



## **Teachers' and Principals' Perceptions of Factors That Contribute to the Success of Blue-Ribbon Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Creating and sustaining an organizational culture that contributes to high academic achievement is frequently a problem in schools. This basic qualitative study explored measures implemented in thriving campus cultures and effective leadership on those campuses by interviewing principals and teachers in Blue Ribbon Schools. The study focused on principals' and leaders' perceptions of three different campuses in South Texas. The study selected schools that have been awarded Blue Ribbon campus designation in 2019 to explore factors that contributed to these campuses' success. The study drew perceptions from three principals and four teachers from two different districts in the Rio Grande Valley.

**Keywords:** Blue Ribbon schools, culture, principals, teacher

In 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA); the goal of the ESSA is to provide all children a significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and to close educational achievement gaps (USDOE, 2019). For decades, public schools have faced challenges to improve student achievement and meet accountability. Public schools are placing increasing pressure on teachers and principals to raise students' standardized scores. The United States Department of Education established the National Blue-Ribbon Schools Program in 1982 to acknowledge exemplary public and private learning institutions that model both excellence and equity in schools (USDOE, 2019). The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore teachers' and principals' perceptions of factors that contribute to Blue Ribbon campus culture and effective campus leadership.

This study focuses on Positive School Culture and Strong School Leadership, two elements of the Effective School Framework (ESF) that contribute to school success in South Texas. Positive School Culture is one of the five prioritized levers in ESF. Positive School Culture ensures that districts commit to supporting and setting up campuses for success to promote effective teaching and learning by implementing the four essential actions. Creating and sustaining a positive school culture is fundamental to accomplish district and campus academic goals. Research conducted by Desravines et al. (2016) confirm

that students are successful when the school leader develops a clear picture of the long-term success for the campus and its students. Campus cultures can vary from strong to weak, depending on how the staff interacts. Strong cultures have many coinciding and unified collaborations to represent the organization's mission and vision (Shafer, 2018). Lezotte and Snyder (2011) explain that effective schools implement a clear mission that focuses on student learning to drive the culture, and constant efforts are made to become learning environments with a commitment to problem solve and build a sense of shared responsibility for improvement. Successful small campuses focus on low student enrollment to personalize connections between teachers and students and develop organizational structures to support students' academic and extracurricular activities (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011). The schools involved in this study are small campuses with an average of 400 students enrolled at each campus.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research explores factors that contribute to positive school culture and identify effective leadership strategies in Blue Ribbon Schools to inform low-performing schools seeking to improve student outcomes. The National Blue-Ribbon Schools Program, established by the Secretary of Education in 1982, highlights excellence in teaching, student performance, school leadership, and school/community interactions. This study addresses ways to improve student outcomes on low-performing campuses by exploring factors that contribute to Blue Ribbon School success. The goal of the study is to discover best practices that Blue Ribbon Schools implement to be successful in facilitating and recommending strategies for campuses in need of improvement. Efforts to improve students' outcomes in low-performing schools have been underway for decades yet limited broad-scale improvement continues to frustrate families, school leaders, and policymakers (Aragon & Workman, 2015)

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Background**

During the Effective Schools Movement in the early 1980s, the U.S. Department of Education initiated a program that recognized schools that met and exceeded specific measures. Originally intended only to highlight excellence in public schools, the program eventually recognized public schools and private schools. The criteria used to identify excellence in these schools were derived from effective school research. The program was formally named the National Blue-Ribbon School Program in 1996 (USDOE, 2019).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) promised to provide all students with equal education opportunities, even though continuous school improvement and achievement gaps continue to be evident in low socioeconomic students who lack opportunities for successful academic outcomes (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). With the ESSA's passage in 2015, state education agencies and school districts' roles shifted to supporting school improvement by providing campuses with flexibility in developing and implementing plans to support five percent of schools with low academic performance (Dunn & Ambroso, 2019). Aragon and Workman (2015) stated that, the federal government has attempted to improve turnaround efforts through funding grants that have cost over 5.7 billion dollars to improve failing schools, which resulted in one of three schools decreasing in academic performance.

Administrative teams are now, more than ever, facing the challenge of not only developing a plan to ensure they are creating effective school culture while ensuring they sustain their status through the Texas academic accountability system. Student performance can be a critical factor that can be identified as under the school's control, thus making this a crucial concern for the entire school community. A school's academic success has a significant impact on school effectiveness; therefore, the focus on school culture remains and is always high. Lezotte and Snyder (2011) clarified that schools' culture represents a complex and powerful set of interdependent forces that ensure schools' consistency. The implementation

of new ideas and programs is also a critical factor in effective schools, and the school leader must have the ability to make sure they avoid approaches and methods that do not work for their campus. Understanding these characteristics and the difference between the two is imperative to sustaining state accountability. Donohoo et al. (2017) stated that a growing body of evidence exists that school culture impacts students, second only to the teacher's influence in the classroom.

