

# A Portrait of Administrator, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Title I School Improvement Plans

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**Abstract:** *As a nation we need to identify a set of practical tools to help schools meet the needs of diverse learners. Schools must improve learning for all students, including children living in poverty, students learning English for the first time, students with special needs, students that are mobile, and students with diverse backgrounds. It is critical to their success that decision making be based on real-time accurate data and include classroom interventions based on research. An increase in staff knowledge is required to promote a unified focus on strategies, targets, and data monitoring that is tied directly to the school mission, beliefs, and objectives for improvement.*

## Introduction

**A** Schoolwide Title I designation allows schools to utilize funds from Title I, Part A, and other federal education resources to upgrade the school's entire educational program and enhance academic achievement (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], 1965). To qualify as a Schoolwide Title I school, at least 40% of the student population must live in poverty. Title I concentrates on a results-based accountability approach. This allowed

flexible use of Title I funds as opposed to targeting only qualifying students for academic assistance, reduced the fragmentation of programs and allowed schools to integrate services based on both the needs of the Title I students and other students within the building. (Stavem, 2008, p. 4-5)

Schoolwide Title I schools are required to develop a comprehensive plan within one year of obtaining Schoolwide Title I status (ESEA, 1965). The plans "must address the needs of all children in the school, but particularly the needs of children who are members of the target population of any federal education program whose funds are included in the Schoolwide program" (Stavem, 2008, p. 2).

This mixed methods research study examined the way Schoolwide Title I schools in Nebraska are implementing their Title I School Improvement Plans in order to identify needs, challenges, and successes within the Title I program. This research provides educators across the nation with information about the effectiveness of Title I School Improvement Plans, and could be used to offer improved assistance to Schoolwide Title I schools and their students. As a quarter of low-performing schools are rural schools (Manwaring, 2011, p. 18), these findings on school improvement have relevance beyond the state of Nebraska.

## Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to examine administrative, teacher, and parent perceptions about their schools' Title I School Improvement Plans.

## Literature Review

There is no doubt that improving schools in order to improve student achievement is extremely difficult work. It requires "strong leadership, a good plan and lots of communication with relevant stakeholders, including teachers and staff, families and community members" (Manwaring, 2011, p. 16). Robinson and Buntrock (2011) argue that schools that successfully improve have "high-impact leaders and the district capacity to initiate, support and enhance transformational change" (p. 22). Marzano's research supports this belief: "Leadership could be considered the single most important aspect of effective school reform" (2003, p. 172). Leadership influences practically every aspect of the school's organization: the teachers, students, parents, community, administration, and the overall school environment. Strong leaders not only encourage a change in school culture and the development of a clear focus, but are "key to the recruitment, retention, and development of effective teachers" (p. 26). It is important, therefore, that school leaders be given the flexibility to make personnel, schedule, and resource allocation changes (Duke & Jacobson, 2011; Robinson & Buntrock, 2011).

Inevitably, leaders seeking to turn around low-performing schools will face resistance in the form of deeply-entrenched behavior patterns of teachers, students, and parents (Heath & Heath, 2011). Overcoming these patterns means redefining how "administrators, staff and faculty think about and relate to work" (Ulrich & Woodson, 2011, p. 33). Robinson and Buntrock (2011) argue that stakeholders must "view turnaround status as a positive opportunity to transform their schools

rather than a public rebuke for poor performance,” and accordingly, turnaround schools must be “desirable places to work” (p. 26). Ulrich and Woodson (2011) discuss the need to forge an identity, purpose, personal relationships, and a positive work environment when trying to improve a school. They suggest that to transform schools in a meaningful way, school leaders must “recognize the interests and unique skills of those they lead and then encourage people to draw on their strengths to strengthen others” (p. 34). Duke and Jacobson (2011) describe successful leaders as having “boundless energy, infectious optimism, sincere regard for students, and an instinctive sense of where to focus resources and energy” (p. 38).

