

THE PERSPECTIVES OF NOVICE PRINCIPALS IN HIGH-POVERTY, LOW-  
PERFORMING SCHOOLS: CHALLENGES FACED AND SUPPORT NEEDED

By

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This study is dedicated to my mother, the late Zilla Taitt Kirton.  
There was never a challenge for which she did not find a solution and never a person in  
need she did not assist.

This study is also dedicated to my children, Dr. Lee C. Buddy Jr., and Dr. Cherisse M.  
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By

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Across the nation, urban school districts continue to search for solutions in order to transform high-poverty, low-performing schools. While the literature recognizes the leadership of school principals as pivotal to school transformation initiatives, novice principals in urban districts face challenges of poverty, racial dynamics in communities, families that are considered dysfunctional and marginalized, and large numbers of low-performing students. District leaders often fail to provide support to these principals to specifically address their unique contexts. The one-size-fits-all blanket support provided is insufficient to support their practice, build their expertise and respond to their challenges.

This qualitative study sought to determine the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they face in leading high-poverty, low-performing schools, and the support they need to be successful. Three novice principals were selected to participate in the study, and data were analyzed following the three interviews that were conducted with each principal. The findings of the study revealed four main challenges to their work: resistance from key stakeholders such as teachers, parents and students;

building partnerships with students and parents; having trust and confidence in district leaders, and the existence of a mentorship vacuum.

The findings of this study also revealed the importance of novice principals being mentored beyond the district's principal preparation programs. The novices explained that they were prepared in the area of curriculum but lacked expertise in such operational areas as budget and personnel. For the success of their leadership, it is crucial that differentiated support is provided to them through collegial, collaborative, and silent mentorship.

The complex and high-stakes accountability system that determines the success or failure of novice principals is much more demanding than in years past. It is hoped that the results of this study will enhance the supports provided to novice principals so that they may facilitate increased student learning and success.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

School transformation initiatives have focused on improving teacher quality and practice, fostering relationships with community leaders and parents, allocating funds for additional personnel, utilizing specific instructional materials and implementing targeted intervention programs. School principals are not only the facilitators of these initiatives, but their role as instructional leaders is pivotal to school transformation efforts (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Levin, 2007; Salmonowicz, 2009; Salmonowicz & Levy, 2009). It is expected that through their leadership, teaching and learning will be improved. However, some principals lack the expertise necessary to increase student achievement, amidst the challenges of poverty, low-performance and societal dysfunction in communities. Additionally, school district leaders may not recognize the unique challenges principals face and therefore, fail to differentiate support that would specifically address their needs. The one-size-fits-all blanketed support provided by district leaders is insufficient to assist principals in their quest for instructional improvement and student achievement (Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2007; Peters, 2012).

### **Background and Significance of the Problem**

Studies have demonstrated that the leadership of school principals has a measurable effect on student achievement and on the quality of instruction in schools (Fullan, 2007; Gentilucci, & Muto, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood and Strauss, 2009; Theoharis, 2009). In fact it has been stated that principal and teacher effectiveness account for approximately 60% of the school's impact on student achievement (Johnson, Walker and Levine, 2010). While school principals play

a key role in creating schools that foster the achievement of students, they are also faced with the unrealistic expectations of the public and the ever increasing standards and scrutiny of the federal government, state and district educational systems. In addition, accountability legislation coupled with increased measures of achievement, have targeted individual schools rather than school districts, placing increased pressure on principals in schools that have been designated as low-performing. These principals experience extreme stress as a result of the increasing demands on their personal time, school board and district directives as well as the requirements of new programs and initiatives. They are also faced with the possibility of being transferred, losing their jobs or having their schools taken over by the State Department of Education. Many principals have even reported a decrease in their effectiveness and authority and have considered quitting their positions. Some have retired early while other potential leaders are concluding that the position of principal is not worth the stress and aggravation (Duke, 1988; Fullan, 2007; Garcia-Garduno, Slater, Lopez-Gorosave, 2011; Rodriguez, Murakami-Ramalho & Ruff, 2009).

Despite the frustrations, principals and school districts continue to explore ways to address the challenges of an ever-changing society where minority children comprise a large percentage of the population, and where 1 in every 4 are children of immigrants (First Focus & Save the Children, 2012). School leaders are not only faced with the challenge of increasing the achievement of a growing population of culturally and linguistically diverse students but must explore solutions to the growing gap between the rich and poor, and the unique needs of children that live in poverty. There were moments in the history of America when reformers believed that education would be the

remedy for social change and targeted their efforts to improve the challenges of society through schooling (Fullan, 2007; Rury, 2009). It seems that once again, the school and its leaders are considered the panacea for the inequities and social problems that exist in our nation. Therefore it is against this backdrop of poverty, low-achievement, high public expectations, national and state mandates that school principals work to provide a quality education for minority and marginalized students.

### **National Context**

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) proposed by President George W. Bush, was the nation's effort to close the achievement gap through the funding of federal programs aimed at improving performance in U.S. schools. This was intended to be accomplished by increasing the standards of accountability for schools as well as increasing the skills of students in reading and mathematics. The Act also provided parents more flexibility in selecting which schools their children should attend. Through annual testing, by which school effectiveness was judged, a timeline for progress was established and specific consequences for failure were imposed. The overall intent of the law was to ensure that students, regardless of economic status, race, ethnicity or disability, attained proficiency in reading, mathematics and science by 2014.

The NCLB requirements included a disaggregation of the data within each state and school by student demographic subgroups. The subgroups included economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, males and females, and major racial and ethnic groups (Balfanz, Legters, West, Weber, 2007; Caillier, 2007; Gardiner, Canfield-Davis & Anderson, 2009; U. S. Department of Education, 2004). Despite the laws that were enacted, the funding that was established to support the laws, and the training and support given to schools and

their leaders, the low achievement of Black and Hispanic students continues to persist as compared to their White peers (Barton & Coley, 2009; National Assessment of Education Statistics, 2012). Furthermore, the accountability legislation at the federal and state levels brought additional challenges that have impeded student achievement in many urban schools and communities (Furhman, 1999 as quoted by Houle, 2006).

This was evident in the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading assessment that measures the reading and comprehension skills of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), there was no statistically significant change in the White–Hispanic gap or the White-Black gap for Grade 4 students from 2009 to 2013. The White-Hispanic gap showed a 25 point gap in 2009, 2011 and 2013 while the White-Black score gap showed a 25 point gap in 2009 and a 26 point gap in 2011 and 2013. It was further noted that even though the average scale scores across the nation for reading between 2009 and 2013 increased, Black and Hispanic student scores were significantly lower than those of their White peers. For example, the average scale scores for Whites in reading increased from 229 to 232; and Blacks and Hispanics from 204 to 207. It should also be noted that in 2013, only 21% of White students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade performed below the basic level of proficiency in reading while 50% of Black students and 47% of Hispanic students performed below the basic level of proficiency. Additionally, 69% of White students scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading while only 6% of Black students and 12% of Hispanic students scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2013).

In mathematics, even though 4<sup>th</sup> grade students scored higher in 2013 than in any of the previous assessment years, there was still a gap in achievement between

Black and Hispanic students as compared with White students. For example, in 2013, the average score for White students was 250 while the average for Black and Hispanic students was 224 and 231 respectively. Additionally, when comparing their proficiency levels, 9% of White students were below the basic level of proficiency in mathematics while 34% of Black students and 27% of Hispanic students were below the basic level of proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Additionally, 70% of White students scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in mathematics while only 5% of Black students and 12% of Hispanic students scored above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile. It was further noted in 2013, that 76% of students that were eligible for the National School Lunch Program scored below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile in mathematics (National Assessment of Education Progress, 2013).

Across the nation, public schools and their leaders are also faced with growing numbers of children and families who live in poverty. In 2012, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 46.5 million Americans were living in poverty. Approximately, one in four children lived in poverty and 24.4% of the children were under age 6. Additionally, 21.8% of children under 18 were also living in poverty and of those children, 18.5% were White, 33.8% were Hispanic and 37.9% were Black (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012; First Focus & Save the Children, 2012). Additionally, in 2010-2011, out of 49.5 million children enrolled in public school systems, 1.1million were identified as homeless by the U. S. Department of Education (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012). It seems that despite these statistics, government policies are slow to adapt and respond. According to First Focus' Children's Budget 2012,

children only receive 8% of federal funding, and for every \$7.00 spent on senior citizens, only \$1.00 is invested in children (First Focus & Save the Children, 2012).

The leadership of principals in schools that serve students that are low-performing and live in poverty is vital. While programs have been established across the country to develop their leadership skills, many programs are not situation-specific and do not address their diverse and challenging contexts (Duke & Salmonowicz 2010; Levine, 2005; Peterson, 1986). For example, programs such as the National Principals Mentoring Certification Program, a yearlong professional development program that trains current principals to support beginning principals as well as the New Teacher Center in Santa Cruz, California are just some of the programs geared to provide assistance to new principals. These programs, although valuable, are not designed to be responsive to the situation-specific needs of principals. It is evident that transforming high-poverty, low-performing schools seem to be far more complex and challenging than previously recognized (Fullan, 2007).

### **Local Context**

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) recently engaged in several programs to train aspiring leaders to respond to the needs of low-performing schools. The Florida Turnaround Leaders Program (FTLP) is a collaborative effort between the Florida Department of Education, the Southern Regional Education Board, five local school districts and charter schools statewide. The program is supported by the Race to the Top grant and partners with the University of North Florida and the University of Central Florida. MDCPS has also partnered with the University of Florida in its Florida Master Teacher initiative. This program, currently funded through the Investing in Innovation grant (i3), not only provides job-embedded professional development to

teachers but enhances the practices of principals through the Principal Fellow Program. Principals are able to attend professional development meetings five times a year to further develop their leadership skills, conduct inquiry projects as well as interact with other principals across the state of Florida.

These initiatives to develop the skills of principals are certainly important because the data and demographics of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) are similar to that of other urban districts in the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). In 2013, MDCPS had 355,268 students, 90% of whom were Black or Hispanic and 7% were White. 73% of the students qualified for the free and reduced-price lunch program (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2013). It should also be noted that the poverty among children 18 years old or less in Miami-Dade County increased in 2012. In 2010, Miami-Dade County reported that 22% of its children were living in poverty while in 2012 there was an increase of 4% to 26%. Additionally, 4,406 students were reported as homeless, the most in all 67 school districts in the State of Florida (Torres, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Despite the challenges, Miami-Dade County Public Schools outperformed districts with similar demographics in 2013, especially on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). For example, the average reading score of students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade in Miami-Dade County was 223. This was higher than the average score of 212 for public school students in large cities. However, there is still much work to be done to address the challenges of closing the achievement gap. When reviewing the 2013 data from the NAEP, as compared to the data from the same assessment in 2011, the average reading scores of White students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade in Miami-Dade County increased

from 221 to 223. However, in 2013, Black students had an average score that was 29 points lower than White students in reading and Hispanic students had an average score that was 13 points lower than White students. Additionally, in 2013, students who were eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch, an indicator of low family income, had an average score that was 23 points lower than students who were not eligible. It was also evident when analyzing the proficiency of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in reading that White students outperformed Black and Hispanic students. For example, in 2013, 15% of students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade performed below the basic level of proficiency, while 46% of Black students and 27% of Hispanic students performed below the basic level of proficiency (National Center for Education for Education Statistics, 2013).

In mathematics, the average score of 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2013 was 237 and not significantly different from the average score of 236 in 2011. Additionally, in 2013, Black students had an average score that was 24 points lower than White students and Hispanic students had an average score that was 13 points lower than White students. In 2013, students who were eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch had an average score that was 20 points lower than students who were not eligible. It was also evident when analyzing the proficiency of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in mathematics that White students outperformed Black and Hispanic students. For example, in 2013, only 6% of White students in 4<sup>th</sup> grade performed below the basic level of proficiency, while 26% of Black students and 18% of Hispanic students performed below the basic level of proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

Based on the 2012 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test 2.0 for reading, 60% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders in Miami-Dade County Public Schools were considered proficient. In

addition, 79% of White students as compared to 44% of Black students and 62% of Hispanic students were considered proficient. In Mathematics, 62% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders were found to be proficient. Of these students, 79% of White students, 47% of Black students and 65% of Hispanic students were considered proficient (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

In 2009, Miami-Dade County Public schools had several persistently low-achieving D and F schools, and Superintendent Alberto Carvalho recognized that it was important to change their trajectory. As a result, the Education Transformation Office (ETO) was formed to improve teaching and learning in 19 of the persistently low-performing K-12 schools. Servicing poor, disenfranchised Black and Hispanic students, the Education Transformation Office with its motto of “build, sustain and accelerate learning,” sought to limit operational and bureaucratic obstacles while utilizing a unique instructional framework of support and change (Education Transformation Office, 2013).

In August 2012, the Education Transformation Office expanded its support to 66 K-12 schools and I was appointed as an administrative director. During that school year, I led the work of improving student achievement in 36 Miami-Dade County Public elementary and K-8 schools. However, for the 2013-2014 school year, ETO expanded its services to 108 K-12 schools. My work as the Administrative Director for 68 elementary and K-8 schools has afforded me the opportunity to improve teacher quality, develop instructional leaders, and expand services for students while increasing parent and community involvement. As I work in these schools, I have had the opportunity to encourage collaborative leadership while implementing strategies to foster change. Working with a team of instructional supervisors and curriculum support specialists, we

strive daily to redefine and support the delivery of instruction in the classrooms while seeking to address the inequities and debilitating practices that have previously defined these schools. Despite our efforts, it seems that sustained student achievement remains elusive. It is my hope that an improvement in the quality of education will serve as a catalyst to break the cycle of poverty, inequity and low achievement.

This study pivots on the perspective that schools operate in different contexts, and the needs of the leaders in high-poverty, low-performing schools are unique. The underachievement of Black and Hispanic students as compared to their White peers, as well as the challenges of poverty, clearly illustrates the need for strong, supportive and innovative leadership in these schools. During the 2012-2013 school year, several beginning principals replaced veteran principals in the low-performing schools of the Education Transformation Office. While the current professional development for principals are well-intentioned, due to funding constraints, the large number of schools, and insufficient district resources, support to novice principals has been limited. As a result, novice principals continue to struggle with effective leadership practices and the implementation of initiatives that would have a positive impact on transforming challenging schools and increasing student achievement. The challenges they face must be acknowledged, and the support provided to them must go beyond state and district preparation programs, school handbooks and the enforcing of district-designed initiatives.

Novice principals, defined in this study as principals who have been in their positions for three school years or less, are on a continuum of knowledge and practice. Their needs differ even though the demographics and student performance data of their

schools may appear similar. While classroom teachers are expected to provide a differentiated approach in their instruction of students, there is a failure to acknowledge a similar differentiation of support for new principals. The practice of district leaders to provide a blanket of support to all principals regardless of their needs and challenges seems to be less than beneficial and does not create the change in student achievement that is needed. The voices, perceptions and ideas of novice principals are silenced amidst district-designed routines, initiatives and mandates.

This study will examine the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they have encountered in leading their high-poverty, low-performing schools and the support that they perceive is needed to address these challenges. Their insights will be used to address the support that is presently being provided to enhance the practice of school principals, transform schools and increase student achievement.

### **Research Questions:**

The following questions will guide the study:

- **RQ1:** What are the challenges experienced by novice elementary principals who lead high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools?
- **RQ2:** What support do novice elementary principals believe they need to address these challenges?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will provide policy makers and district leaders a glimpse into the perspectives of principals who lead high-poverty, low-performing schools. This will encourage and enable school districts to recognize the value of moving beyond the one-size-fits-all blanketed support that is currently provided to a more differentiated method of support, tailored to the diverse and complex contexts in which principals work. This study will also provide insights to other urban districts that are searching for answers to

enhance the leadership of novice principals amidst the demands of accountability, increased poverty and low-achievement. It will also increase awareness of the important role of school principals and other stakeholders in conversations about school transformation and educational change.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Urban schools, characterized by the academic underachievement of Black and Hispanic students, create unique challenges for school districts and their leaders. Even though there continues to be a plethora of district-designed initiatives and mandates to address the challenges and create change, student achievement continues to be elusive. School principals are considered the leaders who can implement and sustain these initiatives, yet their perspectives are rarely solicited. This study will examine the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they have encountered in leading high-poverty, low-performing schools and the support they perceive they need to address the challenges. Their insights will be used to review the support that is presently being provided in order to enhance their practice, transform schools and increase student achievement. The following questions will guide the study: (1) What are the challenges experienced by novice elementary principals who lead high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools? (2) What support do novice elementary principals believe they need to address these challenges?