High-performing schools share many contributing factors, including being under the direction of a high-performing leader. In recent years, however, the notion of distributed leadership has taken hold in schools, and some empirical evidence has emerged to support a strong relationship between distributed leadership and school performance (Leithwood et al., 2006).

In 2019, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) transitioned from the Critical Success Factors Framework to the Effective School Framework to support districts and campuses concerning best practices that effective campuses practice and engage in daily to build a common language among educators (texas esf.org, 2019). The present study explores teachers' and principals' perceptions of factors that contribute to Blue Ribbon campus culture and leadership success. Additionally, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge by identifying and exploring effective factors that will provide best practices and strategies to impact and improve South Texas's low-performing campuses.

Student success is a general problem that exists in education, and turning failing schools around has been a priority to the State of Texas. The Texas Education Agency updated the school improvement framework to ensure that the state provides leadership, guidance, and support to all school systems. The goal of this study was to discover best practices that Blue Ribbon Schools implement to be successful in facilitating other campuses in need of improvement. TEA developed the Effective School Framework to provide a clear vision to provide an excellent education for all Texas students (ESF, 2019). The Effective School Framework incorporates five prioritized levers that are essential in high-performing campuses. The study focused on two of the five prioritized levers: Strong School Leadership, Effective and Positive School Culture. The levers incorporate essential actions that describe what effective schools do to support teaching and learning. Strong school leadership and Positive School Culture focus on effective campus instructional leaders with clear roles and responsibilities who develop, implement, and monitor focused improvement plans to address low performance. Positive School Culture requires compelling and aligned vision, mission, goals and values, explicit behavioral expectations, and management systems that involve families and the community (ESF, 2019).

### **Effective School Framework**

Effective School Framework (ESF) is utilized by TEA to support campuses in need of improvement with best practices that will improve academic accountability. ESF's main goal is to provide a clear vision for what districts and schools across the state do to provide an excellent education to all students. The purpose of ESF is to create a common language, create a culture of continuous improvement, and a system of aligned resources ([texas esf.org](https://texas esf.org), 2020).

This study focuses on Positive School Culture and Strong School Leadership that contribute to schools' success in South Texas. ESF identifies five distinct areas referred to as levers that effective schools utilize to ensure students receive an equitable and effective educational experience.

ESF has five prioritized levers:

1. Strong School Leadership,
2. Effective, Well-Supported Teachers,
3. Positive School Culture,

4. High-Quality Curriculum, and
5. Effective Instruction.

At the core of ESF is effective instruction, which is strengthened and supported by high-quality instruction, positive school culture and effect, and well-supported teachers. The purpose of ESF is to build a common language around best practices, support campus and continuous district improvement, and coordinate the alignment of statewide and regional systems support to the needs of districts and campuses. The Texas Education Agency's goal is to improve outcomes for all public-school students by implementing the Effective School Framework ([texasesf.org](http://texasesf.org), 2020).

### **School Improvement**

Today American educators are challenged to raise students' academic achievement to the highest standard, a demand that aligns with international benchmarks (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Defour and Marzano (2011) explain that no generation of educators in the United States history has been asked to do so much for so many. The momentum for school improvement initiatives in this country is not a consequence of aspiration, but rather a response to transforming persistently low-performing campuses to high-achieving campuses (Aly et al., 2019). Over two decades, underperforming schools have not been successful in response to federal and state initiatives (2019). School turnaround is a two-year intervention plan that supports and improves chronically low-performing campuses to increase student academic performance significantly (2019). School Improvement requires turnaround campuses to streamline through a lengthy transformation process, from low-achieving to high-achieving. Federal legislation gives states various degrees of responsibilities for school improvement, and policymakers have conflicting views on how to turnaround schools in need of improvement (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2019). School turnaround as a concept has been in existence since the 1900s in the US; low-performing schools were sanctioned and tasked to replace school staff to improve low-performing schools; however, since the efforts lacked support, schools did not show improvement (Weiner, 2016). Priority Schools are described as chronic underperforming as well as persistently low-achieving schools or low-performing schools. These schools are classified as the lowest 5% of schools within a state and are frequently affected by factors that are out of the school's control (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2019). VanGronigen and Meyers (2019) describe low-performing schools as sharing similar characteristics, such as that they are in urban or rural areas, serve predominantly low socioeconomic and minority students, have low attendance rates, see low parental engagement, and face high staff turnover.