The consistent use of data derived from formative assessments is also necessary for low-achieving schools seeking to be successful (Robinson & Buntrock, 2011, p. 27). Without a good data collection and monitoring system, schools lose track of students’ academic improvement and progress in meeting the standards; they can also fail to develop a focus for their school that is based on needs (Duke & Jacobson, 2011). While new teacher evaluation systems incorporating student achievement were “perhaps the most hotly debated education policy issue of the last year” (Manwaring, 2011, p. 18), it is also important that data is a part of teacher evaluation.

Heath and Heath (2011) describe a successful change pattern originally postulated for hospital administrators called the Rider-Elephant-Path game plan, wherein the rational “Riders” of a school are given a path to focus on, while the emotional “Elephants” are given a “jolt of energy and hope” to shake them out of a “culture of failure” (p. 32). According to DuFour (2007):

When principals focus on creating an environment in which people are working toward a shared vision and honoring collective commitments, an environment in which the structures and supports foster collaborative efforts and continuous professional growth, an environment in which each teacher has someone to turn to and to talk to when confronted with challenges, they address one of the deepest yearnings in the hearts of most teachers: To make a positive difference in the lives of their students. (p. 46)

## Methodology

This mixed-methods research study utilized both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data collected in the winter and spring of 2010. Both the surveys and interview protocols explored seven themes: (a) Title I School Improvement Plans, (b) Clear Focus, (c) Classroom Interventions, (d) Professional Development, (e) Data/Monitoring, (f) Community Involvement, and (g) Overall Improvement.

Nebraska public school districts were divided into two categories, nonrural and rural, using Locale Codes defined by the Common Core of Data (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Nonrural districts were defined as districts in cities, suburbs, and towns less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area. Rural districts were defined as districts in rural areas as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Towns more than 35 miles from an urbanized area were also defined as rural for the purposes of this study. Of the 14 districts participating in surveys, one (7.1%) was classified as nonrural and 13 (92.9%) were classified as rural. Of the seven districts participating in interviews, one (14.3%) was classified as nonrural, and six (85.7%) were classified as rural.

Twenty schools in 14 districts that were currently in “Needs Improvement” status and four schools in four districts that had recently been in the category were invited to participate in surveys. Seventeen schools in “Needs Improvement” status and all four schools that had recently been in the category agreed to participate. Administrators and teachers from these 21 schools were surveyed using an online instrument regarding their perceptions of the Title I School Improvement Process. Administrators responded to a 51-item survey and teachers responded to a 53-item survey in the winter of 2010. Administrative and teacher survey responses ranged from 1 to 5 on the five-point Likert scale with “5” representing *strongly agree*. Of the 14 districts participating, eight (57.1%) returned surveys. Of the administrator surveys returned, 68.4% were from nonrural districts and 31.6% were from rural districts. Of the teacher surveys returned, 60.2% were from nonrural districts and 39.8% were from rural districts.

In addition, open-ended interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, and parents in seven school districts. Detailed perceptions were collected using an interview protocol. Table 1 depicts the number of responses from both administrators and teachers in each identified theme. These sample districts were selected based on years in Title I (three schools were in their first year in the category, two schools had been in the category for two or more years, and two schools were no longer in “Needs Improvement”), geographic area, Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) rate, and ethnicity. Forty-eight (48) individual interviews were conducted statewide during the spring of 2010. Interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, and parents in both elementary and secondary settings. Up to five interviews were conducted within each school district.

Table 1

*Interview Themes and Total Coded Responses (2009-2010)*

	Number of Coded Responses
<b>Interview Question Themes</b>	
Title I School Improvement Plans	160
Clear Focus	220
Classroom Interventions	349
Professional Development	152
Data/Monitoring	235
Community Involvement	214
Overall Improvement	124
<b>Emerging Themes</b>	
Collaborative Culture	161
Resources	290
Leadership	66
Challenges	64

*Note.* Demographic data on each of the quotes is included in the article under each theme.

## Results

Administrators rated the category Title I School Improvement Plans 4.46, while teachers rated it 3.86. The Clear Focus category was rated 4.57 by administrators and 4.19 by teachers, the highest of any category. Administrators rated the Classroom Interventions category 4.53, while teachers rated it 4.11. Administrators rated the Professional Development category 4.39, while teachers rated it lower at 3.86. The Data/Monitoring category was rated 4.48 by administrators and 4.06 by teachers. The Community Involvement category was rated 3.69 by administrators and 3.31 by teachers, the lowest of any category. Administrators rated the Overall Improvement category 4.26, while teachers rated it lower at 3.84. Figure 1 shows administrators' and teachers' average ratings of the seven categories overall.