Following the introduction, the literature will be reviewed to identify the challenges that urban schools face. The literature will then be further reviewed to explore the evolution of the role of the school principal and identify effective leadership practices of school principals. The chapter will then explore the challenges that principals face in their leadership roles followed by a review of principal preparation programs. The chapter will close with a review of the literature that identifies the support provided to urban schools by school district leaders.

## Introduction

The increasing racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of schools, along with the increasing numbers of families who live in poverty pose challenges for school reform. In addition, while schools have always had the responsibility of preparing students for the future, the methods of teaching and learning utilized in the past are proving unproductive to equip students with the knowledge and skill necessary to be successful in a complex global society (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Darling-Hammond (2010) stated, "The new mission of schools is to prepare students to work at jobs that do not yet exist, creating ideas and solutions for products and problems that have not yet been identified, using technologies that have not yet been invented" (p.2). As a result, educators have had to redefine their knowledge, skills, values and practice in an effort to meet current expectations and standards. Additionally, the increased focus on accountability has impacted their school improvement efforts and operational decisions.

The task of educating students is even more daunting in urban schools where the challenges that are faced are systemic. Urban communities continue to experience severe economic, fiscal and social challenges and the task of increasing student achievement in these communities are enormous and vastly different from those in affluent suburban neighborhoods. Urban schools are often situated in crime-infested, depressed, high-poverty communities, which daily threaten the safety, survival and opportunities of students. Parents who live in these communities are faced with limited resources, work multiple jobs and are often unable to be actively supportive of the education of their children. There is a daily struggle to escape a system that depresses their aspirations, fails to change the trajectory of their lives, or create and sustain positive opportunities for their children. While it is evident that they have high

aspirations for their children and have entrusted them to the school system with the expectation that their potential would be valued and their opportunities expanded, their ability to assist them outside of the walls of the school-house remains a challenge (Foote, 2005; Jackson, 2005; Yosso, 2005). In fact, these parents are often ridiculed by a school system that blames them for being poor, for not making education a priority, and for being the cause of their children's failure (Bradshaw, 2006; Yosso, 2005). As a result, there continues to be a persistent search in urban schools for initiatives that will educate parents and have a sustained effect on closing the gaps of achievement and expectation.

### **Challenges of Urban Schools**

In urban schools, academic success is expected to be accomplished even in classrooms that serve students with multiple languages and needs, wide ranges of ethnic diversity and differing cultures and values. The moving target of success is measured by specific standards, based solely on high-stakes standardized tests that most educators have no voice in defining. Urban schools have strengths that go unrecognized, and they seem to be caught in a cycle of failure (Levine, 2005). The school buildings are often in disrepair, resembling custodial institutions rather than institutions of learning (Haberman, 2000). The large numbers of at-risk students, drug use, gang affiliation, violence, high student mobility and extreme poverty in these urban schools continue to discourage even the most dedicated teachers as they work to create positive relationships and academic success with and for their students (Beachum, McCray & Huang, 2010; Foote, 2005; Jackson, 2005). Classrooms are often overcrowded, and the quality and availability of classroom resources is inadequate (Foote, 2005; Jackson, 2005).

While the management of students often proves to be challenging for teachers and administrators, the students are confronting obstacles as well. With their lives focused on survival in dysfunctional homes and crime-ridden neighborhoods, many discover that they even have to focus on surviving the inequities and low expectations in classrooms that continue to marginalize their existence. Teachers who do not value their knowledge or acknowledge the potency of their cultural differences misinterpret their attitudes and behavior as disruptive, deviant, and insubordinate, and many are suspended, staffed into special education programs, retained or even expelled (Smith & Smith, 2009; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Education, which has always been viewed as the institution that can cure the ills of society, is once again forced to respond to the blatant brutality against the minds and lives of these students. The task has fallen on school leaders to grapple with the challenges of educating them while fighting against low public support, unrealistic standards, and the political machineries of accountability that threaten to derail and devalue their efforts and progress. They continue to work tirelessly to dispel the thinking that the failure of these students can be attributed to their inherent limited intellectual abilities, lack of motivation and circumstances (Rury, 2009; Valencia, 2013). They work diligently to prepare these students to be resilient in the presence of those who judge them unfavorably and are poised to annihilate their dreams and cage them within neighborhoods of crime and poverty.

The leaders of these urban schools are also faced with the hiring and retention of high-quality teachers while working to motivate and develop inexperienced teachers (Beachum et al., 2010; Foote 2005). It has been documented that inexperienced

teachers are often assigned to urban schools. Perhaps not surprisingly, they tend to be absent more frequently than experienced teachers and often transfer out of urban schools to schools that are in suburban districts and considered less challenging (Foote, 2005). As a result, school leaders work diligently to overcome the revolving door of teacher turnover and teacher quality while striving to thwart the low expectations and deficit thinking of many who remain (Beachum et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Jackson, 2005; Valencia, 2013).

School leaders have also explored ways to facilitate academic success while honoring and maintaining the identities and cultures of their students. In response, they have been forced to reevaluate their school's curriculum and its offerings while reinventing themselves and their educational beliefs. They have also explored ways of retaining students in their schools with the increased presence of charter schools whose claims of a more comprehensive education have pandered to parental dissatisfaction. It has become obvious to public school leaders that public schools no longer have the monopoly on the education of students, so they must now compete for the education pie, to remain a viable option at the table of education. While the strengths of the schools and their leaders have often gone unrecognized by the cynics, school leaders have had to acknowledge their weaknesses and explore ways to develop their expertise and enhance their practice.

### **The Evolution of the Role of the School Principal**

The role of the school principal in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was initially that of a teacher and building manager. This teacher and building manager, directed by an off-site superintendent, was responsible for the instruction as well as maintaining the building which was usually just a classroom space (Mendels, 2012; Neumerski, 2012;

Rousmaniere, 2007). As schools became subdivided by age and achievement, head teachers or teaching principals were appointed. There were no job descriptions or legal documents that governed their positions, and many of the head teachers or teaching principals were selected because they were available, wanted the job, or had the most seniority in the school. Their job was primarily to maintain discipline and oversee the operation of the classrooms (Neumerski, 2012; Rousmaniere, 2007). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the move towards professionalization of the principal became evident as the principal assumed a more supervisory role. Additionally, the school bureaucracy expanded into a system of clerks, assistant principals, and others with non-teaching responsibilities. As a result, the principal was required to supervise these individuals and in most cases was no longer required to teach (Neumerski, 2012; Rousmaniere, 2007).

As the role of the principal evolved, the principal was considered an instructional leader and focused on specific elements of reform. The term “Instructional Leader” originated in the 1970’s in the “effective school movement,” when schools were considered effective if they were able to educate all students, regardless of their family background (Marsh 1997; Mendels 2012; Neumerski, 2001). Principals, as instructional leaders, were expected to promote a learning environment that was conducive to student learning by establishing high expectations for student behavior and academic success. Their responsibilities included coordinating the curriculum, promoting quality instruction, evaluating teachers, aligning instructional materials with curriculum goals, allocating instructional time and monitoring student progress. They were also considered facilitators of learning, collaborative inquiry, professional dialogue and

school development (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Mitchell & Castle, 2005). Their goals were centered on student achievement, and principals were considered effective if they were able to articulate the vision and mission of the school to stakeholders both within the school and in the community (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Khalifa, 2012; Marsh, 1997; Murphy, 1990).

Principals were expected to develop a positive culture in their schools, encourage staff collaboration and student engagement, bring in outside resources, and develop strong links between parents and the school. Indeed, principals were responsible for defining and articulating the values, beliefs and cultural tone that gave a school its unique identity (Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2006). A U.S. Senate Committee Report on Equal Educational Opportunity governmental study (as cited by Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005) stated that “in many ways the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school . . . It is his leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become” (U.S. Congress 1970, p.56) This perspective continues to be relevant more than 37 years later.

It seemed that the view of the principal as an instructional leader waned slightly over the years, replaced by the principal as a strategic planner, setting goals and problem solving (Mitchell & Castle, 2005). Several shifts in policies accounted for this change. For example, with changes in educational policies, many principals seemed to be inundated with managerial tasks and mounds of paperwork. In fact Marsh, 2000 [as stated by Mitchell and Castle, (2005)], indicated that the demands of the accountability

movement forced principals to concentrate on the managerial aspects of meeting accountability requirements, and as a result the reins of instructional leadership were given to teachers and assistant principals.

In the current educational climate, however, the role of the principal seems to be a combination of the various roles that have been played over the years: instructional leader, manager, strategic planner, communicator and even a servant to the needs of the state, district, staff, students and parents (Dyer & Carothers, 2000; White-Smith, 2012). With such an enormous responsibility for school transformation and student achievement, it is important that these school leaders maintain a clear understanding of the schools' vision and mission and serve as a bridge to connect numerous school reform efforts. While recognizing that innovation and achievement may not be accomplished without dissonance, they must remain steadfast in their efforts even amidst the distractions of the agendas of parents, teachers, other educators and politicians.

### **Practices of Effective Principals**

In a meta-analysis of 69 studies conducted from 1978 to 2001 by Marzano, Waters & McNulty (2005), it was found that the leadership of principals has a significant relationship with student achievement. It is therefore important that the effective practices of successful school principals are identified. While teachers must concentrate on the core functions of teaching and learning, the school principal must be a motivator and act as a filter to outside distractions, focusing and refocusing the school's reform agenda (White-Smith, 2012; Foote, 2005). Jackson (2005) aptly stated that "the creation of reform agendas that will lead to success by all children requires leaders who can learn from past lessons, heed the findings of current educational research and rely

on the wisdom of their own experiences” (p.193). Therefore, with passion, a sense of purpose, and fidelity to instructional practice, school leaders must have the expertise to move forward the vision and mission of the school. It is expected that through their leadership, teaching and learning will be improved. They should be able to encourage collaboration and build consensus around the school’s goals while working to influence and foster high expectations. Their role is pivotal to school transformation (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Levin, 2007; Salmonowicz, 2009; Salmonowicz & Levy, 2009; The Wallace Foundation, 2012; Theoharis, 2009).

It has often been difficult to identify the practices of effective principals due to a lack of data, the ability to isolate the practices, and other variables coupled with the complexity of their work (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Attempting to create a common framework has in some ways overshadowed the research to specifically identify the effective attributes of principals. However, some researchers have identified effective practices of principals and deemed them very important as they relate to student achievement (Grissom and Loeb, 2011).

Utilizing the study of Grissom and Loeb (2011) as a framework to identify the practices of effective principals, five dimensions of principal leadership have emerged and are supported by other research studies. Grissom and Loeb used the self-assessment of principals to identify and isolate five dimensions of principal effectiveness.

**Instructional management.** This dimension was important in the role of principals and included tasks such as using data to inform instruction, professional

development and evaluation of the programs that supported and improved instruction at the school. In this element, principals planned and implemented the professional development activities for their staff and they also coached teachers. In the evaluative role, principals evaluated the curriculum, utilized the assessment results to improve the curriculum and instructional practices and provided instructional feedback. While few principals rated themselves as “ineffective” or “somewhat effective” in this dimension, there was more variation between those principals that rated themselves “effective” and “very effective”. For example, 65% of principals gave themselves the highest score for using data to inform instruction while only 35% gave themselves a similar rating for their ability to plan professional development activities for their teachers.

**Internal relations.** Building strong interpersonal relations were vital to the work of principals within the school (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Leithwood, 1994; Reitzug, West & Angel, 2008). This dimension included working positively with students and staff, resolving conflicts and maintaining positive relations within the school. Additionally, addressing issues of social justice and working to provide an equitable education for students was vital to the work (Leithwood, 1994). Grissom and Loeb’s study (2011), showed that 72% of principals reported that they were “very effective” in their work with students while 70% reported that they were “very effective” in their work with parents. This dimension aligned with the relational leadership that Reitzug, West and Angel (2008) alluded to in their study. Relational instructional leadership was vital to an effective principal and did not usually occur as a result of working directly with the instructional program. Rather it was a result of the principal assisting teachers and students to feel better about themselves, encouraging them to work harder and take

more pride in their work. The principals in Grissom & Loeb's 2011 study were able to articulate the connection between student success and developing positive relationships.

**Organizational management.** In organizational management, the principal oversaw the operation of the school, and the tasks performed were all geared towards the short and long-term goals of the school. This dimension included maintenance of the school facility, managing budgets and resources while maintaining a safe school environment. This dimension also included managing people, data and processes to foster the improvement of the school (The Wallace Foundation, 2012).

**Administration.** Routine administrative work such as managing school records, including attendance-related tasks were important to the effectiveness of the principal's performance and operation of the school. Compliance-related tasks, such as reporting and implementing standardized tests while maintaining student discipline and supervision, were also integral to this dimension. 68% of principals reported that they were "very effective" in this area (Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

**External relations.** Building positive relationships with all stakeholders outside of the school were also determined to be vital to the work of principals. It is crucial for school principals to have a deep understanding of the community being served and foster a strong relationship between the school, home and other community organizations (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Khalifa, 2012). Khalifa (2012) stated that "principals, especially urban principals, must move beyond their school walls in order to gain an understanding of the unique social and cultural conditions of their neighborhood communities. In doing so, they may find that "grades, behavior, and test scores are not

the primary issues at the forefront of community-based interests” (p. 429). Other aspects of this dimension included fund-raising, while communicating and working with the district to identify and mobilize resources. It was interesting to note that only 38% of principals rated themselves as “very effective” at communicating with the district and community organizations and only 18% considered themselves “effective” at fund-raising activities (Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

Other studies identified effective characteristics and practices of school principals. Collaborative leadership was identified as an effective practice of school principals. For example, Leithwood & Mascall (2008) studied the impact of collaborative leadership on student achievement. They surveyed principals and teachers in 180 schools within 45 school districts in 9 states and found that principals in higher achieving schools encouraged collaboration among school members and other stakeholders to a greater degree than principals in lower achieving schools. The principal seemed to be an infinite resource in all schools, and collaborative leadership was shown to have significant direct effects on student achievement.

In 2010, Hallinger and Heck conducted a study in 192 elementary schools to determine whether collaborative leadership impacted initial school performance. Their study with 12,480 grade 3 students focused on reading achievement by collecting the achievement data from the schools’ websites in years 2, 3, and 4 of the study. Surveys were also given to teachers in years 1, 3 and 4. The study found that while collaborative leadership had indirect effects on rates of growth in student achievement, it had a significant direct effect on the change in a school’s academic capacity.

It is therefore vital that principals recognize the importance of continually developing collaboration among teachers, building their knowledge, skill and practice, and equipping them to work together to meet the current challenges in their schools and in education. Since principals alone cannot provide the leadership necessary to maximize the instructional potential of their schools, effective instructional leadership should also encourage autonomy and collaboration. With so many managerial and leadership demands, principals should recognize the importance of soliciting teacher involvement in instructional and operational decisions. When redefining their vision and refocusing their leadership, principals should regard their schools as learning communities – places where adults and students, through collaboration with each other, are life-long learners.

As opposed to leadership that is hierarchical in nature, collaborative leadership gives opportunities for the school to benefit from the capacities and expertise of the teachers. Through collaboratively creating professional communities of learning, teachers will be able to explore the challenges of practice and find solutions and research tested theories that would be of benefit to students (Beachum, McCray, Huang, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Mascal, 2008; The Wallace Foundation, 2012).

### **Effective Leadership Practices in Urban Schools**

The context of the school influences practices of school principals, so the leadership needed in urban schools is vastly different from leadership that is exhibited in non-urban settings. In a study by Marcos, Witmer, Foland, Vouga and Wise (2011), superintendents and assistant superintendents reported that while many principal preparation programs prepared principals for school leadership, these principals were

often not prepared for urban settings. It is indeed a challenge for school principals when working with a diverse population that includes students who are homeless, live in poverty, are non-English speakers, and live in single-parent homes (Beachum et. al., 2012; Foote, 2005; Grissom & Loeb, 2011).

Based on the demands of urban schools, researchers have found that the practices of effective principals challenge the status quo and champion change initiatives (Fullan, 2007; Marcos, Witmer, Foland, Vouga & Wise, 2011; Marzano, Waters & Mc Nulty, 2005; Tredway, Brill & Hernandez, 2009). Effective practices also build more collaborative and democratic arrangements with teachers, district personnel and other stakeholders in an effort to achieve the challenges of schooling in urban communities and respond effectively to the diverse needs of the students (Beachum et. al., 2011; Leithwood & Mascal, 2008; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005; The Wallace Foundation, 2012). Foote (2005) also stated that urban school leaders should work to provide relevant professional development for teachers, decentralize decision making and explore options for retaining high-skilled teachers. Additionally, the relationship with outside agencies and the community is very important and the principal's practices must ensure that services provided by the community partners are coordinated and aligned to the instructional program of the school (White-Smith, 2012). Overall, the practices of school leaders in urban settings should encourage a comprehensive, authentic, coordinated and sustained effort toward increasing student achievement.