What does it take for a school leader to transform a school in need of improvement into a thriving campus? When a school needs improvement, the principal is the key leader for ensuring that necessary changes occur at the campus and that they are at the center of school improvement efforts (Meyers & Hitt, 2017; Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). School leadership plays an essential role in ensuring school improvement (Yeigh et al., 2019). Principals are the most prominent leaders who make the changes in a school in need of improvement.

Defour and Marzano, in the book, "Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement," quote Earnest Boyer, an influential leader in the advancement of public education and professional development.

"When you talk about school improvement, you are talking about people's improvement. That is the only way to improve. Schools, unless it means painting the buildings and fixing the floors. Nevertheless, that is not. The school: it is the shell. The school is people, so when we talk about excellence or improvement or progress, we are talking about the people who make up the building." (Defour & Marzano, 2011, pg. 35.)

Recent research confirms Boyer's view; a study on the world's best-performing school determined that the quality of campus does not exceed the quality of the teachers (Defour & Marzano, 2011). Two different meta-analyses of research on the factors that impact student achievement discovered that the attributes of instruction students receive in the classroom is the most crucial variable in student achievement (Defour & Marzano, 2011). Teachers are crucial to improving students' academic growth, and the leader's support builds effective teachers.

### **Organizational School Culture**

Educational leaders work in complex, high-pressure cultures with team members from diverse backgrounds, interests, and goals (Aidman & Long, 2017; Smith & Shouppe, 2018). To be successful, leaders must understand the vital process of creating and maintaining a school culture. School culture is defined as the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions common to a group of people. These shared qualities of a group make them unique (Aidman & Long, 2017; Northouse, 2016, p. 428). Olsen et al. (2018) explain that for more than 100 years, extensive research has been conducted on the importance of school culture; therefore, there is no consensus on how to define school culture or climate. Creating, maintaining, and measuring a safe and healthy school culture is a challenge that many school administrators and educators face every day. (Olsen, 2018).

Principals often function as cultural gatekeepers, acting as facilitators of cultural norms to maintain positive campus expectations. School culture impacts every part of the organization. Smith and Shouppe (2018) discuss the correlation between school culture and students' academic achievement; educators are challenged to improve student achievement, regardless of student demographics or economic status. In their study, the researchers discovered that student achievement is a critical aspect of school culture, and stakeholders have an overwhelming and continuously growing task (Smith & Shouppe, 2018). Campuses that lack positive school culture will have students who feel unsafe, unwelcome, and disrespected. The principal is the leader in charge of the context of the school culture, and they set the tone for how school staff should work together to develop a positive learning environment for students and staff (Lee, et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2019;). The National School Climate Center (NSCC) indicates that a school's climate or culture is the quality and character of school life. This organization highlights the importance of norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling social, emotionally, and physically safe. They suggest that educators model attitudes that demonstrate the benefits gained from learning. In schools, this means students, families, teachers, and principals must work together to develop and contribute to a shared school vision (NSCC, 2019), connecting these characteristics of instructional leadership to defining the school mission.

Organizational culture or school culture is built and sustained by the campus team's productivity. Hall and Hord (2015) discovered that most organizations are open to team member's talents, innovations, and expectations to increase accountability success. These expectations are anticipated to be accurate in schools, as well as in the corporate sector. Researchers studying the school workplace culture of both educational and corporate environments see similarities in improvement initiatives (Hall & Hord, 2015). Nevertheless, school culture impacts instructional leaders and stakeholders to improve student achievement. Fundamental to improving school culture is improving the personalization of teaching and learning between the student and their learning environment (Lewis et al., 2016).

A study conducted by Bower and Parsons (2016) defines school culture as a "belief systems, values, and cognitive structure" of an organization. All the elements in culture are complex and precise. Culture is an essential element of the organization that should be monitored and sustained to maintain all stakeholders' success. Culture is the glue that holds an organization together and unites people around shared values and beliefs (Bower & Parsons, 2016).

Lewis et al. (2016) discovered that student achievement improves on campuses where collaborative work culture provides teachers with a professional learning community focused on improving teaching and learning to improve student performance and accountability. Consequently, instructional leaders have a significant impact in shaping school culture and school improvement. Leadership and school culture go hand in hand in both the development and sustainability of school reform. Lewis et al. (2016) state that school leaders are instrumental in shaping campus culture and leading reform, and the presence of sustainability reform is highly associated with the school's culture.