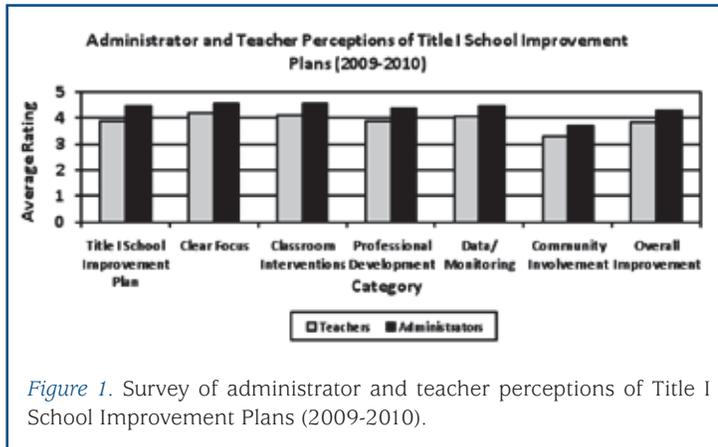


Figure 1. Survey of administrator and teacher perceptions of Title I School Improvement Plans (2009-2010).

### Title I School Improvement Plan

The average administrator response in this category was 4.46, higher than the 3.86 average teacher response in this category. However, administrators and teachers rated the same items as “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” The item rated strongest by both teachers (4.41) and administrators (4.89) within this category was, “The planning process in my school is focused on improving student achievement.” A male, nonrural secondary teacher explained, “Through our PLCs (Professional Learning Communities), through staff meetings, we discuss student achievement all the time. I might say, ‘what are you doing to make that student achieve higher in your classroom than in mine, and vice versa?’” On the subject of administrator participation and leadership in the Title I process, administrators both rated themselves highly and received high ratings from teachers.

However, responses indicated that teacher involvement in the Title I process might be lacking. The item rated lowest by both teachers (3.18) and administrators (3.74) was “All teachers in my school were involved in the disaggregation of student data to identify Title I Goals.” Teachers also gave their second-lowest rating (3.26) to the item “Teachers were involved in the identification of the Title I Goals.” A nonrural female elementary teacher shared that at her school, “too few people [were] involved in school-wide goals.” Although administrators more strongly agreed with this item (4.51), the second-lowest rating in the category given by administrators was for the item “Teachers in my school understand the Title I Goals and

how to achieve these goals” (4.21). Teachers rated this item between “undecided” and “agree” at 3.81, their third-lowest rating.

Accordingly, there were mixed opinions about whether educators had clear understanding of their schools’ Title I Plan and goals. For example, a female rural elementary teacher shared one goal that she was aware of, “I know that we needed improvement in reading.” However, when asked “Do you know why you are in Title I?” she responded, “No, I don’t think so.”

### Clear Focus

Educators acknowledged the importance of developing a clear focus on the areas they had identified as in need of improvement. The average administrator response (4.57) and average teacher response (4.19) in the Clear Focus category were the highest average responses given in any category. Administrators rated every item in this category between “agree” and “strongly agree,” giving ratings that ranged between 4.47 and 4.74. Teachers rated most of the items close to “agree,” giving ratings that ranged between 3.89 and 4.49. This indicates that schools have strongly emphasized the concept of focus on standards and areas of need when developing curriculum and instruction. A female rural secondary Title I coordinator explained, “I think [teachers] are looking at the standards more closely and saying, ‘By the time you leave this grade, you need to not just have been introduced to this standard, but have mastered it.’ So I do think their teaching has become more standards-based.”

Administrators gave the highest rating to the item “The curriculum in my school is aligned with state standards” (4.74). A male rural elementary principal explained,

We set up time for staff to get together and review the curriculum and tie them to the state standards. Then we looked at our current curriculum and correlated it to the standards, and if we’ve got any gaps or overlaps, we look at how we can make adjustments.