### **The Challenges of School Principals**

While it is important to identify the effective practices of school principals, it is also important to recognize that they face many challenges, especially as they relate to the accountability system that has been established as a measure of their success.

Principals have stated that the ever-increasing standards and scrutiny of the federal government, state and district educational systems, which in turn creates unrealistic expectations by the public, has been challenging. For example, in some states, even though the politics of school accountability are very complex and fluctuating, many principals are being evaluated based on the school's grade (Shipps & White, 2009; Stevenson, 2008; Wong & Nicotera, 2007). Such accountability legislation, coupled with increased measures of achievement, has often determined the success or failure of the principal. Research also shows that principals experience extreme stress as a result of school board and district directives, the requirements of new programs and initiatives and the increasing demands on their personal time. They are also faced with the possibility of being transferred, losing their jobs or having their schools taken over by the State Department of Education. Additionally, the demands of listening to and addressing the concerns of parents and community members, as well as teacher and parent organizations wanting more of a voice in school policies, all seem to pull the principal in opposing directions. Principals also find that they are faced with competing with each other for students, competent teachers and resources. It is no wonder that many principals have considered quitting their positions or retiring early (Duke, 1988; Fullan, 2007; Garcia-Garduno, Slater, Lopez-Gorosave, 2011; Shipps & White, 2009; Rodriguez, Murakami-Ramalho & Ruff, 2009; Stevenson, 2008).

While experienced and veteran principals find their jobs challenging, it is little surprise that the research shows that novice principals, with less than three years of experience are reporting high levels of stress and facing many challenges as well. Novice principals reported that they were often appointed to their positions with limited

prior experience and lacking expertise in various aspects of the work (Fullan, 2007; Levine, 2005; Spillane & Lee, 2013). While some novice principals previously participated in principal preparation programs, others were assistant principals prior to their appointment or came into the position of principalship from classrooms where they were teachers. Their inadequate preparation for the principalship has been described by Lortie, 1975 [and quoted by Spillane, 2013] as an “apprenticeship of observation.” The novice principals reported that technical challenges such as managing the budget and maintaining the building were difficult since, not only did they have little exposure to these experiences prior to their appointment, but they believed that these issues required knowledge they did not possess. The area of personnel was also a cause for concern as they dealt with ineffective and resistant staff and discovered that supporting or reprimanding these staff members was challenging. They did not believe they were well-prepared in managing personnel issues (Spillane & Lee, 2013; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006).

Even though the novice principals brought certain skills, knowledge and experiences to the positions, they often realized that these experiences that had previously shaped their expectations were inadequate for the principal position or were being challenged and changed with the reality of the position (Spillane & Lee, 2013). Spillane and Lee (2013), reported a “reality shock” for novice principals when they recognized the “ultimate responsibility” that they now faced. One principal in a study conducted by Spillane and Lee in 2013, stated, “The biggest transition I think is just sitting in this chair and realizing that now it’s all up to me” (p.13). The novice principals in the study further reported that they experienced increased stress, sleep loss, physical

exhaustion, worry and frustration. They also reported that the long hours, relentless workloads and demands from multiple stakeholders were a challenge (Duke, 1988; Fullan, 2007; Spillane & Lee, 2013; Tredway, Brill & Hernandez, 2009). Previous administrators of the school were among the stakeholders who were considered challenging to the novice principals. The novice principals expressed the difficulty of dealing with the legacy, practices and style of their predecessors and reported resistance by teachers, parents and students to the changes in routines and cultures that were previously established (Spillane & Lee, 2013; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006).

Principals have also expressed that they have experienced resistance and a lack of support from district leaders. They stated that district requirements and mandates sometimes impeded their progress and they wanted to be released from the constraints imposed by school districts (Mass Insight Education's School Turnaround Group, 2012; Theoharis, 2009). The principals cited long response times from district personnel as well as a lack of resources and expertise. One principal when speaking of the school district stated, "The system itself can be a huge obstacle. I found myself fighting with the people who were supposed to be helping me" (Mass Insight Education's School Turnaround Group, p. 2).

In addition to the challenges already stated, novice principals in urban districts face the additional challenges of poverty, racial dynamics in communities and families that are considered dysfunctional and marginalized. Not only do they have to work with large numbers of low-performing students amidst high rates of teacher turnover, but they must also deal with a complex and high-stake accountability system that

determines their success or failure as principals (Spillane & Lee, 2013). It is therefore important that the preparation for their positions is explored.

### **Principal Preparation**

Many programs have been established across the country to prepare and develop the leadership skills of school principals. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) introduced the Principals Advisory Leadership Services (PALS) Corps, designed to meet the needs of new and experienced school principals. One component of this program was the National Principals Mentoring Certification Program, a yearlong professional development program that trains current principals to guide, nurture and support beginning principals in a quasi-apprenticeship experience. The program includes a three-day institute and nine-month mentoring internship with in-depth mentoring practice, monthly chats, professional readings and self-reflection projects (Hall, 2008)

Additionally, the New Teacher Center in Santa Cruz, California has also created initiatives to assist new principals. This national non-profit center is designed to improve student learning by developing the effectiveness of new teachers and school leaders. Their principal induction program provides training for leadership coaches as well as an on-line formative assessment system for novice administrators. They also provide support for districts in designing and implementing their own programs of support. The “Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success” (CLASS) workshop works exclusively with selected principals, new and experienced, who are experiencing low student achievement at their schools (New Teacher Center, 2009). Additionally, at the University of Virginia, the Curry School of Education and the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration joined forces to create the Partnership for Leaders in

Education. This program in turn developed the Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Programs (VSTSP) to specifically address the needs of low-performing schools in Virginia by training specialist principals (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010).

Many principals are also trained through traditional university coursework. Levine (2005) conducted a four year study of America's education schools and focused the report on the education of principals and superintendents. The study included 28 schools and departments of education. He found the overall education administration programs in the United States to be poor, ranging from "inadequate to appalling . . . with programs marked by low standards, weak faculty and irrelevant curriculum" (p.294). Fullan (2007) quoted Mintzberg (2004), who stated that principal preparation programs produced "superficial generalists who know nothing about the contexts in which they work" (p. 295).

Several principal organizations have been in support of induction programs that include mentoring or coaching for new principals. The California State Department of Education recommended the use of leadership coaches and the West Contra Costa School District, an urban school district in northern California, provided external coaches to principals leading low-performance schools. The leadership coaches were used to develop novice principals and provide assistance to them in clarifying their professional goals, reflecting on their practice and creating systems that were sustainable to increase student achievement (James-Ward & Salcedo Potter, 2011). The coaches were selected from individuals who had successful careers as principals, central office administrators and university professors.

Although efforts have been made to address the training of aspiring principals, there is still a gap between the curriculum and the job requirements of school principals. The professional development that most school districts provide does not relate to the unique contexts in which these principals work. The principals still enter principalship lacking expertise in various aspects of the job (Fullan, 2007; Levine, 2005; Spillane & Lee, 2013). With the challenges that school principals, and novice principals in particular, are experiencing, it is apparent that many of these preparation programs are not specific to their diverse, challenging contexts and needs, and additional support is needed after they become principals (Duke & Salmonowicz 2010; Levine, 2005; Peterson, 1986).

### **The Role of District Leaders Supporting Urban Schools**

District administrators work in school districts that range in size from fewer than 100 students to large school districts with over 300,000 students (Fullan, 2007). Often in the larger school districts, the schools report to district offices that consist of a bureaucracy of specialists. The school superintendents of these districts are usually appointed by a school board and work to lead the specialists and promote the vision of the school board. The superintendent has the opportunity to exercise educational leadership (focus on pedagogy and learning); political leadership (focus on acquiring resources and building coalitions) and managerial leadership (focus on supervision, planning and support) (Fullan, 2007). The operation of district offices is vital to the school reform process and the success of school leaders.

It is important that school districts, with the leadership of their superintendents recognize what is needed to get district-wide student success. For example, Togneri and Anderson (2003) in a study conducted by the Learning First Alliance, identified the

policies and practices of five high-poverty districts to improve student achievement. The five school districts:

1. Recognized and acknowledged poor performance and explored solutions.
2. Focused on improving instruction and student achievement making tough decisions on the allocation of limited resources.
3. Built a system-wide framework of instructional support.
4. Encouraged all stakeholders to play a role in the transformation of the schools.
5. Ensured that professional development was relevant to instructional practice.
6. Recognized that school improvement takes time and they did not expect immediate results.

With the important role that district leaders play in school transformation, it is vital that they are able to reflect on current practices, open to change, and are focused on improving the achievement of students. Too often teachers and school principals are asked to change their knowledge and their practice while district personnel maintain the status quo. Therefore, district leaders should evaluate their work and the practicality and effectiveness of policies, practices and procedures. Without this, the unchanged policies and practices of district leaders will not be aligned with the work of principals in schools. For example, while principals are called on to be instructional leaders and their presence in the classroom is demanded, the administrative demands on them from district offices are rarely reduced (Fullan, 2007; Jackson, 2005). A different approach to leadership is needed. The literature indicates that district leaders should be willing to change policies and procedures and create new systems to support and align curriculum and instruction. It is also important that they are willing to create programs and professional development sessions that are tailored to the needs of school principals. District leaders should also be willing to engage in ongoing communication

with school principals and demonstrate respect for their ideas, experiences and time (Fullan, 2007; Theoharis, 2009).

Through identifying the practices of effective principals, the challenges that many principals face in the execution of their jobs, and the role of the district offices in the school transformation process, important background for this study is provided. For school transformation to be a reality it is vital to recognize that schools operate in different contexts, and the needs of the leaders in high-poverty, low-performing schools are unique. It is also important to recognize that there are many ingrained district practices that are considered as “common sense” (Kumashiro, 2009). However, many of these practices are not in the best interest of increasing and sustaining student achievement or addressing the needs of novice principals in high-poverty, low-performing schools. For example, the “common sense” practice of providing a blanket of support to all principals regardless of their needs and challenges does not provide adequate support for principals who work in challenging contexts. The support of principals in these schools, especially novice principals, must go beyond preparation programs, compliance with State mandates and an enforcement of district-designed practices.

This study will examine the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they have encountered in leading their high-poverty, low-performing schools and the support that they perceive they need to address these challenges. Their insights will be used to address the support that is presently being provided in order to enhance their practice, transform schools and increase student achievement. As educators, we must have the courage to give voice to the plight of urban schools and the novice principals

who strive to bolster and increase the academic performance and opportunities of students.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Across the nation, there have been many initiatives to reform schools and increase student achievement. Some school reform efforts have included increased standards and regulations, a lengthened school day or year and a changing of core requirements. Other school reform efforts have included a broadening and deepening of the relationship between schools and families, attracting and retaining effective teachers, upgrading teacher education and restructuring teacher roles. Despite these reform efforts and the huge sums of money invested, significant gains in student achievement continue to be elusive. Issues such as teacher resistance, funding, lack of collaboration and shared meaning among stakeholders, as well as the entrenched practices and policies of school districts, are some of the factors that have impacted the implementation and sustainability of many reform efforts (Fullan, 2007; Theoharris, 2009).

School change and transformation is a sociopolitical process that must take into account the perspectives of individuals, classrooms, and schools as well as local, regional and national forces (Fullan, 2007). The development of a shared understanding of school transformation among stakeholders was often not a priority and the initiatives failed, frustrating those who were mandated to implement the strategies. There remains, however, a sense of urgency across school districts to understand the transformation process and combine meaning and action to achieve continuous improvement in schools.

In this chapter, I describe the methodology that was used for a qualitative study that addresses two research questions: (1) what are the challenges experienced by

novice elementary principals who lead high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools? And (2) what support do novice elementary principals perceive they need to address these challenges? First, I provide an introduction to the context of the study. Then I will state the purpose of the study followed by a description of the participants and a brief description of the schools they lead. This will be followed by the interview questions as well as some of the challenges that may be encountered in the interview process. Finally, after stating how the data will be analyzed, this chapter will end with a glimpse into my work as an educator and its potential impact on the findings of the study.

### **Miami Dade County Public Schools**

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) is a public school district serving Miami-Dade County, Florida. Founded in 1885, it is the largest school district in Florida and the southeastern United States, and the fourth largest in the United States. Miami-Dade's school district has over 400,000 students and approximately 44,000 employees, 20,332 of whom are teachers (MDCPS District Strategic Plan, 2013). Similar to other school districts, MDCPS has several schools that are persistently low-performing and fragile, especially as high-stakes testing and state formulas continue to raise the standards of proficiency and achievement. MDCPS continues to work to provide a high quality education that will enable its students to lead productive and fulfilling lives as lifelong learners and responsible citizens (MDCPS District Strategic Plan, 2013).

Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, with a vision of equity and high student achievement, stated, "We must transform education as we know it to prepare our students for the promises and challenges of tomorrow" (Carvalho, 2011). However, despite his vision and the district's commitment to

educational excellence, many schools continue to struggle with implementing and sustaining school reform initiatives. Previous superintendents have worked to change the culture of low performance in the district, but the top-down approach of many of these initiatives did little to tap into the beliefs, values and knowledge of teachers, administrators, parents, students and community leaders.

For example, in 2004 the School Improvement Zone was the cornerstone of Superintendent Rudolph F. "Rudy" Crew's efforts to reform education in Miami-Dade. The 39 schools selected for the School Improvement Zone initiative received intensive support and a special academic program that placed a strong emphasis on literacy. High quality teaching materials were utilized and special teams of experts known as Student Development Teams were hired to assist students in grades pre-kindergarten to second and to boost the reading and writing skills of retained third-graders. In the secondary schools, these teams specifically addressed the needs of students in grades six and nine who were performing two years or more below grade level. Additionally, to give all students in the School Improvement Zone more time and opportunities to learn, the school day was extended by one hour and the school year by five days (School Improvement Zone, 2007). Student achievement, as indicated by the test scores, did not improve significantly and the funds that were being used to sustain the initiative seemed to place funding constraints on non-zone schools. As with other school reform efforts, the School Improvement Zone initiative ended when the Superintendent resigned.

### **Education Transformation Office (ETO)**

In 2009, Miami-Dade County Public schools had 35 D and F schools with 19 of those schools considered persistently low-achieving. Superintendent Alberto Carvalho

recognized that it was important to take those low-performing schools in another direction and arrest their downward trend in performance. As a result, the Educational Transformation Office (ETO) was formed. Even though many still remembered the failed efforts of the School Improvement Zone, and viewed this new initiative with skepticism, ETO forged ahead armed with a \$14 million school improvement grant to address the needs of 19 persistently low-performing schools – six elementary schools, three middle schools and 10 senior high schools. In 2011, the Education Transformation Office expanded its services to 26 schools, adding three elementary schools, four middle schools, and an additional \$6 million dollars. In 2012, Miami-Dade County Public Schools expanded the Education Transformation Office to 66 schools, adding 27 elementary schools, 11 middle schools and two senior high school schools, for a total of 36 elementary schools, 18 middle schools and 12 senior high schools. There were 66 schools being served by ETO, with a total population of 47,356 students. Of these students, 65 percent were Black, 32% were Hispanic, 2% were White and 1% comprised students of other ethnicities. With over 93% of the students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch, only 31% of these students scored at proficiency on the 2012 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in reading and 37% scored at proficiency on the 2012 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test in mathematics (Education Transformation Office, 2013).

Based on the results of the 2013 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, it was evident that schools in the district that were not being served by the Education Transformation Office were regressing and struggling academically. As a result, the district created a new system of support and school selection criteria based on a District

Support Formula (DSF). After adding the various components of the school grade and doubling the reading proficiency score, all schools in the district were ranked from lowest to highest. The lowest 25% of schools were then tiered to receive various levels of support from the Education Transformation Office. For example, all Tier 3 schools would receive intense ETO support, including systems and structures to build teacher and leadership capacity. Tier 2 schools would receive a scaled down model of support from ETO sufficient to build and maintain capacity, while Tier 1 schools would receive limited support from ETO's curriculum support specialists, but their progress would be closely monitored. All tiered schools however, would be allocated instructional coaches (Education Transformation Office, 2013). Based on this new tiered support initiative in 2013-2014, ETO supported 108 low-performing K-12 schools including 68 elementary and K-8 schools, and 40 middle and senior high schools.

While the work of ETO continues to be challenging, it is important to recognize its successes since its inception. In 2009, the 19 low-performing schools were C, D and F schools as per the State of Florida grading system. After the 2010 Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) results and one year of support from ETO, there were two A schools, one B school, 12 C schools, four D schools and no F schools.