As the campus leader, the principal has the most significant responsibility to develop and sustain a campus's cultural success. As per Lezzotte and Snyder (2011) and Smith and Shoupe (2018), to create a positive school culture of achievement, leaders should focus on teacher professionalism, academic press, and community engagement. The academic press is defined as the overall tone of the campus as a serious, orderly, and focused learning environment which creates a shared spirit of excellence, high expectations of self and others, collaboration, and hard work.

Fallon and Pichot (2018) discuss eight factors contributing to school culture change in a turnaround campus. These eight factors help leaders make a profound transformation in schools.

1. Consider the Principal as a lead learner.
2. Have a sense of focused urgency about reducing inequity.
3. Use the group to change the group.
4. Spread and deepen teacher leadership.
5. Establish procedures and communication during implementation involving staff.
6. Focus on pedagogy and student progress.
7. Use evidence.
8. Go outside to get better inside.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership empowers the team to promote and develop the ability of the organization to succeed. Transformational leadership is defined as leaders who facilitate people's mission and vision by renewing their commitment to reorganize the system and accomplish their goals (Leithwood et al., 2006). Transformational leaders are role models who can develop and communicate a clear vision for any organization, empower their team to meet high expectations, increase the team's trust, and give life to the organization (Aldridge & Fraser, 2018; Fullan, 2016; Northouse, 2016; Windlinger et al., 2020). Day et al. (2016) describe transformational leadership as a style that highlights vision and inspiration, establishes structures and cultures that improve teaching and learning, directs, and develops team members to reconstruct the campus.

Additionally, transformational leaders set goals to achieve success as well as motivate their team to modify expectations and perceptions, encouraging engagement to achieve common objectives for student success (Aly et al., 2019). In contrast, a study by Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, and Brown compared instructional leadership and transformational leadership. The study revealed that instructional leadership has more variation in connection to student success than transformational leadership (as cited in Pietsch & Tulowitzi, 2017). Pounder's research provides abundant evidence that links relationships among successful teachers and leadership. He explained that transformational leadership is the foundation of successful teacher leaders, and that it is evident in successful school organizations because their leaders are transformational (as cited in Stein, 2020). Finally, a study by Mayes and Gether (2018) also identified

transformational practices essential for principals to serve as change agents on campuses that require academic improvement.

### **Principal Leadership**

Defour and Marzano (2011), as well as Milbrey McLaughlin and Talbert, state that principals are arguably the essential players affecting the character and consequences of teachers' professional communities. Principals are culture makers, intentionally or not (DeFour & Marzano, 2011). In the United States, school turnaround reform points out principals as the critical levers for change in campuses that need academic improvement (Meyes & Hitt, 2017; Woulfin & Weiner, 2017). Kempa et al. (2017) and Nadelson. et al. (2020) concluded that school principals have the power to stimulate or overturn the school climate to ensure an equitable education for all students. Principals who support equitable education create a climate and culture through their instructional leadership, collaboration, advocacy, encouragement of transformation, and engagement in evidence-based practices. Principals are the gatekeepers who are also the captains of the ship, responsible for all campus aspects.

Desravines et al. (2016) describe principals as unique, responsible for cultivating school culture, rigorous instruction, and creating a team that works with the expectations that all students will succeed. A principal's leadership can motivate students and teachers to believe that all students will succeed with support and commitment. Research shows that schools led by great principals with highly effective leadership skills increase student achievement by twenty-points compared to schools led by average-performing principals (Desravines et al., 2016). In contrast, Sanchez et al. (2019), referencing Syed (2015), asserts that some researchers argue that principal leadership is secondary to the impact of teaching and student achievement. Furthermore, principals who are appointed to underperforming campuses are expected to improve academic achievement and school culture in a short time (Sanchez et al., 2019). The principal's leadership role in instructional improvement makes them accountable for students' academic success or failures. Leadership is central to the effectiveness and improvement of the organization, as well as to the quality of the leader (Aldridge & Fraser, 2018; Woulfin & Weiner, 2017).

Days et al. (2016) describe international research on effective leadership which determined the positive and negative impact on the quality of teaching, learning, and student achievement, specifically principal leadership, on-campus organizations, culture, and environment. Research on school leadership effectiveness is immeasurable and rapidly increasing; however, not long ago, educational researchers and theorists assumed that the principal's leadership did not impact student achievement (Defour & Marzano, 2011).

Fullan and Pichot (2018) discuss what actions a school leader should take to quickly improve low-performing schools. The researchers discuss six strategies that were implemented by one principal, who turned around a low-performing campus.