Teachers gave this item the second-lowest rating in this category, but still agreed with the statement (4.09).

Teachers gave the highest rating to the item “Teachers in my school engage students in order to improve individual and group academic performance” (4.49). A female rural elementary reading coordinator stated,

I feel like teachers have been a lot more engaged in the students’ learning. They pay a lot more attention to what kids are doing on a daily basis and their test scores. Usually within two weeks, a teacher can say, “this kid’s failing, what intervention can you help me put in place?”

Administrators rated this item similarly (4.47).

### Classroom Interventions

Schools used a vast array of interventions to meet the learning needs of students. The average teacher response in the Classroom Interventions category was “agree” at 4.11, while the average administrator response in this category was higher at 4.53. In general teachers and administrators indicated that they understood the purpose and importance of classroom interventions. Both administrators (4.68) and teachers (4.30) most strongly agreed with the item

“Additional learning time is provided for students who need it.” A male rural elementary teacher explained, “We have a lot of teachers that stay after school to help kids, from 3:30 to 4:00 as needed. For 5th grade on up, we have tenth period, which means if they don’t have work done, they stay and do work. There’s an aide in there to help them.” The item that was rated second highest by both groups was “Classroom interventions are used to achieve my school’s Title I Improvement Goals” (4.19 by teachers and 4.63 by administrators).

Administrators and teachers differed slightly, however, on their assessment of their schools’ use of resources and research-based interventions. The item rated lowest by teachers was “Both external and internal resources are used to develop research-based interventions” (3.98), while administrators gave it the third-highest rating of the category at 4.47. A female rural secondary teacher explained,

Last year, I didn’t even turn in the budget, because we had no money. This year I understand we’ve been cut \$250,000 more. After a while you just go, ‘happens every year.’ What we’re trying to do this year is just the bare minimum. The only thing I’m buying is a consumable vocabulary. The rest I will buy out of my own money.

The item producing the largest discrepancy between teacher and administrator means in this category was “Research-based interventions are implemented based on the data analyzed for my school’s Title I Improvement Plan.” Teachers were more likely to rate this item “agree” at 4.02, whereas administrators were in more enthusiastic agreement at 4.53. A male rural elementary principal stated, “We were using Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies and we charted all our growth. When we didn’t see growth, we’d change the strategy, do something different in hopes of seeing gains.”

## Professional Development

Both teachers and administrators indicated that professional development at their schools needed to be improved. The average administrator response in the Professional Development category was 4.39, ranging from 4.26 to 4.53. The average teacher response was lower at 3.86.

Educators agreed that what professional development was available was helpful. Both administrators (4.53) and teachers (4.05) gave their strongest rating to “Professional development experiences have led to new classroom practices.” A male rural superintendent shared, “We try to train in [APL Associates] every two or three years, because we think it’s real, practical stuff that most good teachers probably use, but sometimes forget.” The second-highest-rated item for both administrators (4.47) and teachers (4.03) was “Teacher collaboration in my school is a form of professional development used to enhance student learning.” A female nonrural secondary teacher explained the impact of professional learning communities (PLCs):

[The] PLC movement was huge for us. Before that, we were on our own. PLCs just brought it all together. That’s when we really started to see a lot of changes: when we had that common time to actually sit, plan, talk about curriculum, talk about students, talk about what was and wasn’t going well in our classrooms.

However, the item rated weakest by both administrators and teachers was “Teachers are encouraged to observe each other in the classroom.” Administrators rated this 4.26, while teachers rated this item between “undecided” and “agree” (3.67). Although educators stated in interviews that such observations were important for teacher self-improvement, a nonrural male teacher indicated, “It is hard to arrange for the opportunities to make observing in fellow teacher’s classrooms happen.” The item rated second-lowest by both teachers (3.73) and administrators (4.32) was “Professional development needs at my school were based on analysis of data.” Making sure that professional development decisions are based on data may be another area schools need to improve on.