Following the 2012 FCAT, the results of the original 19 schools as per the State of Florida grading system were reviewed. There were three A schools, three B schools, eight C schools, four D schools and one F school (Education Transformation Office, 2013). The results of the 2013 FCAT also showed that 36% of the 36 ETO elementary schools, maintained or increased reading proficiency, 67% increased proficiency in Mathematics while 75% increased proficiency in Science. Additionally, 61% of the 18

ETO middle schools increased in reading proficiency and 72% increased in science proficiency. All 18 middle schools maintained or increased participation points on the algebra end of course exams and nine of the 18 middle schools maintained or increased in performance points.

Of the 12 ETO senior high schools 92% increased in reading proficiency, while all ETO senior high schools increased their passing rates in Algebra, Geometry and Biology. There was also increased participation in Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment and Industry Certification courses by 27 percentage points (51% to 78%) and an increased performance in these courses by 21 percentage points (59% to 80%). College Readiness in reading also improved by 26 percentage points (32% to 58%) while Math improved by 8 percentage points (21% to 29%). Finally, the average graduation rate for ETO schools increased to 76% (Education Transformation Office, 2013).

Many of the successes of the Education Transformation Office (ETO) can be attributed to the efforts of the staff of practitioners who were teachers, instructional coaches, and instructional leaders prior to being hired by ETO. With a shared vision to “build, accelerate and sustain” student achievement in low-performing schools, they began their work with ETO (Education Transformation Office, 2013). All ETO employees previously worked with some measure of success in high-poverty schools and had a demonstrated record of improving student achievement. Their main focus was to provide support to schools, building instructional capacity and increasing student achievement. While focusing on developing and implementing a coherent instructional vision and instructional framework, they work to improve teacher quality, to develop

instructional leaders, to expand wraparound services for students and to increase parent and community involvement (Education Transformation Office, 2013).

In an effort to improve teacher quality in the 108 low-performing K-12 schools, the Education Transformation Office has placed at every school three or more instructional coaches with expertise in reading, mathematics and science. Positive Behavior System (PBS) coaches were also allocated at selected schools to work with teachers and administrators in developing strategies to ensure positive student behavior. The ETO executive directors, instructional supervisors and curriculum support specialists, with the leadership of administrative directors, recognized that the training of the instructional coaches was vital to the success of the ETO initiative. They provided a summer coaches' academy for instructional coaches every year. Over the three days of the academy, instructional coaches are equipped with strategies and content knowledge to drive the instruction at their schools. They also participate monthly in the one day Instructional Coaches' Academy (iCAD) where their understanding of theory and content is deepened and their practice is developed. ETO instructional supervisors and curriculum support specialists work with the instructional coaches at the school to implement the coaching cycle with teachers who are in need of support. They also ensure that all professional development activities for teachers are job-embedded, specifically related to the needs of the teachers and the school. With the exception of a one week-long summer academy for teachers, all other professional development activities are provided in collaborative planning sessions during the school day or after school, addressing areas of interest and need.

In addition to the professional development activities that are provided to instructional coaches and teachers, providing incentive bonuses to teachers whose data indicates improvement in student achievement provides motivation towards the goal of achievement. For example, at the end of the 2012-2013 school year, bonuses of \$2,000.00 were paid to several teachers in ETO schools. However, while teachers were able to receive bonuses for their efforts, several teachers whose data did not demonstrate increased student achievement after receiving support were involuntarily reassigned to nonETO schools.

Another element of improving teacher quality and fostering school reform was the instructional review conducted at all ETO schools three times during the school year. The administration, instructional coaches and ETO practitioners participate in classroom walkthroughs to review instructional practices, and analyze data from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), Florida Assessment for Instruction in Reading (FAIR), and district interim assessments. Strategies and action steps to increase student achievement are identified during the reviews and documented in implementation plans. These implementation plans are written by the ETO practitioners, working collaboratively with school site administrators and instructional coaches. The progress of the strategies and action steps of the implementation plans are monitored and the plans updated as needed.

The Education Transformation Office (ETO) also works to develop instructional leaders. All principals are on a continuum of knowledge and practice, and it is important to develop and support their instructional capacity. Professional development activities such as think tank sessions and instructional rounds have been implemented, and

principals also collaborate as a community of learners focusing on best practices and instructional rigor. Assistant principals are also expected to work closely with the instructional coaches to facilitate the alignment of the instructional program while encouraging the collaboration of all stakeholders. Therefore, it is important that initiatives to develop their instructional capacity were addressed. For example, in ETO's secondary schools, assistant principals were assigned to specific subject areas, thus enabling them to master the content and provide focused support to instructional coaches and teachers. Secondary assistant principals also attend the monthly Instructional Coaches Academy (iCAD) sessions with their instructional coaches. Elementary assistant principals develop their content knowledge and become equipped to provide instructional leadership in their schools by participating in the monthly Instructional Cohort of Assistant Principals (iCAP) sessions facilitated by the ETO instructional supervisors.

In an effort to also develop the instructional capacity of school leaders and provide the necessary experiences to move seamlessly into positions of leadership, ETO created the Project Lead Strong program. This internship initiative for future principals and assistant principals is designed to build their instructional expertise. The participants not only attend monthly professional development sessions but are also given the opportunity to participate in a one-week summer institute at Harvard University. Assistant principal participants in Project Lead Strong are also assigned a mentor principal and work in schools as resident principals for a semester.

In an effort to expand wrap-around services for students, many community based organizations have partnered with ETO. For example, mentoring and outreach

programs such as the Big Brothers and Big Sisters organization, Communities in Schools and Diplomas Now have all partnered with ETO to provide mentoring and support services. Additionally, enrichment opportunities are provided to ETO students through the participation of City Year, College Summit, and the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program.

ETO also strives to strengthen parent and community involvement, and advocacy centers have been established across the county for parents to receive assistance and voice concerns over student progress and school decisions. ETO also focuses on parent academy classes and parent teacher conference times have been extended as needed to accommodate parent schedules. Additionally, an ETO task force, comprised of various community and business leaders, meets in an effort to provide and coordinate services to parents and students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Even though the Education Transformation Office has a coherent, aligned and well-defined plan to improve teacher quality, develop instructional leaders, expand wraparound services for students, and increase parent and community involvement, the challenge of increasing and sustaining student achievement remains. As a result, it is necessary to delve deeper into the practices and needs of the leaders of these low-performing schools. As stated in Chapter 1, studies have shown that the leadership of school principals is pivotal to school transformation efforts and has a measurable effect on student achievement and on the quality of instruction in schools (Fullan, 2007; Gentilucci, & Muto, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood and Strauss, 2009; Levin, 2007; Theoharis, 2009). Johnson, Walker and Levine, (2010) have also stated that principal and teacher effectiveness account for approximately 60% of the school's

impact on student achievement, while in a study by Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) there was a significant indirect relationship between the leadership of the principals and student achievement. Many novice school principals however, do not have years of experience to guide their work, and seem to lack the expertise to improve teacher quality and increase student achievement in their schools. Leithwood, Bauer and Riedlinger (2006) stated that if administrators are to improve student learning, then ongoing support is needed. There seems to be a failure by school district leaders to recognize the unique challenges of school principals and provide support that is specific to their needs. The one-size-fits-all blanketed support provided by district leaders seems to be insufficient to assist principals in their quest for instructional improvement and student achievement (Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2007; Peters, 2012).

This study will examine the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they have encountered in leading their high-poverty, low-performing schools and the support that they perceive they need to address these challenges. Since school principals play a key role in creating schools and opportunities to foster the achievement of students, it is important that their perspectives are explored. Their insights from this study will be used to address the support that is presently being provided to enhance their practice, increase student achievement and transform high-poverty, low-performing schools.

### **Selection of Participants**

During the 2012-2013 school year, the Education Transformation office (ETO) was comprised of 66 schools. Thirty-one of these schools were Elementary (K-5) schools and five were K-8 centers. Among the 36 Elementary and K-8 school principals, nine principals were in their first three years of principalship with five of the

nine principals in their first year of principalship. For purposes of this study, novice principals were identified as those within the first three years of principalship. In an effort to understand the challenges novice principals face, principals will be selected from the nine principals who were novice principals during the 2012-2013 school year. The selection of the principals will be based on the following criteria:

1. Novice principals working in schools in Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Education Transformation Office.
2. Three years of less as principals of high-poverty, low-performing schools.
3. Their schools have been labeled as Differentiated Accountability Schools (DA) by the State of Florida.
4. Their schools have been awarded grades of "D" or "F" following the 2013 Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test.
5. The principals must be very engaged in their practice, and eager to discuss their plans for improvement.
6. The principals must be principals of the same school for the 2012-2013 school year and the 2013-2014 school year.
7. Their schools have a student enrollment of over 250 students with 98% or more eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

Based on the criteria, three principals were identified to participate in the study.

The Education Transformation Office (ETO) provided support to the schools of the three principals during the 2012-2013 school year. Two schools have worked with ETO for three years, and one school was new to the ETO process in the 2012-2013 school year. The three novice principals have participated in the ETO principals' meetings and have been supported by the ETO team of Instructional Supervisors and Curriculum Support Specialists. However, despite the resources that have been made available to the schools, based on their performance on the 2013 Florida Comprehensive Assessment

Test, one school received a D grade and two schools received an F grade on the State of Florida's grading system.

### **Description of Participants**

It was important that the identity of the novice principals was protected to prevent them from experiencing additional challenges to their work for participation in this study. In the interest of confidentiality and anonymity, several steps were taken. For example, I decided that I would not provide a detailed narrative about each participant and their school. Additionally, I removed their ethnic identities and merged participant descriptors.

The first participant was a female principal appointed to her school after working as an assistant principal and reading coach. She holds a degree in Educational Leadership. The school she leads is located in a low socio-economic urban community in Miami-Dade County, Florida. For many years the school has served a transient community which is comprised of governmental subsidized housing and some private homes. During the 2012 – 2013 school year, the school served a population of pre-kindergarten through fifth grade students with 98% of the student population identified as economically disadvantaged and qualified for free and reduced-price lunch. The school implements a systematic school-wide behavior plan and students across grade-levels are provided with rewards and consequences in order to promote a positive learning environment. The school is a Differentiated Accountability (DA) school.

The school has implemented several parent trainings to allow parents to learn about student programs and school initiatives. Activities such as open house, award ceremonies, and the participation of the school's Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee (EESAC) have assisted in fostering parental involvement.

The second participant was also a female principal and was an Assistant Principal before being selected to become a principal of an elementary school. She was also a reading coach before becoming an administrator and has a degree in Education Leadership. The school she leads is located in a low socio-economic urban community in Miami-Dade County, Florida. The school has pre-kindergarten through fifth grade with 98% of the students on free and reduced-priced lunch. The school also implements a systematic school-wide behavior plan where students are provided with rewards and consequences in order to promote a positive learning environment.

Parental and community involvement have increased in the past years as a direct result of the involvement of the district's parent academy. School workshops and training allow parents to engage and learn about student programs and school initiatives which result in a positive collaboration between home and school. Several activities such as open house, award ceremonies, and the school's Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee (EESAC) have assisted in fostering parental involvement. The school has also worked diligently to create a partnership with the community, and several counseling agencies and community programs provide services to the students and their parents.

The third participant is a female principal who has a certificate in Educational Leadership. Her school is also located in a low socio-economic urban community in Miami-Dade County, Florida. The school has students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade with 98% of the students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch. The students reside in governmental subsidized housing and single-family homes where the median income is at or above the poverty level. The school implements a systematic

school-wide behavior plan. Students across grade-levels are provided with rewards and consequences in order to promote a positive learning environment. The school is a Differentiated Accountability school.

Despite the past academic performance of the students, the leadership team, in partnership with stakeholders, has imagined a very different future for students, the school, and the surrounding community. Parental and community involvement have increased in the past years as a direct result of the leadership of the principal and her staff. Workshops and trainings allow parents to learn about school initiatives and several activities such as open house, award ceremonies, and the school's Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee (EESAC) have assisted in increasing parental involvement. The school has also worked diligently to create a partnership with the community and outreach programs and Dade Partners are actively involved in the school.

The three novice principals' report directly to the Education Transformation Office and receive instructional support from ETO's curriculum support specialists and specialists from the Florida Department of Education. They also receive support from other district offices in the school system. However, there appears to be a disparity between the resources and support provided and the student performance outcomes.

This qualitative study explored the perspectives of the three novices about the challenges they have faced and the support they need to address those challenges. The experiences of the participants were explored in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they perceive to exist in their schools. The data were gathered through three interviews conducted with the selected novice principals. Their

experiences have served to generate further insights into the challenges novice principals face and the support needed as they lead high-poverty, low-performing schools. The findings will provide insight for school districts and school principals regarding the support that is needed to transform low-performing, high-poverty schools and increase student achievement.

### **Method**

Interviews provide powerful data because they afford access to the thinking and perceptions of the participants (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009). Therefore, three semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were conducted with participants to collect the data. Capturing the words of these novice principals was important for gaining insights into the challenges of their positions and the support they needed. Prior to the first interview, the participants were given a consent letter to sign and the initial list of interview questions (see Appendices A and B). The interviews were conducted over a six-week period during the months of January 2014 and February 2014 and each session was approximately 45 minutes.

The dialogue was recorded using a tape recorder and the recording app on an IPAD. Additionally, I maintained a journal in which I recorded responses from the participants that needed further clarification. The journal also allowed me to consider questions to be asked in subsequent interviews. Following each interview, I listened to the recording of the interview and with the questions noted in my journal, I was able to ask clarifying questions in subsequent interviews.

The questions below guided the interviews, and additional questions were posed in response to the participants' comments.

### **Interview 1 – Becoming Acquainted:**

1. Describe your professional background, including the preparation that you have had for your role as principal.
2. Were you working in an Education Transformation Office school prior to your appointment? Please explain.
3. Did your training adequately prepare you for your position? Please explain.
4. Were you a Project Lead Strong participant prior to your appointment? If so, did your participation in the program prepare you for your position? Please explain.
5. Describe your school, including the students and staff.
6. What were your first impressions of your school?
7. Tell me a story about one of your first experiences at the school?
8. What do you wish you had known before moving into your position? How would this have helped you?

### **Interview 2 – The First Year:**

1. What challenges did you encounter as a first-year principal at this time?
2. How did you respond to the challenges?
3. What opportunities did you encounter as a first-year principal?
4. How did you respond to those opportunities?
5. Looking back, would you change your response to the challenges/opportunities? If so, how and why?
6. What supports did you receive during your first year? From whom did you receive support?
7. What kinds of supports do you wish you had received during your first year? Please explain.
8. Tell me a story from your first year as principal. Make it a story that captures what that year was like for you.
9. What is your advice for novice principals?
10. What is your advice for the supervisors of novice principals?

### **Interview 3 – Looking Back and Looking Ahead:**

1. As you look back on your first year, what stands out for you?
2. Has your leadership practice changed since your first year? In what ways?
3. How do you account for the changes you have made?
4. What are your short-and long term goals for the school as you look ahead?
5. What kinds of support are you receiving from the district this year?
6. What support do you need moving forward to be successful in meeting your goals for the school?
7. What do you wish district administrators understood about your school?
8. Tell me a success story about you and your school.
9. Tell me about a disappointment you have experienced this year.
10. What do you think new principals at schools like yours need to know and do to have success?

It was important to minimize the unequal power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee so that the participants were comfortable about expressing their perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The unequal power dynamic posed the greatest challenge because of my supervisory relationship with these principals. It was important to ensure that when interviewing the principals, or when interpreting and reporting the data, I remained conscious of any biases and experiences that I was bringing to this qualitative study. This concept of reflexivity was important as I positioned myself in the writing, recognizing how my experiences would have potentially shaped the findings, interpretations and conclusions. Minimizing unequal power was also vital in the interview process. It was important to allow the participants to be free to express their views. Several strategies were employed to ensure their freedom and comfort during the process.

For example, when it was foreseen that a question would be asked that the participants would be hesitant to answer, or when I perceived that they were hesitant to respond to a question, they were immediately reminded that I was merely the researcher and their responses were confidential. I constantly reminded them that their identity would not be divulged or connected in any way to their responses. Additionally, prior to their consent to participate in the study, they were given the consent letter that clearly stated that all identifiers would be removed during transcription and the tape erased following transcription. These guidelines have been carefully followed and I have been extra careful to ensure that all identifiers have been removed when writing the findings of this study. It is also important to note here that the positive rapport that had already been established with the participants seemed to have created a welcoming, non-threatening environment at each interview session.

### **Analysis of Data**

The stories of the participants and the commonalities that existed between them were captured and narrated in response to the two major research questions. After the interviews were transcribed, each interview was read several times to allow me to be immersed in the story of each novice principal. During the reading of each interview, partial sentences or phrases of interest were highlighted and notes were written in the margins of each transcript identifying ideas or insights that were beginning to emerge from the data. Three tables were then utilized to condense and analyze the data before beginning to narrate the perspectives of the novices. A sample page from each table is represented in Table C.