They are:

1. Establishing multiple permanent teams led by teachers.
2. Providing a variety of specific teacher professional development and follow up with clear expectations and support.
3. Developing the schoolwide behavior plan.
4. Using instructional rounds to collect data on instructional practices.
5. Purchasing digital devices and establishing a new media center.
6. Achieving visibility in teacher-led teams and classrooms through weekly walkthroughs.

Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, school principals have been obligated to disaggregate student data to make informed decisions on what goals to set for the campus to succeed (Sun et al., 2016). According to Sun et al. (2016), the new data requirements with which school leaders should familiarize themselves do not reflect recent leadership models. Some researchers have identified that principals' use of data to lead schools may be the most important way to turn around schools in need of improvement. The study's purpose was to develop an emergent theoretical model to understand school leaders' practices in effectively utilizing data to lead schools. The results showed that data-driven school leadership is an important feature of today's principalship. Approximately 20 years ago, principals utilized data primarily for goal setting and management of schools, but today, principals use student data with great determination to improve and develop everyday leadership (Sun et al., 2016).

### **Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership is perceived as the leadership style that focuses on the quality of classroom instruction (Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). Thirty-five years ago, instructional leadership was introduced to school administrators during the school effectiveness movement; however, time devoted to instructional work yielded very few changes and led to a lack of time devoted to academic issues (Murphy et al., 2016; Terosky, 2016). In a study conducted by Camburn et al. (2018) the researchers discovered that principals in urban districts spent 19% of their time on instructional leadership. They concluded that in comparison to 30 years ago, principals were devoting minimal time to matters of teaching and learning at their campuses (Murphy, J. et al., 2016).

Effective school independence is managed by leaders whose goal is to ensure student academic success. Pietsch and Tulowitzki (2017) as well as Woulfin and Weiner (2017) referred to instructional leadership as the idea that principals are the educators-in-chief for improving instruction, supporting, and providing teachers' professional development, improving instruction, and providing organizational change to meet all student needs. Educational standards and accountability create demands on the principal to lead curriculum initiatives aligned with state and local standards. Miller et al. (2016), referencing Halliger (2003 & 2005), assert that the principal's role is to lead school-based instructional improvement to make sure that accounting standards and continuous change in student demographics challenge the school in the United States.

Instructional leadership plays a critical component in how effective school leaders' work in effective schools (Murphy et al., 2016). Numerous studies have been conducted concerning how principals influence student achievement and address both instructional and transformational leadership. Vogel (2018) conducted a study of 50 principals to explore what elements of their responsibilities identified them as instructional leaders. Instructional leadership plays a critical role in how principals support and empower teachers to improve student achievement. This study discovered that 91% of the principals identified teacher supervision and coaching as the primary focus of their instructional leadership. Data analysis comprised another element identified by 72% of participants as important to coach teachers on the manner in which to engage students and increase student achievement. 70% of principals coached teachers on instructional content, specifically on mathematics and reading. Principals focused on conversing about a new curriculum with teachers to provide guidance and support to expand teachers' practices and outcomes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The National Blue-Ribbon Schools Program was initiated in 1982; its purpose is to acknowledge exemplary public and private education organizations that model excellence and equity in schools. The US Department of Education (USDOE) reported that only one percent of Texas public schools are National Blue Ribbon Schools (2019). Currently, the state of Texas has 9,317 public school campuses, and 27



awarded as Blue Ribbon Schools (thought.com, 2019; USDOE.gov, 2019). This study focused on the problem of student outcomes on low-performing campuses. My goal in this study is to discover practices that Blue Ribbon Schools implement to be successful, practices that may facilitate improvement for other campuses labeled as requiring improvement.

A growing body of research recommends that campuses should focus on the school improvement process, specifically on the core content of teaching and learning (Dunn & Ambroso, 2019). Currently, state education agencies are frustrated by unsatisfactory results from school-restricting initiatives. States are searching for turnaround strategies that will develop immediate and transformative changes to improve students' outcomes in low-performing schools. This problem impacts public school systems that are faced with daily challenges to improve student achievement and meet state accountability standards for all students, regardless of socioeconomic status and chronically struggling subgroups of students. Researchers have been interested in studying factors that contribute to positive and conducive school culture and conducive to effective teaching and learning (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011).

TEA developed the Effective School Framework to provide a clear vision that requires schools to provide an excellent education for all Texas students (ESF, 2019). The Effective School Framework incorporates five prioritized levers that are essential in high-performing campuses. The levers incorporate essential actions that describe what effective schools do to support teaching and learning. One of the levers is Positive School Culture, which requires compelling and aligned vision, mission, goals and values, explicit behavioral expectations, and management systems that involve families and the community (ESF, 2019). Positive School Culture is essential to increasing student achievement in an environment of high-stakes accountability. A sense of urgency exists to save failing institutes identified as Improvement Required and improve these organizations to meet state accountability after being previously labeled as underperforming has proven to be a struggle. Many possible factors contribute to this problem, among which are school culture and effective leadership.