## Data/Monitoring

The use of data and the extent to which schools monitor student progress and plan curriculum and instruction varied; teachers and administrators gave a wide range of responses to this category. Administrator responses ranged from 4.16 to 4.89, with an average of 4.48. Teacher responses ranged from 3.72 to 4.38, with an average of 4.06. Educators (4.89 by administrators, 4.38 by teachers) agreed on the item rated strongest: “Data are essential to our school improvement process,” showing that educators understand the importance of data to school improvement. A male rural principal explained, “We looked at different types of data sets. It all showed that our reading comprehension was going down as opposed to even staying level or going up. . . . It wasn’t hard to say we had to make a change.”

However, survey and interview results indicated that the actual use of data was not strong in all schools. The item rated weakest by administrators was “Teachers in my school adjust their instruction in order to attain our Title I Goals” (4.16), which teachers rated similarly (4.10). A male rural elementary principal stated,

Sometimes I question how much data-gathering you do. Sometimes I think it’s too much. My core beliefs are that really good, effective teachers are going to be more effective than keeping score on kids all the time. I think we do too much assessment.

The items rated weakest by teachers were “Every classroom is implementing our Title I Goals” and “Administrators in my school monitor additional learning time for students to ensure success,” both receiving a rating of 3.72. It should be noted that administrators either rated these items “agree” or “strongly agree,” giving them both ratings of 4.47. This indicates that teachers and administrators are not in agreement as to the frequency and consistency of monitoring that is taking place in schools, with teachers feeling that less monitoring occurs than do administrators.

## Community Involvement

The challenge posed by community involvement was made evident by the average administrator (3.69) and teacher (3.31) responses, which were the lowest of any category. Parent involvement was often low in Title I schools. Schools hoped to increase it by using diverse communication methods and expanding after-school programs. Administrators most strongly agreed with the item “The Title I Improvement Plan was communicated to all stakeholders”

(4.47), also rated second highest by teachers (3.61). Schools—especially administrators—made a point of notifying parents and the community of the school’s Title I status, as is required by the grant. A female rural elementary teacher stated, “I know our superintendent has put [information about Title I] in newsletters and in the paper. If parents have questions or want to observe a classroom, they’re more than welcome to. We’ve had a few [come in], not very many at all.”

The item rated strongest by teachers was “Community members have high expectations for student achievement” (3.65), which was not asked on the Administrator Survey. A male nonrural secondary teacher shared, “When schools and parents come together, there’s always a benefit, because the student sees that it’s not just the school trying to get you to learn this.” A male rural elementary principal discussed parents’ awareness of their children’s achievement: “There’s no reason our parents should not be fully aware of what their child’s capabilities are.”

However, parent and community engagement in the Title I process received low marks. The item rated lowest by both administrators and teachers was “Community members are engaged in decision making based on data that was analyzed.” Administrators (3.16) and teachers (3.06) both rated this item mostly “undecided.” The similar item “Community members were involved in identification of the Title I Goals” garnered similarly low ratings from administrators (3.37) and teachers (3.12). A nonrural female elementary principal stated, “Our community group is informed of the goals but did not take part in the decisions. We have parent and community groups but they don’t actively work on the improvement plans.”

## Overall Improvement

The average administrator response in this category was 4.26, while the average teacher response was 3.84. Importantly, the item “Data shows that progress is being made in meeting our Title I Goals” received the strongest level of agreement within the category from both administrators (4.42) and teachers (4.04). A female nonrural secondary teacher provided the example using state writing scores:

Four years ago, 69% of our students were proficient in writing. Three years ago, after we started PLC work, we started this common planning, common assessment, big kick on writing in the classroom. That first year we went from a 69% to a 95% proficient.

A female nonrural secondary Title I coordinator stated,

The 6th grade team set Smart Goals and the students were not making them. They were working so hard, they were doing everything correctly. The counselor and I were like, ‘but look at that evidence of growth!’ So they started charting both. They showed that maybe we didn’t [meet the Smart Goals], but from where we were [at] pre-assessment and where we are [now], let’s not forget that.

Administrators also rated “The use of our research-based interventions is leading to the attainment of our Title I Goals” the highest rating of 4.42. When a female rural elementary Title I coordinator was asked what she was seeing with the new reading program, she responded, “Huge improvements. The data I look at on a weekly basis, you can see their scores rising.”