Table C-1 grouped the responses for each participant by the interview questions. For example, this table listed the interview questions on the left with columns labeled

with the names of the participants across the top (Table C-1). The responses of each participant to the interview questions were placed in the various columns. Many of the responses were paraphrased but care was taken to ensure that the participants' intended meaning was accurately conveyed. As needed, direct quotations from their responses were also recorded in the table. Table C-2 then noted the responses of each participant as it related to the two major research questions. As questions and responses to similar topics were combined and labeled, this table identified the inferred themes that emerged from each participant (Table C-2). The responses that were not able to be combined and did not relate to the major research questions were still coded and later discarded if they did not address the research questions. While Tables C-1 and C-2 analyzed the data by participant, Table C-3 identified, combined and labeled the common themes that emerged across all three participants (Table C-3). The process of identifying and combining the themes across the participants was repeated, further condensing and analyzing the data. Following this analysis, the two major research questions of the study were answered in a narrative that best reflected the perspectives of the three novice principals.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

As an administrative director in the Education Transformation Office, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, I currently lead the work of improving student achievement in its 68 elementary and K-8 schools. My work has afforded me the opportunity to focus on improving teacher quality, increase the capacity of instructional leaders, and expand services for students while increasing parent and community involvement. As I work in these schools, I have had the opportunity to encourage collaborative leadership while implementing strategies to foster initiatives of change. Additionally, my work continues

to afford me the opportunity to speak on behalf of students who have been subjected to practices that are not in their best interest and assist teachers who do not expect much from them. Creating a vision for student success, I continually strive to give voice to their plight, while coordinating programs that support and enhance their achievement. Working with a team of instructional supervisors and curriculum support specialists, I strive daily to redefine and support the delivery of instruction in the classrooms while seeking to address the inequities and debilitating practices that have previously defined these schools. It is my belief that an improvement in the quality of education will serve as a catalyst to break the cycle of poverty, inequity and low achievement.

Based on my position as an administrative director in the Education Transformation Office and seven years of experience as a principal, I am aware of the biases, values and experiences that I bring to this study. Throughout the data collection process I was aware of my thoughts, emotions or reactions to the responses of the participants. I constantly sought clarification from the participants on their responses, pressing them for details so that I did use my own experiences and knowledge to provide meaning to their responses. It should also be noted that since the interviewing of these participants can pose some challenges due to my experience and supervisory relationship, care was taken to ensure that the phrasing of the interview questions would not coerce participants to respond in particular ways. Additionally, so as not to impede my ability to tell their story, I remained mindful to use their words and experiences when writing the narrative. It was important to gain their perspectives and identify their challenges and needs. This study hopes to provide a deeper insight into what was needed to improve the practice of novice principals and increase student

achievement while creating sustainable school transformation in high-poverty, low-performing schools.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

The accountability movement in our nation has placed increasing pressure on schools and school districts to perform. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), based on the assumptions that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals would improve individual outcomes in education, required states to assess students' basic skills annually. According to NCLB, the scores from these assessments determined whether the school had taught the students well (Gardiner, Canfield- Davis, & Anderson, 2009; U. S. Department of Education, 2004). If the required standards or improvements were not achieved, decreased funding, the stigma of failure, and other punishments were meted out. In light of NCLB expectations, it became incumbent on school districts, schools and their leaders to ensure that students are learning and performing to a high standard.

While much has been done to address school improvement and student achievement, many schools are still not performing to the high standards that are required. School districts continue to implement initiatives in the hopes of changing the trajectory of achievement. Their initiatives include innovative instructional strategies and interventions, demotions of administrators, school closings, opening of charter schools, and traditional approaches to professional development for teachers and administrators.

School principals are not only the facilitators of many of these initiatives, but their role as instructional leaders is pivotal to school improvement efforts. They play a key role in fostering the achievement of students, but face the unrealistic expectations of the public and the ever increasing standards and scrutiny of the federal government, state

and district educational systems. While it is easy to look at the school's data and judge the effectiveness of the principal, it is vital that district administrators and other educators are able to see the faces, lives, and stories behind the data. It is important to recognize that schools not only operate in different contexts but the needs of the leaders in high-poverty, low-performing schools are unique.

In 2009, the Education Transformation Office was created to improve teaching and learning in persistently low-performing schools in Miami-Dade County. Servicing poor, disenfranchised Black and Hispanic students, the Education Transformation Office utilized a unique instructional framework of support to its schools with a coherent, aligned and well-defined plan to improve teacher quality, develop instructional leaders, expand wraparound services for students and increase parent and community involvement (Education Transformation Office, 2013). Despite their well-defined plan of support, sustained student achievement remains a challenge. As a result, it is necessary to delve deeper into the practices and needs of the leaders of these high-poverty, low-performing schools and gain a better understanding of the challenges they face.

This study examined the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they have encountered in leading high-poverty, low-performing schools and the support that they perceived they needed to address the challenges. The following questions guided the study: (1) What are the challenges experienced by novice elementary principals who lead high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools? (2) What support do novice elementary principals believe they need to address these challenges? Interviews were conducted with three novice principals of high-poverty,

low-performing schools in Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the data was analyzed. I begin my discussion of the findings by introducing the three principals and their priorities for their schools.

### **The Novice Principals**

As an administrative director in the Education Transformation Office, I was fortunate to witness the initial appointment of the novices to the principalship. Even though their schools were designated as low-performing on the State of Florida's grading system, they were determined to create positive opportunities for their students. I was honored to listen to their stories and sense the drumbeats of passion echoing through their efforts to be advocates for their students and parents. As we discussed their journey, we celebrated their triumphs while acknowledging the disappointments and fears that resonated deeply throughout many of their stories. It was evident though, that their vision for their schools was indelible in their minds and sustained their efforts despite resistance, fears and unrealistic expectations. They were determined that their students not be "forgotten little children who just needed to be pitied" and their schools would once again be considered "great" (P2). They recognized their role in providing a quality education and a plethora of positive experiences and opportunities for their staff, students and parents.

#### **Principal One (P1)**

P1 was very "excited" to be appointed as the principal of an elementary school and recognized the potential of the school and staff. She believed the school was a "gold mine" (P1). It was her priority to nurture the teachers, motivate the students and set positive expectations. She did not consider herself a "dictator" but believed that "teamwork and collaboration" were going to be vital to the school's success. Realizing

that the school did not have efficient management systems or structures in place when she arrived, she knew that she was facing many challenges. After working to put structures and systems in place and to refocus the instructional practice of her teachers, she was devastated at the end of the school year when the school received a failing grade from the State of Florida.

### **Principal Two (P2)**

The “amazing” pride that P2 had for her school was evident in all of our conversations. She was well acquainted with the “rich history” of the school but realized that many people in Miami-Dade County did not know of the school. Therefore, she decided that it was important to begin an aggressive “PR campaign.” Her school was positively featured on the news, in newspapers and she was also featured in several articles. P2 was also committed to “making the best instructional decisions” for her school, and was determined to educate her students as well as their parents. She believed that “minority children would have better opportunities if their parents were educated.” As a result, she created various opportunities to educate the parents and make them partners in the work of the school. It was important to her that the parents “trusted her” as the leader of the school and were knowledgeable about various aspects of their child’s education.

P2’s overarching priority, however, was to change the grade of the school because even though she knew the positive work that was being done at the school could not be measured on the “state’s report card,” she believed that the “perception of everybody around the state” was that her school was failing. She worked diligently to change the trajectory of student achievement but despite her efforts and those of her staff, it was disappointing to her and the faculty that the school received the F grade

from the State of Florida. With determination, she emphatically stated in response to the grade, “It [the school] doesn’t look like an F, it doesn’t feel like an F, and we won’t allow it to be an F again.”

### **Principal Three (P3)**

P3 believed that student “discipline” was the first thing that a school should have. She commented, “If they cannot sit still or if they’re trying to fight each other or curse at each other, they cannot learn.” She made it her priority to establish discipline in her school by creating rules and expectations for the students, teachers and parents. She also worked to develop their trust, especially after she experienced severe opposition to her changes in the routines and procedures of the school. It was important to her to demonstrate to the teachers and parents that the decisions that she was making were in the best interest of the students. She also expressed her determination to change the failing grade of the school.

### **The Challenges of Novice Principals**

As their stories unfolded, it was evident that the principals had pride in their accomplishments, experienced disappointments in failed initiatives, and maintained clear priorities as a compass for their leadership. An analysis of the data revealed four main challenges to their work as novice principals: resistance from key stakeholders, building partnerships with key stakeholders, having trust in district leaders, and the mentorship vacuum.

### **Resistance from Key Stakeholders: Teachers, Parents and Students**

“You had these moments that were just the worst days of your life . . . because it was just one fight after another . . . I just had to fight so many people” (P3). The words of P3 are indicative of the opposition that the novice principals faced to their vision and

expectations. Their efforts to disrupt the status quo of chaotic structures and routines, ineffective instructional practices that were fostering low performance, and abysmal test scores were met with opposition from teachers, parents and students. While the teachers boldly challenged the new instructional expectations, some of the parents were opposed to the change in administration, and the accompanying changes in the “routines of the school” (P1). Additionally, P1 described the students as blatantly opposing academic and behavioral expectations. She viewed the students as disruptive in the classrooms, confrontational with adults, and resistant to school rules and routines.

**Teacher resistance.** The novice principals were previously trained curriculum leaders, and understood the instructional practices that were necessary to increase student achievement. For example, as a result of P1’s experiences with curriculum and pedagogy, she was confident that the curriculum framework and structures she was implementing were necessary and would yield positive results.

P1 claimed that the teachers were unwilling to “change their teaching practices” and responded negatively to her expectations for increased rigor in instruction. She was confronted with numerous complaints, high levels of absenteeism, and teachers requesting transfers out of the school. She was “devastated” by their actions, especially since she knew the teachers’ potential. She recounted the many times she went home and cried to her husband. In fact, on one occasion she told him that she was unable to continue being a principal. Her husband, while being supportive, firmly responded, “Yes you can, you’ve been sent to this school, this is what you’re all about; toughen up – you’re a leader. You will turn that school around, give yourself time.”

Prior to becoming a principal, P3 was also a Reading Coach. She was confident in her ability to disaggregate the school's data and make the necessary instructional changes to focus instruction and increase student achievement. Based on her knowledge and expertise, she believed that disrupting ineffective instructional practices was necessary. P3 candidly stated, "I was exhausted . . . getting so overwhelmed with things that I thought I had to take care of all the time." Her exhaustion stemmed from the many teachers that were "vocally resistant and negative." Many indicated that they were not going to be compliant with any task she requested if "it were not in their contract." Their resistance to her requests often left her feeling "personally attacked," especially after a teacher threatened her family following an unpleasant exchange. She was also "frustrated" as she observed some of her teachers focus only on students they thought were going to be successful. The students who were having difficulty grasping the concepts seemed to be invisible. The teachers failed to recognize that many of these students had entered the school with limited background knowledge and vocabulary and were deficient in the skills needed to master the grade level curriculum. As a result, they were struggling and failing. P3 was aware that the status quo of low expectations was breaking the spirits of the children and "devaluing" their existence. It was important to her that the teachers valued differentiated instruction and "reignited the confidence" of the students. She found her teachers' inability to reflect on their practice and make the necessary changes alarming, and she was determined to disrupt their cycle of "ineffective teaching practices." She considered their tirade of complaints – too much paperwork, too many administrative mandates, too many disruptive students – not in the best interest of the achievement of the students. She stated, "I was exhausted in

trying to explain the reasons why I wanted something done. Every time I made a decision for something to be done, it was constantly them coming to me, asking why it had to be done that way . . . I had to constantly justify or prove myself at every turn” (P3).

Despite the resistance from the teachers, the principals worked every day to inject effective strategies into anemic instructional programs. They remained consistent in their expectations and efforts to redirect the trajectory of poor teaching and student achievement. Despite the resistance, P1 knew it was important to nurture the teachers and assist them in realizing high expectations for every student. She nurtured her teachers by demonstrating to them that she believed in their potential and encouraged their collaboration on various decisions that needed to be made. She reported saying to them, “You’re not just a classroom teacher, you are a leader of the building . . . look for your strength, and turn that strength into your leadership quality.” It was important for P1 to give her teachers a voice and allow them to work with her to find solutions to the challenges. Following each meeting, many of their ideas were implemented and the resistance began to be diffused. P1 reported that she now has a connection with her teachers and they are “happy.”

P3 noted that the walls of resistance began to break down when the teachers realized that the achievement levels of their students were “going up.” She explained that teachers began to understand that since the new instructional strategies seemed to be working, they needed to “move forward.” P3 stated that it was a “nice change . . . I don’t feel exhausted every day trying to explain myself or justify myself to anyone.”

**Parent resistance.** Parents were not only initially resistant to the new administrations but also to the accompanying changes in the routines at the schools. P3 vividly remembered that in her first few weeks her parents were “very, very upset” with the changes she was making and called the Parent Advocacy Office with complaints every day. After receiving numerous calls, the parent advocate advised P3 not to make as “many changes so quickly” and suggested she should “invite the parents in for tea.” However, P3 was not to be deterred, and in an effort to change the chaos and secure the building, she continued to make the changes she thought necessary. For example, P3 was stunned to observe a parent yell and curse at a second grader whom she believed had bothered her daughter. This further convinced P3 that the established routines that were in place for the arrival and dismissal of her students did not create a safe environment. She recalled thinking on her first day, “What is this? . . . Everybody’s coming in from everywhere, there’s no handle on who’s in the building, or where the students are going” (P3). She closed the gates, changed the entrance of the parents and no longer allowed them to roam the building after the arrival bell had sounded. This did not resonate well with the parents, and they responded by challenging other decisions she made. She stated, “I felt like I really had to be a tyrant to really try to get this school in order . . . everybody hated me” (P3).

P1 also experienced the anger and resistance of many parents and community leaders and believed that her ethnicity was the main cause for their resistance. The school was predominantly Black and she had a different background and was not raised in or lived in the community. Parents wrote letters to the State Attorneys’ office expressing dissatisfaction with her appointment and leadership, and she was faced with

many negative comments and blatant opposition to her work. Parents stated that since her background was different she could not have an understanding of the neighborhood and the people who lived there. P1 expressed that she did not allow the resistance to taint or diminish her passion for the work in the school. She cared about the students and the community and knew that she was an integral part of the change that had to be realized. She knew that not to follow through with her commitment would be to actively support and reproduce prejudicial actions. In fact, she boldly stated, “I don’t think color should ever be a factor and it was, and I think it still is and I think it always will be . . . I don’t focus on that – but on what I can do to improve the school and work with the kids . . . I am here for a purpose” (P1).

While P1 and P3 candidly expressed their challenges of resistance from the parents, P2 did not voice resistance from teachers or parents as one of her challenges. She seemed to have a different understanding and interpretation of the actions of her parents. She believed all of her families were “struggling” but they had “high hopes for the school . . . definitely for the children.” She believed it was her responsibility to educate children and to “educate her parents.” For example, she stated, “As a principal you find yourself sitting with a grandmother who now has two extra children and her food stamps were only supposed to be for her and now she has to feed two new children and she doesn’t have money for shoes and they need clothes. Tell that kind of parent that they need to do homework every night . . . that’s the work we do here” (P2). Her understanding of her parents and their struggles allowed her to find ways to work with them in spite of their resistance.

**Student Resistance.** “As administrators we must create more of a safe haven for these kids when they come here” (P1). Creating that safe haven with the students proved to be a challenge. The principals explained that initially the students did not recognize the school as a haven and seemed to “confront issues by fighting.” P1 described the students as confrontational, defiant and disrespectful to adults and to one another. She stated, “The kids believed they were in charge . . . they thought that they were in total control of the teachers, of security, of the staff. We had our hands full with the amount of problems that we had.” The students even knew how to use the school’s system to their advantage for they realized that if there were an infraction of the rules they would be suspended and sent home. Once home they would be allowed to play and ride their bikes around the neighborhood (P1).

The principals realized, however, that these students could no longer be subjected to the exclusionary practices of suspension that seemed to indicate that they did not have the intelligence, behavior or skills necessary to be successful in regular classrooms. For example, P1 remembered on her first day, walking the hallways and finding at least 24 students outside of their classrooms that were “kicked out because of their behavior.” She stated that the teachers were tired of the ongoing battles and wanted the students out of their classrooms. The principals knew that they had to work with teachers to change the inequities and low expectations that marginalized these students. Although challenging, the principals were determined to change the trajectory of student achievement while nurturing them to success.

The novices understood that it was important to work with the students. For example, P3 stated, “we need to mold them, remediate them – whatever issues this

child has, because we might end up encountering this child in the streets someday. So we've got to show them something different." As a result, she designed programs at the school that would encourage achievement and invested in incentives as rewards. For example, not only were students rewarded for being on the honor roll but even students who did not achieve the honor roll were rewarded for demonstrating progress.