This study may contribute to the body of knowledge by exploring factors that influence successful school cultures that sustain state accountability through positive and effective leadership strategies. The researchers are interested in studying factors that contribute to positive and conducive school culture and conducive to effective teaching and learning (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011).

## **Method**

### **Research Questions**

The present study focused on the factors that contribute to positive school culture and attempted to identify effective leadership strategies in Blue Ribbon Schools to inform low-performing schools seeking to improve student outcomes. This study explored the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of teachers and principals at Blue Ribbon Schools regarding strategies for leadership or instructional practice that are most effective and least effective as they relate to improved student performance?

1. EQ1: What motivating factors are influential in seeking the Blue-Ribbon status of the campus?
2. EQ2: What role do teachers and principals play in the Blue-Ribbon implementation process?
3. EQ3: To what extent do collaboration and shared values contribute to the overall culture of the Blue Ribbon Schools?

4. EQ4: What are the perceptions of teachers regarding principal leadership and school culture in Blue Ribbon Schools?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) explain that a theoretical framework is an underlying structure, the scaffolding, or the frame of a study. A theoretical framework explains narratives drawn from principals' and teachers' perceptions of the factors contributing to their school culture's success. This study's theoretical framework will focus on the approaches to school culture, leadership, and principal's and teachers' perceptions of school culture. From the Literature review, the researcher contemplates utilizing the Effective School Framework (ESF) that TEA employs to support campuses in need of improvement with best practices that will improve academic accountability. ESF has five prioritized levers:

1. Strong School Leadership,
2. Effective, Well-Supported Teachers,
3. Positive School Culture,
4. High-Quality Curriculum, and
5. Effective Instruction.

This study's focus will be on Positive School Culture and Strong School Leadership that contribute to Blue Ribbon schools' success in South Texas.

### **Research Design and Approach**

This qualitative research was designed to study principals' and teachers' perceptions of factors that contribute to Blue Ribbon School campuses' success. Basic qualitative research, as asserted by Merriam and Tisdale (2016), is grounded on the idea that people assemble knowledge as they participate and make implication of the activity, experience, or phenomenon. Basic qualitative research is a method of research that includes emerging questions and procedures, data collected in the participant's natural setting, inductive analyses that move from specific to general themes, and research interpreting the meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2018) outlined the qualitative research process into the following phases: (a) the researcher as a multicultural subject; (b) theoretical paradigms and perspectives; (c) research strategies; (d) method of collections and analysis; (e) and the art, practice, and politics of interpretation and evaluation.

Basic qualitative studies explore meaning and understanding. The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; an inductive investigative strategy is utilized; and the final product is thoroughly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Respondents answer the research questions through semi-structured, open-ended interview questions. Semi structured interview questions guide the researcher to include a mix of structured interview questions that utilize flexibility. The semi structured interview is a blend of structured and unstructured approaches. In this type of interview, either all the questions are flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of structured and flexible questions (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Purposive sampling was utilized to determine what criteria were essential to enhancing the people or site studied (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Campuses were selected with data from Region One, which is in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The elementary campuses were selected as Blue-Ribbon Schools. The study sample comprised two school districts in South Texas in the Region One Service Center, districts with at least one campus recognized as a Blue-Ribbon School. Therefore, the sample was from districts in South Texas. Once the districts were selected, the central office administrators assisted

in selecting the school and administrators who were contacted by email and phone calls. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) assert that a typical sample would be selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest. The population for this study comprised three to four principals and three to four teachers from each campus. Participants were selected based on years of service at the campus and their willingness to participate in the study.

### **Population and Sample**

The study utilized purposive sampling to determine what criteria are essential to enhancing the people or site studied (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Current data from Region One campuses selected as Blue Ribbon Schools was examined. The study sample comprised two school districts in South Texas in the Region One Service Center, districts that have at least one campus that is recognized as a Blue Ribbon School. The sample was from districts in South Texas. Having determined the districts, district level administrators assisted in the selection of the school and administrators who were contacted by email and phone calls. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) assert that a typical sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest. The population for this study comprised three to four principals and three to four teachers from each campus. The participants were selected based on their years of service at that campus and their willingness to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis**