However, both administrators and teachers rated the item “Community members recognize improvement as a result of our Title I Improvement Plan” the lowest in this category. Teachers rated it between “undecided” and “agree” at 3.46, while administrators rated it “agree” at 4.05. The second-lowest rating was given to “During teacher evaluations, administrators in my school discuss with teachers about the way they are helping students in order to meet our Title I Goals,” which administrators rated 4.16 and teachers rated 3.84.

## Additional Themes

In addition to these seven themes, four additional themes emerged from the interviews: Collaborative Culture, Resources, Leadership, and Challenges.

### *Collaborative Culture*

Educators emphasized the importance of a collaborative culture to the Title I School Improvement Process, as it allowed teachers to share resources, cooperate on a more cohesive curriculum, and support each other emotionally. A female rural elementary teacher explained, “With us being a small school, we are like a little family. Everybody here is on board. It’s easy to ask if you have questions, easy to notice if somebody’s confused. We all work really well at reaching that same goal. It’s nice.” She elaborated, “There’s always a teacher that we can go to. It’s mentoring, helping one another.” A female rural secondary principal implied that steps taken during the Title I School Improvement Process might in and of themselves encourage collaboration: “There’s a lot more collaboration between the disciplines and between the levels of the discipline than we’ve ever had before.”

Collaboration took place across grade-levels, disciplines, and school buildings, but could be difficult to coordinate consistently. A male rural superintendent stated, “We had good conversations between our upper elementary and middle school people. We’ve not done as well with that recently.” Teachers and administrators collaborated through formal, regularly scheduled meetings as well as informal conversations throughout the day. A male rural elementary principal explained, “Given the [small] size of our school, teachers go across the hallway and have grade interventions and intermingling. Even though we don’t have official meetings, we simply stop and talk about how things are going in the classroom.”

### *Resources*

Through federal funding, the Title I School Improvement Process allows schools to use extra resources to support the implementation of their school improvement plans. Educators considered this a major benefit of participating in the Title I program. A female rural elementary teacher stated, “It’s been a good thing for us to be in school improvement, because we get the opportunity to get more professional development and individual textbooks, which we need.” Schools used these resources to attain new technology (e.g., interactive whiteboards, laptops, projectors, distance learning technology, reading and grading software); extra teachers (e.g., reading and math coaches, home-school coordinators, part-time teachers, and paraprofessionals); professional development opportunities; and new programs and interventions. Educational Service Units (ESUs),

the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE), and consultants were also listed as helpful resources.

A female rural elementary Title I coordinator explained,

When we were able to take advantage of this opportunity to develop a plan and have some funding to help us with research-based materials and strategies, and extra manpower to help deliver those services, then [it] became, as our principal referred to it, our reward for having [Title I status].

It is vital that schools learn how to manage these resources well. Educators stressed that this involves prioritization and accountability. A female rural elementary principal explained, “Don’t go in and ask for something unless you can justify it. You know how you want to spend this money and what you expect to receive from it. That’s the way it should be: accountability.”

### *Leadership*

Many educators pointed out the positive difference a good leader could make for a school in Title I “Needs Improvement” status. A female rural secondary principal explained, “It’s trickle-down. It’s important to [our superintendent] so it’s important to me, and then it’s important to the teachers, and then it’s important to the kids.”

Although administrators displayed a wide variety of leadership styles, teachers praised similar attributes: having an open door policy, being present in classrooms and hallways, being involved in the Title I process, and earning the respect of teachers and parents. A female rural secondary teacher explained that her principal was “really good about ‘let’s get together and talk about it.’ . . . If you do a good job, you hear ‘good job.’ That makes a big difference.” A female nonrural secondary teacher stated that communication with administrators at her school was “constant,” and “They’ve made it a point to understand where we are in the curriculum. They know where we are in terms of pacing for every curricular area. Very, very involved.”