Resistant teachers, parents and students were a significant challenge to the principals' vision of increased student achievement. These challenges of resistance from the stakeholders needed immediate attention for they threatened to derail student learning and erode the influence of the principals in the school and the community. The principals knew they were working with teachers to close the achievement gap, but also working to change the expectation gap. They also recognized that without effective instructional strategies, and a belief in the abilities of the students, it would be impossible to disrupt the trend of low-performance in their schools. It was also vital, according to the principals, that the parents and students understood the value of education and the importance of rules and routines in the learning process.

### **Building Partnerships with Key Stakeholders: Parents and Students**

"Knowing the parent, knowing the community, helped me better understand where my kids come from and what they deal with at home and how they're treated" (P1). The three principals acknowledged that if they were going to be successful in meeting the needs of their students, they had to make the necessary changes to create a climate where parents and students were valued, and respected. They recognized that the school could not work in isolation, but needed to build positive partnerships with parents and students. It was important to create "expectations for the students . . . and make parents accountable for their kids" (P1). With numerous obstacles facing these

students and their parents, educating and engaging them in the life of the school, while important, was challenging.

**Partnerships with parents.** The principals acknowledged the importance of developing partnerships with the parents but also recognized that the negativity of school site personnel to parent partnerships was also a challenge. P2 expressed that many school personnel viewed the parents' educational background and socioeconomic status negatively and did not give them an opportunity to be involved in the school. The parents in turn sensed the negativity and felt alienated, refusing to participate in an unwelcoming school environment. In fact, P3 explained that some school personnel believed that they should be the sole decision-makers about the child's education. This stance would make it difficult for parents to view the school-parent relationship as a workable partnership.

The principals recognized that the challenges they were experiencing in building positive partnerships were due to their lack of experience at "making connections" with parents. P1 realized that it would be challenging for her to build partnerships with parents since as an assistant principal she did not have many experiences "making connections." She realized that her community of parents was different from anything she had ever encountered and several incidents in the school's office brought further awareness to the challenges ahead of her. She recounted a parent becoming irate in the office because she believed that the school was not attending to her needs. She then threw her flip-flops across the office while expressing many demeaning expletives. P1 recalled another incident of a parent who came to the school to retrieve her blood pressure medicine from her child who had stolen it that morning. P1 explained that she

had never witnessed a parent react to a child in that manner. It was “very physically and verbally negative.” She recalls the parent asking her to turn around so that she would not witness what she was going to do to the child. The principal successfully encouraged the parent to leave the premises with the child, but the incident made her realize the challenges ahead of her to understand and build positive partnerships with her parents and students.

P2 acknowledged that the school could be an “intimidating place for parents” since everyone in the school had at least one or more degrees, and many parents were illiterate or did not have a high school diploma. As a result, they were often unable to speak knowledgably with teachers and be effective advocates on behalf of their children. It was also evident to P2 that the “priorities” of the parents were different from the priorities of the school. She recounted the experiences of picture day at her school. In most elementary schools, this event is a “huge fundraiser” while in P2’s school she did not make much money the first year. She then decided that she would allow the students to take the pictures dressed in their own clothes and not in their school uniforms. The money that was made on picture day that year was “unbelievable.” The students were dressed from their “heads to their toes” with new clothes and new shoes. She reported that to the parents, “showing off and strutting with style” was important and even though they had “high hopes” for their children, education was not their priority.

P3 also reiterated the challenge of understanding parents and building positive partnerships with them. Through an unfortunate incident at the beginning of her appointment to the school, she recognized that every community was “unique” and

building partnerships with the parents would be challenging. She recounted noticing a student with a hole in her shirt and flip-flop sandals on her feet. Thinking that the family needed assistance, she approached the parent and offered assistance. The parent was extremely offended by the offer and instead of the gesture being seen as a positive one for both the principal and the parent, it became a negative experience for both. She realized that it was very important to know and understand the parents in order to build positive partnerships with them.

P3 also realized that sometimes it took the efforts of another parent to assist in the building of a positive principal-parent relationship. She had a parent in her school who volunteered for many years, lived in the community and was acquainted with many of the parents. P3 recognized that while this parent was volunteering in the school, he was probably taking the opportunity to observe her actions and interactions with the students. She thinks that he was observing how challenging her relationship with the parents was becoming but also noted how dedicated she was to the students and their achievements. P3 then observed him quietly having informal conversations with the parents and diffusing many situations for her. While P3 acknowledged that initially she may have caused some friction among the staff and parents, the assistance and influence of the volunteer parent enabled her to build positive partnerships with the parents.

As previously stated, it was evident that P2 understood the challenges that her parents faced and was a strong proponent of the importance of educating the parents. In an effort to encourage parental engagement, she planned many events for the parents at her school. Initially, the events were not well attended, but she kept working

to establish many more opportunities for engagement and conversation. She believed that it was important for her to be “present” for her parents and took “every parent conference that came in the door.” In fact, she laughed when she recalled the numerous conferences she held the previous year. Drawing on her own experiences, she was open and honest with the parents when she spoke. She would say, “If you want to change the trajectory of your family, trust me and let’s do this work together because you can change the way your family looks, lives, eats . . . you can change opportunities . . . it can happen that quickly with education.” However, because of the “investments” she made at that time, she does not have “nearly the amount of conferences” she had in the previous year, and her parents are expressing “trust” in her leadership.

**Partnerships with students.** Building positive relationship with the students amidst their defiance of authority and confrontational attitudes was a challenge. The principals realized, however, that it was important to understand their lives and develop positive relationships with them. The principals recognized that many of the students were poor and disenfranchised, lived in foster homes or at homeless shelters, and many were in open cases with the Department of Children and Families. Additionally, these students were forced to survive in neighborhoods where drug dealers carted their wares openly on streets, where gangs and violence existed and false accusations of who they were as minority children “threatened their existence” (P2). P2 noted that the students led lives that were “complex” with “things going on in their households.” She stated, “It’s hard for education to be a priority if your mom just dropped you off at your grandma’s house and she hasn’t come back home . . . and it’s been two months.”

The principals remained determined to build positive relationships with students in order to communicate to them that their lives were “valuable”. They realized that no matter how daunting the challenge to build their confidence and change their negative behaviors, it was important to mold and remediate the students so they would ultimately be productive citizens not only of the school but of society. They were aware that these students could no longer be subjected to the exclusionary practices of suspension. Such practices were a Band-Aid on underlying issues and seemed to indicate that the students did not have the intelligence, behavior or skills necessary to be successful in regular classrooms. They no longer wanted their academic disengagement to be viewed as disruptive or defiant. Although challenging, the principals were determined to change the path of student achievement while nurturing them towards success.

The principals also recognized that if the students were to become partners with them in their learning, they had to have a voice. For example, P1 realized that while their underachievement continued to be a topic of conversation and an increasing challenge, their perspectives often remained unsolicited. She believed that if the students were to become “responsible for their learning” it would be pivotal to the school’s transformation. Therefore, before the school’s revised behavior plan was implemented, she met with every classroom of students, and explained the new routines for arrival and dismissal. She also explained the school’s expectations for positive behavior as well as the incentives. The students were allowed to ask questions and express their apprehensions regarding the changes. Additionally, P1 explained that it was just as important to rebuild their confidence. She stated, “Every day we tell them how much we love them; you can do it, we believe in you.” She further stated that

when you show that type of interest in the students, they respond and “show that same type of attention back.”

While the novice principals experienced many challenges in building partnerships with parents and students, they knew that once the partnership was developed it was an important milestone on the journey to increased student achievement. P1 stated that “once you get parents on your side and they understood what you were all about, they would support you”. As a result, they continued working diligently to build relationships and passionately advocate on behalf of the parents and students.

### **Trusting District Leaders**

There are enough people vying for my job that if I mess up at the wrong point there are people who are ready . . . piranhas in the water, vultures waiting on you . . . some people wait until you die, but vultures have really gotten quite bold in these last days, so they’ll come and pick on you even when you’re not dead, even when you’re down. You kind of feel that nipping (P2).

These were tough words from P2, but threaded throughout the conversations with the principals was the fear of being “replaced” and “losing their jobs” (P2). It was perceived by these principals, that there were people in power who determined their fate, and it was beyond their control to change the decisions. It was their perception that negative comments or parent complaints would be enough to get them replaced.

There were several factors that contributed to this fear and insecurity, including the limited number of schools in the district and the eligible candidates who had completed the preparation programs and had not yet been assigned to an administrative position. The pool of assistant principals was large and the available positions few. In fact, the district temporarily discontinued the Assistant Principal Preparation Program (AP3) and redesigned the Project Lead Strong program because

of the numerous candidates to be placed. As a result, this contributed to the fear of the novices that there were many persons waiting and they could easily be “replaced.” Additionally, in prior years, there were demotions of principals and assistant principals, even within the Education Transformation Office, and the reasons for the demotions remained a mystery to the novices. Throughout our conversations, it was obvious that there was some discomfort when I asked questions regarding the support they received from their supervisors. I continually had to remind the participants that I was simply the researcher collecting the facts, and their identities would be completely anonymous.

The fear that these principals were experiencing seemed to make it difficult for them to remain confident and make the tough decisions that the position required. One of the principals expressed how debilitating the fear was among novice principals. P2 stated how “uncomfortable” it was to do the job in so much fear and thought that “principals would produce so much more if they were not afraid of losing their jobs.” This fear also limited the questions they would ask or answer during the principal’s meetings and in other arenas. They perceived that asking certain questions would lead others to believe that they were “not smart or suited for the job” (P2). Also, asking questions of supervisors could expose the supervisor’s lack of expertise. P2 stated, “Some supervisors don’t teach because they don’t know. So when you ask those questions then it seems like you’re trying to expose their vulnerability. So rather than be vulnerable – you become prey.” As a result, their questions and contributions to the discussions became guarded.

The novice principals also perceived that if their thoughts were different from those of the facilitators at meetings, someone might conclude that they were not team

players. They believed that the leaders did not really want to hear honest opinions, and these principals were not willing to risk the embarrassment. It was stated that they had seen principals “publicly embarrassed at meetings and no one wanted to be that person.” P2 recounted the “embarrassment” that many novice principals could experience if they asked a question. She stated that other principals would look at them as if to say, “Are you an idiot? Did you not see that?” As a result, the novice principals were “quiet” at meetings, perceiving that questioning the district leaders could be costly; expressing divergent perspectives could be interpreted as negativity and a possible reason for demotion.

The principals all found support networks where they felt safe receiving the assistance they needed. Their networks consisted of principals who were appointed to their positions at the same time or principals with whom they had previous relationships. In these networks there was trust; questions were not judged negatively, and the principals could be “vulnerable,” revealing their strengths and weaknesses. In that circle they could ask the “dumbest questions” and no one would care (P2). Together they worked to help each other master the requirements of the job hidden from the eyes of those in authority and their agendas. P2 stated, “We all know what we all don’t know and we’re all ok with what we don’t know; we are going to help each other get through it.”

### **Mentorship Vacuum**

It was indeed evident that the three novice principals lacked expertise in various aspects of the job even though they were academically qualified and prepared for their positions as principals. On review of their academic preparation for the job, two of the three principals were education majors and one principal, although not an education

major had certification in teaching and administration. Additionally, the novices either previously participated in the District's principal preparation programs such as the Project Lead Strong Program or participated in the Assistant Principal's Preparation Program (AP3). One principal did not participate in either of the preparation programs but believed that the various positions she held prior to becoming a principal, prepared her for the principalship. All three principals were assistant principals prior to their appointment and credited their leadership preparations not only to their prior experiences but to the different principals they assisted. Explained P3, "I was prepared for what it means to be a principal because of the school I was coming from, the principal, just learning from her . . . that got me ready more than anything else." The general consensus among the principals, however, was that there was no program that could give you "everything you needed to be a principal" (P2). As a result, they recognized that they needed a lot of help in their new positions.

It was evident that as assistant principals they were mentored by the principals they assisted. However, as principals it was challenging to access information and have questions answered as they related to the operation of their schools. There was not a formal vehicle or clearly defined pathway to receive mentorship specific to their needs after they became principals – a time when they perhaps needed the most support and assistance. One principal was assigned a mentor by the school district and that was extremely helpful for her; another was assigned a mentor who called one time to introduce herself but did not reach out to her after that initial call. The third principal in the study was not assigned a mentor and had to seek her own mentoring relationships.

The principals faced challenging experiences that they were not prepared to handle independently. These experiences often left them “overwhelmed and scared” (P2). They explained that even though they believed themselves to be prepared and were “confident” that they were ready for the principalship, they often “panicked” over the things they did not know and were “overwhelmed” with things they had to do. P2, who was not assigned a mentor, recounted her experience immediately after she was appointed. She stated that the former principal handed over the keys to the school stating, “Congratulations! It’s the summer, school starts in six weeks, you have no instructional coaches, you’re short ten teachers, you have no doors, there are no lights, this is a failing school, – have a great day” (P2). For her it was a very “scary” time and she felt “very alone.” She stated that during that time, she had to rely on what was “inside of her” – her leadership and passion, as well as the relationships she had previously developed with other principals.

While it was beneficial for the purposes of the study to identify the challenges that the three principals encountered, it is also vital that the reader is aware that these principals did not allow the challenges to negatively impact their leadership, vision and passion. Even though they were “exhausted,” “scared” and “overwhelmed” at times, they moved forward to change the trajectory of student achievement. The principals continued to explore effective leadership strategies to combat the resistance they experienced from teachers, parents and students. They worked strategically to encourage parent and student engagement and to build positive partnerships. While it seemed that the perceptions of those in authority were at times negative, the principals continued to work with their supervisors and peers to find solutions to positively impact

the instructional programs at their schools. It was also evident that without a system of mentorship, developing expertise in various areas was still a challenge. In this study, the principals were able to express the type of support that they needed to be successful.

### **The Support Needed by Novice Principals**

While an analysis of the value of the preparation programs of Miami Dade County Public Schools is beyond the scope of this study, the principals all agreed that even after participating in the preparation programs and assisting veteran principals, they were unprepared for various aspects of the job. The principals explained that after they became principals, it would be helpful to have a vehicle in place to enable them to address aspects of the work where they lacked expertise. When reflecting on the support that they needed as novice principals, they all expressed that the curriculum support they received through the Education Transformation Office was exceptional. Coupled with their “curriculum sense” (P2), they did not have a need for additional curriculum support. However, the operational aspects of the job were where they believed they lacked expertise and needed further support from mentors. For example, P3 stated that every time something happened operationally, she “didn’t know how to handle it or what to do.” Further, all three principals acknowledged that “if you don’t have the operations, it makes it very difficult to efficiently lead a school to success” (P1). P1 further explained that every job she had prior to becoming a principal had always been “curriculum-driven,” and she admitted to spending many sleepless nights when she became a principal, “trying to figure out” the operational aspects of the job. P1 further noted that she would have benefitted from more training “operational-wise” in the principal preparation programs. To the novice principals, being “operational wise”

referred to the ability to develop a good management system, efficiently scheduling and managing teachers, security, custodial and cafeteria staff, and “understanding and working” with the budget.

The three principals reported that they were least prepared in the area of school budget. While there were sessions in the principal preparation program designed to review the budget, the principals described that training as a “generic” approach to budget. They considered the training ineffective since the “elementary school budget looks vastly different from a secondary school’s budget” (P2). As a result, when they became principals, they did not have an understanding of “how the budget worked or how it was connected with the total school program” (P2). P2 stated that the school district should “invest more time in training principals on the school’s budget” because initially she was “scared of money.” P1 expressed her budgetary frustrations and wanted more support, specifically on using the school’s money to invest in the various programs. She stated, “I get so flustered with just looking at the report and not knowing how to decipher it.” P3 referred to herself as “clueless” in the areas of budget and personnel. In fact, she stated that she had to hire a treasurer from another school to teach her – “she would teach me . . . imagine a treasurer from another school teaching a principal what to do.”

Personnel management was another area in which the three principals struggled and needed support. P2, for example, would have benefited from additional support when she had to dismiss nine people from her building during her first year. She stated that as an Assistant Principal, she did not receive sufficient training in the area of administrative reviews and writing attendance directives, so the process was

challenging for her and she needed assistance. P1 also recounted a situation during the previous year when she had to non-reappoint a teacher because of ethical concerns. She did not know the process and wished that she could have received “more support and training in how to handle personnel situations” prior to becoming a principal. P3 was also faced with challenging personnel situations and was “uncomfortable” with her lack of knowledge and expertise in this area.