The method of discovery in this research project was qualitative. First, the researcher collected demographic information through a questionnaire administered to three principals and three teachers in the Blue-Ribbon School process. Personal and professional demographics, such as gender, race, highest degree earned, and a total number of years' experience in education, were all considered. Next, the Research Site Letter was emailed to superintendents to acquire permission to research their district. Once the superintendent signed the approval form, the researcher acquired the principal's contact information, to ask the principal to participate in the study and recommend three to five teachers to ask for participation. Next, each respondent participating in the study's interview process was emailed a Participant Research Letter to request their participation in the research study. The participants also read and signed the Informed Consent Form, as the researcher did before the interview occurred. Participants were assured that pseudonyms would be utilized to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality. Finally, the interview questions were utilized to conduct the interviews, addressing the following areas: (a) motivation, (b) role during implementation, (c) leadership, (d) leadership capacity, (e) factors, and (f) culture. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews occurred online or by phone after regular school hours from September 2020 to October 2020. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. The interview question protocols were read word for word to each interviewee. The interviews were recorded and the Microsoft dictation feature was utilized to transcribe all the participant responses and member checks to review the interview scripts and provide feedback on the responses.

The process of analyzing data for this study followed numerous steps. Transcripts for each individual interview were read twice before returning them by email to their review participants. Following this process, a preliminary list of codes and categories were developed. The transcripts were reread and uploaded to Dedoose to develop codes using themes and categories that emerged. To manage the data organized files for each participant were created. These files contained the transcriptions from each interview, my interview notes, as well as copies of any relevant documents that participants shared during the interview. Additionally, a matrix for each question was employed to develop codes by reviewing and comparing all the responses of the questions individually. Participants were identified by an assigned number instead of by name, and the schools were labeled as A, B, C to protect the campuses' location.

All relevant data was uploaded to the Dedoose software program utilized for qualitative analysis ([dedoose.com](https://dedoose.com)). All the interviews were imported to Dedoose by creating a new project. All participant interviews were uploaded from the USB pen drive into Dedoose. The program was used to analyze the words for each source: existing data sources, interview transcripts, and relevant artifacts. After uploading the interviews, the researcher manually input codes and imported after analyzing all the interviews and highlighting the information linked to the codes. The program code as then utilized to analyze the text, highlight information, and assign themes. Triangulation used a variety of data sources by assessing the data and constructing themes from the participants' responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Miles et al., 2020). After analyzing all the interview data seventeen codes were used. The used codes included academic achievement, collaboration, communication, community, consistency, data driven, high expectations, leadership, parental involvement, principal, professional development, recognition, school culture, school improvement, students, teachers, and teamwork.

Dedoose was utilized to discover word frequencies and text that was part of the participants' interview data. After analyzing the interviews' information, the researcher discovered the themes from the code co-occurrence table (Table 4). The themes that emerged from the interview comprised seventeen codes and participants' responses. The researcher utilized the most common codes to develop the themes for the study. The top five themes were: leadership with 128 codes, school culture with 125 codes, teachers with 115 codes, principals with 113 codes, and collaboration with 110 codes.

## Results

This study explored and assessed principals' and teachers' shared experience who were part of a collaborative team that participated in and successfully achieved the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award at three elementary schools in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program highlights excellence in teaching, student performance, school leadership, and school/community interactions. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify commonalities, recurring themes, or significant dimensions of these schools' shared experiences to discover factors that contributed to positive school culture as well as to identify effective leadership strategies in these Blue-Ribbon schools which might contribute to improving schools in need of improvement. The qualitative findings present emerging themes and supportive data from individual interview sessions with campus principals and teachers, the review of existing data, and artifact analysis while analyzing the data's distinctions.

### Setting

This study focused on three principals and three Blue Ribbon Schools teachers in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. It was of importance to consider the general information about each campus and the background information of each participant. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several factors impacted the study's data collection and participation. Five district superintendents were contacted to obtain consent for participation, but only three agreed to participate. Even though Superintendents agreed to participate, principals were hesitant to participate; only three out of four agreed to participate in the study. Eight teachers were asked to participate in the study and only three agreed to participate. The changes in remote instruction and the presence of closed campuses impacted the study's interview process. All interviews were conducted by telephone or Google Meets video conferencing.

### Themes

**Leadership.** The primary emerging theme was leadership; in the co-occurrence table from Dedoose, 128 codes were discovered. Teachers and principals at the three campuses expressed how reflection and critical inquiry became a cornerstone for their success in achieving the Blue-Ribbon Schools award. The principals and teachers described leadership styles as a transformational, servant leader, and

shared leadership. All the principals expressed the importance of being a visible leader, beginning their day as early as six in the morning, and teachers described the role models to all the community. Most respondents spoke favorably that campus leaders play a vital role in communicating the strategy, empowering teachers to take ownership of their student learning and engagement and striving for excellence. Unanimous in their support of the team concept approach, several teachers at one school expressed how data played a critical role in supporting students' academic needs.