High levels of administrative turnover can negatively impact the school improvement process. In these cases, teachers reported a decrease in staff collaboration and administrative involvement. A nonrural male elementary teacher shared, “Communication is a HUGE problem in my school. [Our] principal does not give information to teachers until the last minute, if even then.” It is also inevitable that administrators will make mistakes. A female rural elementary principal explained, “Sometimes you do it and afterwards you think, ‘I should have involved this person or that person,’ or ‘maybe that wasn’t my job to do.’ But that’s part of being an administrator, you do some things right and you do some things not so right.”

### *Challenges*

Children from demographic subgroups have specific needs that must be taken into account. A female rural elementary principal explained that her students

do not bond well with adults because they have basically raised themselves. They are, in their mind, adults already. If you are your own primary caregiver, it’s difficult to go to school and look at someone else as a person who is going to inform you or change your life.

A male rural elementary principal stated: “Our kids don’t understand what it takes to get to the next level, because they’ve never witnessed it at home.”

For meeting these challenges, effective teachers are just as important as effective administrators. A female rural elementary teacher suggested, “Because some kids don’t even have a kitchen table to do their homework, they need to stay here for half an hour and work with us.” Still, educators expressed frustration that they could not eliminate these challenges. Regarding student mobility, a female rural elementary teacher shared:

I wish there was a formula [for] what to do with children that move. It is hard to work so hard on a child, get them rolling, and they’re gone. I don’t care if they go to the best school in the state, they still miss out, they still have to adjust.

A male nonrural assistant secondary principal noted,

[Our school] isn’t like most schools in Nebraska. It’s much more intense; you have to have a passion for it. The teachers said when I arrived, “it takes a special person to work at [our school].” It really doesn’t take a special person to work here. To make an impact here, it takes a special person. To be a difference maker, it does take something special.

## **Conclusion**

As illustrated by the survey findings and interview responses, Nebraska Title I “Needs Improvement” schools are focused on improving student learning. These results were categorized according to the themes of Title I School Improvement Plans, Clear Focus, Classroom Interventions, Professional Development, Data/Monitoring, Community Involvement, and Overall Improvement. Additionally, four themes emerged during interviews that were not examined by the survey: Collaborative Culture, Resources, Leadership, and Challenges.

The items “The planning process in my school is focused on improving student achievement” and “Professional development experiences have led to new classroom practices” were the highest-rated items by teachers and administrators in their respective categories. Given the focus on improving student achievement and providing new opportunities for teachers to implement interventions, it is worth noting that both teachers and administrators gave the highest rating in the Overall Improvement category to the item “Data shows that progress is being made in meeting our Title I Goals.”

Teacher observation should be pursued as an opportunity for growth in schools, since both teachers and administrators gave “Teachers are encouraged to observe each other in the classroom” the lowest rating in the Professional Development category.

A major factor in the success of a Title I Plan is the involvement of parents and community. Both rural and nonrural educators indicated that engaging parents is difficult due to the many demands placed upon families with children in Title I programs. Teachers and administrators gave the item “Community members are engaged in decision making based on data that was analyzed” the lowest rating in the Community Involvement category. Engaging community members in the Title I School Improvement Process was even more difficult. This is evidenced by the finding that the item “Community members recognize improvement as a result of our Title I Improvement Plan”

was the lowest-rated item in the Overall Improvement category by both teachers and administrators. One successful method of engaging parents was after-school programming. A female rural elementary parent who was also on the school staff explained, "A lot of parents call and say, '[my child] needs to go to the after-school program to complete their homework.' Some parents are really consistent and make sure their kid is here."

Administrators and teachers discussed the importance of focus in planning and implementing school improvement goals. A male rural elementary principal explained, "The more you can focus different aspects of different programs on the same thing is huge. I can really concentrate our efforts and improve one area at a time. Once you do that, you make a lot more progress." The area of greatest focus for the schools in this study was the use of interventions to positively impact learning. However, it is unclear how schools are using data to guide decisions about individual student needs.

It became evident in interviews that many challenges impact Title I students' learning. Many of their teachers indicated the need to depend on each other when trying to improve student performance, thus building a culture that encouraged collaboration. This culture allowed leaders to actively engage with staff and utilize new Title I resources and materials for professional development and student engagement.

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