leadership



Apply academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement



List the results on the Large Post-it to share with the entire group

Facilitate the small groups. Give each group the four scenarios. Set a timer for 15 minutes for each scenario. Allow the groups to discuss what transformation leadership component is a part of the scenario and how the academic support, collaboration, communication, and encouragement are included. List what areas are lacking if any.

After each group has their ideas for each scenario, lead a whole group discussion.

Take a 60-minute break. Come back and be ready to discuss additional problems in your faith-based schools due to COVID-19

LUNCH

Individual Reflection

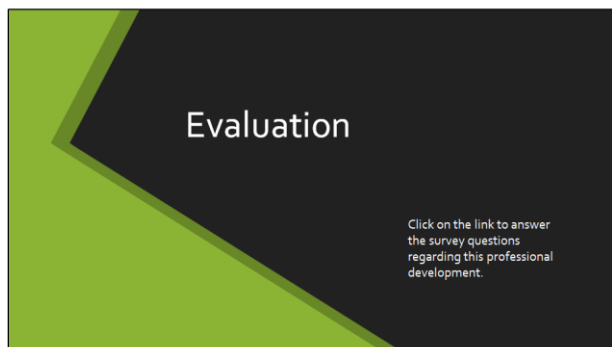
Think about the Four Components of Transformational Leadership.

What are the areas of strength in your leadership?

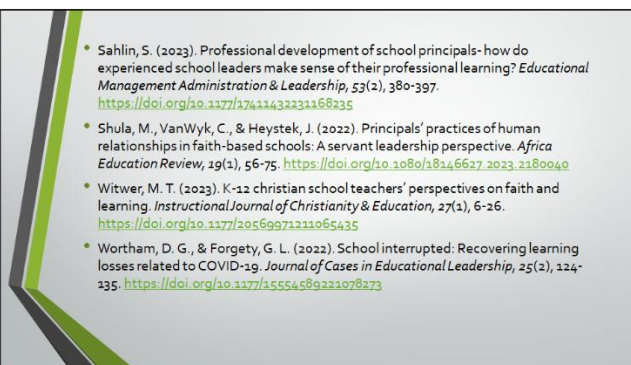
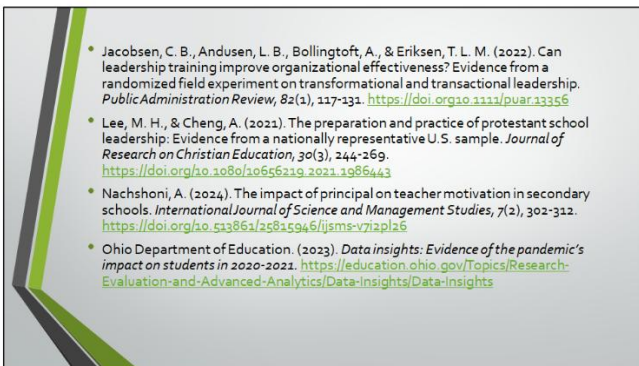
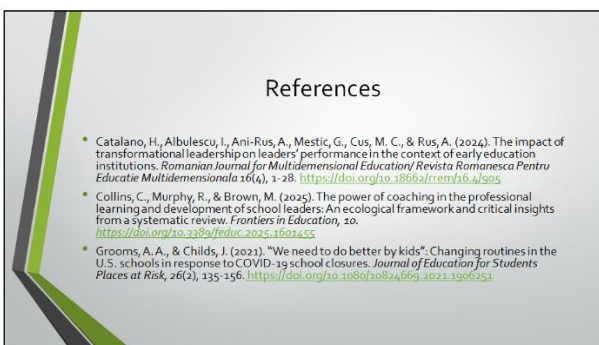
What are the areas of growth in your leadership?

What barriers inhibit growth in transformational leadership?

Facilitator pass out the handout for individual reflections. Explain each area. Give participants an hour to reflect. After this reflection, bring the group back together and ask for volunteers to share out.



Thank you all for coming. Please fill out the evaluation at the end.



Appendix B: Email Invitation to Participants

Subject line:

Interviewing faith-based school leaders regarding the academic achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic

Email message:

Dear school leader,

As part of my qualitative doctoral dissertation project study, I am researching strategies faith-based school leaders use to support teachers to address student achievement gaps following the COVID-19 pandemic. My primary method of collecting data for this study will be through interviewing faith-based school leaders in Ohio. I would like to invite you to participate in a qualitative research study through a semistructured individual interview. After this project study, I will share my results and recommendations through a PowerPoint presentation.

About the study:

- A thirty to forty-five minute in person or zoom interview that will be audio recorded.
- A twenty-minute follow-up phone call after the interview has been transcribed, if needed.
- To protect your privacy, the published study would protect your confidentiality.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Employed as school leader in a faith-based school for a minimum of three years.

- Lead a faith-based school with a minimum of fifty students.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Jolene Culver, an Ed.D. student at Walden University. Please respond to this email to let me know of your interest. Additionally, you may reach out to me at the following phone number (xxx)xxx-xxxx.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jolene Culver

Walden Doctoral Student

Appendix C: Semistructured Interview Questions

1. What role do you have at this faith-based school?
2. What do you see as contributing factors to teachers who lack strategies to address the academic achievement gap since the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How do your teachers address the academic achievement gap in students since the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How do you support teachers to address the academic achievement gaps since the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. What leadership style do you use as a school leader at this faith-based school?
6. What strategies do you use as a faith-based school leader to support teachers in closing the academic achievement gap?
7. What results have you seen using the strategies discussed in Question 6?