Without expertise in the areas of budget and personnel, the novice principals were “frustrated” “uncomfortable” and “scared.” The mentorship vacuum, previously identified in this chapter, continued to challenge their ability to develop professionally and address the areas in which they were deficient. The three principals expressed the need for the school district to “embrace” the mentoring of novice principals. As P2 stated, “You really need people who you can talk to.” Based on their responses, three kinds of mentorship were identified: collegial mentorship, collaborative mentorship and silent mentorship.

### **Collegial Mentorship**

Collegial mentorship refers to the mentorship and support that novice principals need from colleagues such as district leaders, and experienced principals. The novices viewed these colleagues as experts in various aspects of the work and considered their expertise vital to their ongoing professional growth and support. Although P3 hoped to find one veteran principal or district leader with expertise in all aspects of the work, the novices recognized that district leaders and expert principals had different areas of expertise.

**District directors.** It is important to reiterate that the three novice principals were complimentary of the support that they received from the directors in the Education

Transformation Office. P1 stated, “I can say there was never a lack of support . . . I am able to tackle a lot of things because of the support from ETO.” However, they initially considered district directors an “intimidating group of people” and noted that it was difficult to be “vulnerable” with them. However, as the principal-director relationship was nurtured, they found that the directors were responsive to their needs. P2 recounted an emergency situation at her school and she called her ETO director for support. The director’s immediate response was “I’ll be there.” She arrived soon after and provided much needed assistance.

Even though the principals acknowledged that the district leaders were responsive, they stated that they had to request their assistance. They expressed that since novice principals “did not know what they did not know” (P3) they wished that directors would “call and check” on them on a regular basis. Since the first year was so overwhelming, it was important to the novice principals that their directors made contact with them to find out what support was needed. P3 appreciated her ETO director checking on her in her first year. She explained that her director knew she was a “rookie principal” and would visit the school or call to offer assistance. “Every time he would come he would say, ‘Let’s sit down; do you need any help?’” (P3). For example, when she would express to the director that she needed assistance with the budget, he stayed with her and assisted her. When she needed assistance with a parent, the director would set up a meeting. She further explained that since she is no longer considered a “rookie” principal, it is different. “I know that the people are there and that they’ll be there for me if I call them, but it’s different when somebody’s calling you asking, ‘What’s going on? Is everything ok?’” (P3).

The three principals also commented on key qualities of effective directors. They viewed these qualities as vital for a mentoring relationship. P3, for example, indicated that she wanted directors who were “approachable” and “reassuring” and kept in confidence concerns or issues that were shared. For example, P3 recalled that her director handled situations for her and it was great. She recalled his reassuring presence when he would visit her school and say to her, “Don’t worry about it; I’ll take care of it.” She admits that she is not aware of whether she “bogged him down” but he always made himself available.

P3 also expressed that district directors should be emotionally supportive, always assuring novice principals that “everything was going to be ok.” P3 thought that to be supportive meant that the district director was not going to make her feel that she was “dumb” or “judge” her. She did not want to be made to feel that she was “being watched” or that the district director was “out to get her.” Since these principals worked with the fear and insecurity that they could not ask questions without being judged negatively, it was important to them to have supportive directors. They had witnessed other principals publicly “called out for not having their work together and not knowing something”. It was important to have district directors who “wanted to see them succeed in the position” (P2).

P2 wanted a “teaching” director and recounted an experience with one of her ETO directors who she valued and considered a “teaching” director. She vividly remembered the director arranging for the district budget analyst to meet with her at the school to assist with balancing the school’s budget. She considered the experience “priceless.” Additionally, P2 was impressed with the district director since she

“intimately” knew her school and was willing to “tailor” the support to her needs. P2 added that in her first year, she worked with one director for all operational aspects of the job and another for curriculum issues. This model of support worked for her because the two directors knew her “more intimately.” She added that the present system, which divides various aspects of the work between four directors, does not “make sense” to her and is not “customer-friendly.”

The principals explained that it was vital that the district directors “remembered” what it was like to be a novice principal, – “worrying and thinking about hundreds of children, staff members, making the school grade . . .” It was important for them to remember. “Remembering is powerful” (P2). By this they meant district directors should not “compare a novice principal to their twenty years of work as principals” (P2). Instead, they needed to remember what their first year was like as beginning principals. By remembering the challenges and fears they experienced during their own first year, district directors would become more “sensitive” to the work of novice principals, and novice principals “would all be in a better position” and get the support they needed from district directors.

**Expert Principals.** While it was important for novice principals to have support from district directors, it was just as important to have the expertise from the “boots on the ground” (P2). Before being assigned a mentor, P1 recounted her experiences as “exhausting,” working late hours at her school to determine what she needed to do as a leader to “create change.” However, after she was assigned a mentor, the information she gleaned was of “great help” and addressed the specific needs of her school. After reaching out to the expert mentor principal and visiting her school, she stated that she

was able to see the “principalship and leadership from a whole different lens.” When speaking of her visit to the mentor’s school, she stated, “she’s a veteran principal and so the way she runs her building was very interesting to me . . . I saw her delegate a lot of things and empower others . . . she opened my eyes to what I thought I had to do.” P3 also indicated that the collegial mentorship of expert principals was powerful because they were “practicing principals” and knew “the tricks of the trade.” She thought that having an expert mentor principal was important, because she could get answers on issues that she did not want to “bother a director about.”

Although the ETO directors were “extremely supportive,” the novices expressed that they did not want to reach out to them for “minor things that did not affect the operation of the school as a whole” and preferred to reach out instead to expert principals who had already dealt with similar situations and could give a quick response. It was evident that the novice principals experienced fear and were cautious of calling the directors “too much.” They were therefore selective about the issues they brought to the attention of the directors, and those issues on which they received assistance from other principals. For example, P3 considered bullying and the budget as “big things” that should be brought to the attention of the director while they reached out for assistance with the “day to day operations” from other principals since “they [principals] knew exactly how to do it and could send what was needed right away” (P3). While they valued the expertise and timeliness of response from the other principals, they did not want to “bother” the director or to be perceived as “not knowing.”

The three principals recognized that while mentorship from expert principals was important, mentor principals should be selected based on their expertise. As a result, it

was possible that more than one mentor principal should be assigned to novice principals based on their expertise in the various aspects of the job. For example, P2 selected a mentor who was good at data and curriculum while another of her mentors was good at budget and personnel. She therefore reached out to principals who had the expertise in the areas of her need and thought that it was important “not to do the work without them.” Additionally, P2 sought out the advice of principals who were not in schools with a school grade similar to hers, and reached out to expert principals whose schools were demonstrating increased student achievement. Although she was leading an “F” school, P2 stated, “If I want to do ‘A’ school business, then I talk to ‘A’ school principals.”

The three principals were also emphatic that professional development from district personnel who have not worked as principals for many years tended to be more “theoretical” than “practical.” P1 perceived that while district directors were “knowledgeable,” practicing principals tended to be more realistic in their presentations since they were in the “trenches” and understood the job of the principal. She recounted a professional development session on budget the previous year that was facilitated by expert principals. She stated that the session was valuable because it was “led by principals and not by district personnel that have left the school site for so many years and are out of touch with what’s really going on.” She stated that she left the session “knowing exactly what to do.” Even in the training offered through the principal preparation programs, the principals expressed that the most “helpful” sessions were presented by principals who were practicing in the field. “When you are a principal you

need to talk to people who are principals . . . you can't just bring me in somebody . . . the credibility is gone" (P2).

### **Collaborative Mentorship**

Collaborative mentorship refers to the mentorship that novice principals receive from collaborating in a "trusting" environment with their peers. P2 stated that her collaborative group of principals "trusted" each other and were supportive of each other. She stated that "I know I can call that small group of people and not be judged for it. I'm going to be helped" (P2). For example, P1 spoke very highly of the Think Tank sessions that were implemented through the Education Transformation Office and wanted to have more opportunities for similar experiences. Those sessions, facilitated by expert principals, allowed expert and novice principals to collaborate as a community of learners and develop strategies that would foster change efforts in their schools. As stated by P1 when speaking of the Think Tank sessions, there is "open candid dialogue . . . everyone feels safe." In the Think Tank sessions, they not only discussed the theory behind the strategies but gained insights into strategies and practices that could be implemented in their schools. Since a distrust of some district leaders was one of the challenges expressed by the principals, it was important for them to find networking opportunities where their ideas and questions could be voiced and respected. In the Think Tank sessions, they were comfortable expressing their ideas, and sharing their practices without fear of being retaliated against or judged negatively for their ideas.

The support that came out of "collaborative mentorship" was also important for the emotional support that novice principals needed. P3, for example, stated that the relationships developed in "collaborative mentorship" were not really important for her success; however, they made her feel better about the challenges she faced. "I feel

that I am not alone because they're honest with me and they say that it happened to them too." The novices were adamant that more opportunities to network with each other should be fostered. Their advice to other novice principals was to "take the initiative," reach out to other principals, and develop a network in which they can be "vulnerable" and supported (P2).

### **Silent Mentorship**

Silent mentorship refers to the mentoring novice principals received by observing district supervisors. These "silent" mentors were not assigned and were often not even aware that they were mentors to novice principals. Nevertheless, their actions were being carefully observed by the principals and were used to chart their professional growth and career advancement. P2 stated, "There are people who don't know that they're mentoring me but I'm watching their every move. I'm watching because there's something so much in their leadership that I admire; there's something so much in how they've charted their course."

Silent mentorship was important to the novice principals because they wanted support and guidance in their career decisions. For example, P1 candidly stated that she wanted to be me (the researcher). She stated that she was watching me carefully and emulating some of my leadership traits. P2, although not naming her "silent" mentors, was aware of their journeys and carefully watching as they maneuvered through the "challenges of the bureaucracy." Even though she did not have an opportunity to speak "intimately" with them, she was cognizant of the obstacles that they overcame to attain and maintain their administrative positions. They were her "silent" mentors on her professional journey.

## Conclusion

“You do what you need to do because at the end of the day, every minute that passes, you’re losing time and the kids are losing out on something” (P1). Based on the findings, it is evident that the novice school principals were faced with daunting and unique challenges when leading high-poverty, low-performing schools. But they were determined to work diligently to increase student achievement. They were faced with resistance from teachers and parents as they worked to change entrenched routines and ineffective instructional practices. They were also challenged by the disruptive and confrontational behaviors of students, and realized that their students did not have a “voice” in their educational journey. Additionally, they recognized that their vision of increasing student achievement could not be accomplished without building positive partnerships with their parents and students. Not only was it important to educate the parents and make them advocates for their children, but it was vital that parents felt welcomed, and that they trusted their leadership.

The findings also indicate that the novice principals were fearful of being “embarrassed” by some district leaders or demoted from their positions. They perceived that there was “always someone waiting in the wings” for their jobs and they could easily be “replaced” (P2). Additionally, without a formal mentorship program, they found it challenging to receive support in the areas where they lacked expertise such as budget and personnel. Without the assistance of mentors and the demands of the job, they reported being “overwhelmed” and “frustrated.”

If novice principals are to be held accountable for student achievement, then the challenges expressed in this study must be addressed and support provided. The novices expressed not only how much they valued the knowledge of district directors

and their desire to glean from their experiences, but they also wanted the opportunity to network with other novice and expert principals. Based on the findings of the study, they considered the principals who were experts in various aspects of the work valuable to their professional growth. These expert principals helped them build their expertise and enhance career advancement. At the same time, they were able to be vulnerable as they collaborated with other principals. They wanted the school district to make it a priority to provide support to novice principals through collegial mentorship, collaborative mentorship and silent mentorship.

It is vital that district directors and expert principals, who have mastered the art of leadership and school transformation, be given an opportunity to mentor novice principals. Similarly, novice principals should be given the opportunity to collaborate and work alongside the experts, honing their leadership skills and developing their practice.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Across the nation, there have been many initiatives to transform low-performing schools and increase student achievement. Despite the investment made in innovative initiatives, significant gains in student achievement remain elusive. School leaders, the caretakers of school transformation, are at the center of these initiatives and are not only faced with the challenge of increasing the achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students, but must explore solutions to close the gaps of achievement and expectation.

While many middle class families across the nation are seemingly plummeting into poverty, many students in low-performing schools are living that life of poverty. Together with their parents, they exist in crime and drug-infested neighborhoods, imprisoned by the shackles and consequences of racism and poverty. They react negatively to an education system that is sometimes unable to cater to their needs or value their potential and often perceives them as intellectually deficient. Their perspectives on their learning are unsolicited, and their disruptive and confrontational behaviors are met with suspensions and expulsions.

There were moments in the history of America when reformers believed that education was the panacea for social problems, inequities and academic challenges (Fullan, 2009; Rury, 2009). Unfortunately, education has not always proven to be the answer, and is instead blamed for various social problems and the inability to close the achievement gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged (Levine, 2005). While schools have strengths that go unrecognized, the accountability movement, with its high-stakes tests, has exposed their weaknesses. Therefore, a strong, decisive and

immediate response that articulates a clear and focused plan is needed to increase student achievement and change the negative tide of public perception.

Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS), has framed his response through the efforts of the Education Transformation Office (ETO). With a mission of equity and increased student achievement, ETO has worked to address the needs of low-performing and fragile schools (Education Transformation Office, 2013). In spite of its efforts, sustained student achievement and transformation of all low-performing schools have not become a reality. Since the leadership of the principals in those schools was vital to their mission of school transformation, it was necessary to delve deeper into the challenges and needs of the leaders of these high-poverty, low-performing schools in Miami-Dade.

This study examined the perceptions of novice principals about the challenges they have encountered in leading their high-poverty, low-performing schools, and the support they perceived they needed to address these challenges. The following questions guided the study: (1) What are the perceived challenges experienced by novice elementary principals that lead high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools? (2) What support do novice elementary principals perceive they need to address these challenges? Three novice principals were selected to participate in the qualitative study and data were gathered from the three interviews that were conducted with each principal. While every effort was made to reassure the novice principals that I was acting as a researcher and would protect their anonymity, I was still their district supervisor. Even though I was confident that I had a positive relationship with each participant prior to beginning the study, it is possible that they may not have been as

candid in answering questions that related to the work of the directors of the Education Transformation Office. However, I do believe that sufficient data have been collected to give district leaders insight into the challenges of the novices and the kinds of support that should be provided to meet their needs. In fact, data analysis revealed four main challenges to their work: resistance from key stakeholders, building partnerships with key stakeholders, having trust in the district leaders and the existence of a mentorship vacuum.

Based on the findings of the study, the novice principals expressed the need for the school district to “embrace” the mentoring of principals through collegial, collaborative, and silent mentorship. Mentorship was important to the novices since it was recognized that even after they participated in principal preparation programs, they lacked expertise in various aspects of the job and needed support from district leaders and other principals to be successful. The insights of these novice principals will be used to address the support that is presently being provided to novice principals in Miami-Dade County Public Schools and in other urban school districts. It is hoped that the results of the study will also enhance the instructional practice of the novice principals, build their operational expertise and lead to increased student achievement.

### **Contributions to the Literature**

“In many ways the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school . . . It is his leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers and the degree of concern for what student may or may not become” (U. S. Congress, 1970, p. 56). Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that this perspective continues to ring true. The role of principals is indeed pivotal to the efforts of transformation (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010;

Fullan, 2007; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Levin, 2007; Salmonowicz, 2009; Salmonowicz & Levy, 2009; Theoharis, 2009).

The novice principals in this study stated that their schools were unique, and they faced challenges such as the resistance of teachers, parents and students; building partnership with parents and students; trust and confidence in district leaders and a mentorship vacuum. The challenges they expressed mirrored the findings of previous studies that identified the challenges experienced by novice principals. For example, this study identified the stress that novice principals faced as a result of school board and district directives, the requirements of new programs and initiatives and the possibility of being transferred, losing their jobs or having their schools taken over by the State Department of Education. Additionally, it was noted that the principals faced resistance to changing instructional practices and routines from teachers, students and parents. These findings were also identified in previously conducted studies. (Levine, 2005; Shipp & White, 2009; Stevenson, 2008).

Despite the resistance they faced, the principals recognized that it was important to nurture and collaborate with the teachers and build strong relations within the school if their vision of student achievement was to be realized (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Reitzug, West & Angel, 2008). Multiple researchers, (Beachum et al., 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008), have commented on the opportunities for school transformation when there is collaborative leadership as opposed to leadership that is hierarchical in nature. The novice principals in this study also recognized the importance of collaborative leadership and worked to encourage this collaboration among teachers and other stakeholders.

The three principals perceived that it was important but challenging to build partnerships with key stakeholders such as parents and students. It was also important to their work to have a deeper understanding of the communities they served and to foster strong relationships with stakeholders (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Khalifa, 2012). One of the principals was quite empathetic to the challenges of building a positive relationship with parents, and acknowledged that the school was an “intimidating place for parents” since everyone at the school had at least one or more degrees. While many parents had high hopes for the success of their children, their views on their role in the education of their children were different from those of the school. It was therefore important to the principals to make it a priority to develop a positive partnership with the parents, to create a welcoming environment and to educate them to be advocates for their children.