**School Culture.** An overwhelming majority of the teachers interviewed referred to their principals as the primary component of the school's thriving culture, skilled team builder, instructional leader, and visionary worker. They further stated that their principals exhibited a sense of integrity, embraced responsibility, and were ready to take any new roles to ensure the campus was thriving. Teachers defined their principals' leadership as the ability to get all school members to perform the task required to achieve the organization's goals and objectives. The teachers described their principals as hard-working, compassionate, and always ensuring a welcoming environment to all stakeholders. One teacher admired how the principal welcomed students and staff every morning in the hallways of the campus. Participant Two, a teacher, shared.

Our principal or assistant principal were always in the middle of the hallway, where we would enter every morning, and they would stand to greet teachers every day as we walked in and greeting all the kids as they were making their way through the hallways. So, I think that was something that stands out, and I'm just feeling that sense of welcoming early on every day gets started on the right path.

**Principals and Teachers.** Administrators and team members believed that by working together in a goal-oriented process, such as one found in the Blue-Ribbon Schools program, they could glean a broader, more meaningful view of their school. Principals repeatedly verbalized a child-centered orientation and maintained that this focus was integral to each school's mission. Team members agreed that student focus was the driving force of the school's goals and purpose. They further emphasized the shared accountability structure in place, enabling teams to work collaboratively to develop advanced solutions to problems that fostered an increase in the likelihood of ownership in the campus decisions. The notion of shared accountability had become embedded in the daily work life of teachers.

**Collaboration.** In the following excerpts, the interviewees discussed the degree of motivation believed to have been influential in their decision to apply for the Blue-Ribbon Schools award. The accounts from the principals and the teachers revealed remarkable similarities across the three campuses. While some responses varied among the interviewees, the descriptions reflected the most significant aspects of a collaborative school community and constant mindfulness that student success was a priority to ensure that everyone succeeded. Participant One, a teacher, shared.

I think that when it comes to collaboration, it plays a big role when we must showcase everything that we did for us to be successful and all the hard work that took place to ensure student success. As a low performing school being awarded was a big taking risks in the classroom and reflecting critically on their classroom practices." Principals and teachers believe that hard work, collaboration, and quality education for student success are key factors to the success of their campuses.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the shared experiences of elementary teachers and principals in South Texas, which were awarded the National Blue-Ribbon School of Excellence Awards, thereby providing information that might afford insight for other schools seeking meaningful change and improvement. This qualitative study provided rich documentation of three

principals' lived experiences and perceptions, and three teachers who validated commitment to academic excellence. One of the principals described being selected as Blue-Ribbon schools in Rio Grande Valley, as receiving a Nobel Peace Prize or an Olympic Medal. All the interviewees were insightful and resilient educators dedicated to improving the quality of life for student success and making a difference in students' lives.

Educational researchers, principals, and those aspiring to seek meaningful change may utilize the results of this study to guide further research and to inform other school communities on how they promote a welcoming and collaborative environment. As educators, the researchers are aware that schools of excellence, and student success are the primary priority. This excellence is possible if principals and teachers are passionate in providing an excellent education to all students.

### **Recommendations**

Based on this study, the researcher identified several directions that a future researcher could take including extending to a different school level and pursuing emerging themes. A recommendation is to replicate this study with more participants and more campuses, so the study will not have limitations. Additional Blue-Ribbon School studies may be carried out using qualitative methodology with quantitative assessment data, in part, to research the possible cause and effect relationships among the varying factors identified in this study and reporting the school outcomes. Future investigations can be conducted to (a) include more participants, (b) focus solely on the leadership at one school to investigate variations in perception and (c) involve more in-depth interviewing to obtain richer data by interviewing non-classified staff members to gain a complete picture.

### **Implications**

The study results suggest that the overall National Blue-Ribbon Schools Program comprises a challenging and lengthy process. Principals are the most significant influence in the success of the school. Therefore, they must be committed to the process of collaboration and willing to work toward building a collaborative culture within their school. Schools should implement numerous dimensions of thriving learning communities to encourage open dialogue and shared meaning among teachers. The principal is the key player in establishing valued professional collaboration. Collaboration between principals and teachers is critical to sustaining school improvement efforts. Teamwork, collegiality, and school pride are critical to the school's success. School leaders must be able to motivate followers to work together toward common goals while sustaining a vision committed to student success.

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