Novice principals reported that they were often appointed to their positions of principalship with limited prior experiences, and lacking expertise in various aspects of the work (Fullan, 2007; Levine, 2005; Spillane & Lee, 2013). While they thought they had a strong “curriculum-sense” (P2), they did not think of themselves as “operational-wise” (P1). As a result, they reported that the operational aspects of their jobs, such as managing the budget and personnel, were challenging (Spillane & Lee, 2013; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). They did not believe that they were well-prepared for managing these areas and even referred to themselves as “clueless” in the area of budget (P3). They noted that even though they participated in principal preparation programs, they did not find the programs adequate to address their specific needs and build their expertise (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010; Peterson, 1986). For example, in this study, P3

gave little credit to the Project Lead Strong program for giving her “any kind of real preparation to be a principal.” She thought she already knew the things that were presented in the program but nevertheless entered the principalship lacking expertise in other critical areas.

Based on the literature reviewed and the findings of this study, it is important to provide support to novice principals, beyond the district’s principal preparation programs. With the lack of a formal mentoring program after principals were appointed, their inability to perform certain tasks was evident. It is vital then that collegial, collaborative and silent mentorship programs are developed by school districts to provide much needed support. Additionally, the findings demonstrated that novice principals were intimidated by district directors and even “scared” to ask questions or express their ideas. It is therefore important to their success and professional growth that they are supported in their work and given opportunities to network and build relationships with district supervisors and other principals. Other researchers have stated that it is important for these principals to continue to challenge the status quo and build more collaborative conversations with district personnel if the diverse needs of students are to be met and increased student achievement is to become a reality (Fullan, 2006; Marzano, Waters & Mc Nulty, 2005; Mascall, 2008; The Wallace Foundation, 2012).

### **Implications for Practice**

This study will provide policy makers and district leaders a glimpse into the perspectives of the novice principals who lead high-poverty, low-performing schools. It will also encourage school districts to recognize the value of moving beyond the one-size-fits-all blanketed support that is currently offered to principals, to a more

differentiation of support, tailored to the diverse and complex contexts in which principals work. The study will increase awareness of the important role of school principals and other stakeholders in conversations about school transformation and educational change. The findings of this study will also be relevant to other urban districts that are exploring ways to enhance the leadership of novice principals amidst the demands of accountability, increased poverty and low-achievement.

The study conducted with three novice principals who lead high-poverty, low-performing schools, has made me aware of the challenges they face in increasing student achievement. I realized that there have been many mandates given to them both by the state, district and ETO, yet few district leaders have taken the time to listen to their needs and respond with consistent and ongoing support. While there are high expectations for their leadership, principal preparation programs have been inadequate and have not provided them with the expertise and knowledge needed to enhance their practice. District leaders continue to hand them the keys to their schools with well wishes but fail to adequately mentor them after they unlock the doors.

The implications of the study will be further articulated as they relate to district leaders, principals, students, and parents.

### **District Leaders**

District leaders have been perceived by novice principals as an “intimidating group of people” (P2). They were also perceived to be powerful, and the novices expressed that it was a “nerve-wracking” experience not knowing if they could be “vulnerable” and express their fears and needs (P2). Until a relationship was developed between them, the novice principals believed they could become the “prey” of district leaders (P2). Some district leaders were considered quick to “judge” (P3) and many

novice principals have been hesitant to voice their opinions. The fear of being considered an “idiot” or “not knowing” was often debilitating (P2). While they acknowledged that there were some district leaders who wanted to see their principals succeed, it was often difficult to identify the district leaders they could trust.

Based on the lack of trust of district leaders, the novice principals were guarded in their questions and made few contributions to discussions. They perceived that boundaries were silently placed around their thinking, and they were unable to voice their challenges and needs. Instead, they found themselves relying on a group of three or four principals with whom they had previously built relationships and trusted. In that group, the “dumbest” questions could be asked and they felt safe (P2). They often preferred to receive information from these principals instead of “bothering the director” (P3).

It is possible that my colleagues and I in the district office may have forgotten what it were like to be novice principals. As I reflect on my first year as a principal, I do recall the excitement over my appointment, but even though I knew I was ready for the position, I also knew that I lacked expertise in various aspects of the job such as budget and personnel. While I knew that my directors were available, I did not want to be perceived as “not knowing” and trusted only a select group of principals, with whom I had previously developed a relationship, to provide answers to my questions. I also remember the isolation and fear that I experienced after being handed the keys and realizing that I was the person in charge of the future of these students and the professional growth of the staff. I recalled my first week on the job and having to prepare for my first summer session. Even though the classrooms were ready, the

teachers were hired and the student lists prepared, I remember waiting for my director to visit the school and check my work. I needed her to assure me that everything was ready, but she never came. I have since discussed that experience with her and while she did explain that she knew my capabilities and expected that I was going to be ready, her support at that time would have been reassuring. Based on the findings of this study, and remembering my personal experiences as a novice principal, I recognize the importance of checking in occasionally with novice principals and offering support and guidance. Novice principals, especially in high-poverty, low-performing schools operate in unique contexts, and it is important that as district leaders we address their needs and allay their fears and frustrations.

It is interesting to recall that the areas of budget and personnel were the most operationally challenging for me. These areas were also identified by the novice principals as the areas in which they lacked expertise and needed support. It is vital that the areas of budget and personnel be addressed in the specific contexts of each school and principal. Additionally, it is important to review the principal preparation programs to ensure that these and other areas of need are also addressed in detail.

The data indicated that while the principals respected the knowledge of district leaders, they also wanted the opportunity to network, collaborate with other principals and receive information from principals in the “trenches” (P3). The principals valued the expertise of “practicing” principals and were eager to learn the “tricks of the trade” from them (P3). During the 2013-2014 school year, a limited number of Think Tank sessions were organized by ETO for Elementary and K-8 principals. Even though the sessions were facilitated by principals and received positive feedback, the findings indicate that it

is important for ETO to consistently organize monthly sessions where principals can collaborate and share their best practices with each other.

The results of the study also demonstrate that it is important for district leaders to establish a mentoring program for novice principals. Implementing a collegial or collaborative mentoring program would provide support from district leaders and expert principals. With the mentorship program implemented, novice principals would be mentored beyond their first day on the job. The principals expressed that rarely does one person have the expertise in every area, and they relied on the expertise of several district leaders and principals. Therefore, it is possible that novice principals would be assigned more than one mentor based on their needs and expertise.

It is also important that the district leaders select mentors carefully, based on their areas of expertise. It can no longer be assumed that all supervisors would be effective mentors. It would be important to review the number of years that district supervisors have been removed from the school site and determine if they possess sufficient “practical” knowledge to effectively mentor novice principals. The selected mentors should also be trained in providing support to the novices and must be held accountable for the support to the novice principals. For example, in the study, P3 expressed that she was provided a mentor; however, the mentor contacted her once to introduce herself and never contacted her again. Therefore, it is important that a system of accountability is established to ensure that the novice principals are receiving the necessary support and expertise to improve their practice.

## **Principals**

The lack of support principals received, coupled with their limited expertise in various aspects of the job, left the novice principals “frustrated,” “scared,” and

“overwhelmed.” With the pressure of state and district mandates, unrealistic public expectations and the demands of high-stakes testing, it is vital that the challenges and the need for support they expressed are addressed. While they may perceive district directors and other stalwarts of the bureaucracy as “intimidating” (P2), it is crucial that novices use their voices and positions on behalf of their marginalized students. They must be willing to change and disrupt entrenched and ineffective practices to increase student achievement. They should be confident in their practice and give voice to effect changes to school policies and practices that inhibit their professional growth and preclude students and parents from positive educational opportunities. As P2 declared, “I think one of the things that new principals don’t know is that you get paid to talk . . . the ability to write well, speak well and to hold a conversation with the superintendent and then talk to that grandma with the third grade education . . . everything is about how well you can manage communication.”

The findings of this study suggest that principals must develop the art of communication. It is important for principals to communicate with teachers, parents and students, using their words to break down the walls of resistance and provide inspiration and motivation towards the goal of student achievement. P2 confirmed this when she stated, “When you talk to people and you’re passionate about the work, they’ll get the vision and then they’ll join you.” It is therefore very important that novice principals remain passionate about their work and be able to speak on behalf of their school and its needs.

It is also important that novice principals take the initiative to make contact with district leaders or other principals to receive support. While it is still prudent for district

leaders to reach out to them, the novices should be bold and aggressive in requesting assistance in spite of any fear and intimidation they may experience.

**Students.** Principals should use their positions to develop the voices of their students while building positive partnerships with them. Studies have shown that when student participation is encouraged, classroom and school-wide changes occur and student achievement is enhanced (McQuillan, 2005). Additionally, when students are empowered, they are able to develop the “ability, confidence and motivation to succeed academically” (Cummings, 1986, p.22). While the underachievement of Black and Hispanic students continue to be a topic of conversation and an increasing challenge for educators nationwide, these students have not been a part of the reform process. Their voices have been silenced and controlled through discipline policies and the negative stereotypes that falsely define them. Their perspectives remain unsolicited even as they contend daily with perceived deficiencies of their intelligence and discriminatory practices of low expectations from their teachers. Their defiant and confrontational behaviors, which often lead to their suspensions and expulsions, indicate their resistance to a watered-down curriculum and ineffective instructional practices that do not meet their needs.

The participants of the study developed strategies to empower their students to be partners in their education while recognizing their schools as a haven. The principals knew that it was important for student voices to be heard and their self-esteem developed. In the face of racial profiling and violent attacks against students’ dreams and achievement, principals must work collaboratively with district leaders to take a stand against the forces that dehumanize and disrespect the dignity of students.

Principals must valiantly work with teachers to understand and respect students' diversity and cultural differences and celebrate their identities. Through giving them a voice in their educational journey, educators can provide students the tools and resources necessary to maximize their opportunities. This must be a priority for novice principals.

**Parents.** The findings of this study forced me to recognize the challenges that many parents face in changing the academic trajectory of their children. In addition to parents' daily struggle to escape a system that depresses their dreams and makes it difficult to exit the cycle of poverty, they are often blamed for being poor, and targeted as the cause of their children's failure. Instead of valuing parental input and recognizing the importance of the school-parent partnership, many schools do not make it easy for them to volunteer or become involved. While educators profess the importance of parental involvement, our policies and practices send a different message.

Based on the principals' insights, it is important to recognize that regardless of their socio-economic status and involvement in the schools, parents have high aspirations for their children. Principals and district leaders must have the courage to give voice to the plight of parents and work to educate them to understand and support their child's educational journey. Developing policies that welcome them into our schools may build partnerships that would benefit students. Instead of focusing on the perceived deficiencies of parents, it is important for educators to become creative in exploring ways to involve them. Similarly, it is vital that principals and district leaders include parents in defining the meaning of parent engagement. Too often educators call for engagement and partnerships but are resistant when parents become involved.

Therefore it is vital that principals, their staff and the families share an understanding of their expectations for one another and for the ways parents will work in partnership with schools.

### **Next Steps**

As an administrative director in the Education Transformation Office of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, I have been given the opportunity to lead the work of improving student achievement in its 68 Elementary and K-8 schools. This job has been challenging but rewarding and has reinforced my belief that improvement in the quality of education will serve as a vehicle to break the cycle of poverty and increase student achievement. As a district leader, I have always strived to encourage collaborative leadership while implementing strategies to create initiatives of change. While I recognize that the leadership of principals is pivotal to school transformation, based on the findings of the study, I am aware that I must work more closely with novice principals to find solutions that will close the gaps of achievement and expectation. The study has made me realize that my practice has been insufficient to support the practice of novice principals, and I must become the liaison between the novices and district leaders, articulating their challenges and telling their stories.

While I recognize that my colleagues in the Education Transformation Office work diligently to provide support to principals, it will be important for us to reevaluate our support to novice principals. Not only do we have the findings of this study and the perceptions of the novice principals to guide our work, but we have our own experiences as well. The high stakes of the accountability movement are so much more demanding of novice principals than in years past, so it is vital that the findings of this study impact our future practice so that it will impact theirs.

The findings of the study indicated that collaboration among the principals was important. The participants of the study were complimentary of the Think Tank sessions that were implemented through the Education Transformation Office since the sessions allowed them to collaborate as a community of learners and develop strategies that would foster change in their schools. It is my intention to facilitate monthly Think Tank sessions with the principals, addressing various topics related to their instructional practice. A survey of all ETO principals will be designed to identify topics that will guide the focus of the monthly Think Tank sessions. Principals with expertise in the various areas will be identified to lead the discussions.

Researchers (Fullan, 2007; Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Leithwood, 1994) have reiterated the importance of collaborative leadership and its direct effect on the culture of the school and instructional practice of teachers and administrators. With the many demands of the principalship, it is important that principals solicit the involvement of stakeholders in the decisions of the school. I will encourage principals to have weekly collaborative meetings with their assistant principals and instructional coaches, reviewing the instructional work of the previous week while planning for the upcoming week. Principals will also be encouraged to identify a school-wide leadership team that consisting of grade-level chairpersons, non-instructional personnel, union representatives, students and parents. This team should meet monthly in collaborative sessions to explore solutions of increasing and sustaining student achievement and addressing the needs of the school.

Since the study focused on novice principals' perceptions of the challenges they faced and the support they needed. It would be interesting to hear the perspectives of

the district leaders as to the challenges they face in sustaining student achievement and working with novice principals. Their insights would help to further strengthen the leadership and transformation of our struggling schools while building the relationship between district leaders and principals. Veteran principals should also be the focus of additional studies. Many of the 68 elementary and K-8 schools that are being served by ETO are led by veteran principals. It would be of value to determine the challenges faced by veteran principals and the support that they need to change the trajectory of student achievement.

Further studies and deliberation are also needed on the use of mentors to provide ongoing support to novice principals. As district leaders begin to collaborate on developing a mentoring program to meet the needs of novice principals beyond the principal preparation program, four questions deserve further attention:

1. How do novices respond to the mentoring of mentors they have selected vs. the mentoring of mentors selected by district leaders?
2. What criteria might be established to identify a veteran principal as an “expert” principal and a mentor?
3. What criteria should be used to select district directors who will ultimately provide support to novice principals?
4. How do novices respond to receiving the support of a mentor for various lengths of time?

These questions can be addressed through inquiry and the collective reflection of principals and district leaders.

### **Conclusion**

The best educational leaders are in love with the work they do, with the purpose their work serves, and with the people they lead and serve. They are more prone to think of what they do as a calling or a cause rather than a job. The best leaders . . . all demonstrate a palpable passion for a moral purpose, and it is that passion that helps them persevere when

confronting the inevitable difficulties of attempting to bring about substantive change. (DuFour & Mazano, 2011, p.194)

The novice principals who participated in the study were “in love” with their work and with those they were leading. As they recounted their experiences, their enthusiasm and sense of pride in their schools, their staff, parents and students was evident. Committed to their vision for equity and student achievement, they knew that they needed to move beyond mediocrity and good intentions to purposeful action, implementing specific strategies and practices. They recognized that they needed to increase their knowledge and expertise and rebuild collaborative routines and structures so that school transformation would be a reality.

With principals as the pivotal leaders in our schools and the caretakers of school transformation, district leaders must continue to be aware of the challenges expressed by the novice principals in this study, and the support they need in their work to interrupt the cycle of poverty, and ineffective instructional practices. There has to be recognition on the part of district leaders that novice principals must be mentored beyond the principal preparation programs and that support to them must be differentiated to meet their needs.

Across the nation, school districts search for solutions to transform high-poverty, low-performing schools. If we believe that all children can succeed, then we must also recognize that school principals are pivotal for moving this concept from merely an expression to a reality. Support of the efforts of principals, especially novice principals, must be provided to bolster the knowledge and resilience they need to accomplish and sustain the transformation of schools.

APPENDIX A  
CONSENT LETTER

**Participant Informed Consent Letter**

Dear School Administrator:

I am a graduate student in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida. As part of my coursework I am conducting interviews to learn what novice school principals perceive as their challenges in leading high-poverty, low-performing schools and the support that they need to be successful. I am asking you to participate in these interviews because you have been identified as a successful school administrator with less than three years of experience leading a high-poverty, low-performing school. As part of this study, you will be asked to participate in three interviews with each session lasting no longer than 45 minutes. The interviews will be conducted at your office and will begin after I have received this signed consent document from you. With your permission I would like to audiotape these interviews. Only I will have access to the tape which I will personally transcribe, removing any identifiers during transcription. The tape will then be erased. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript.

There are no anticipated risks, compensation or other direct benefits to you as a participant in these interviews. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the interviews at any time without consequence. The initial list of questions is enclosed with this letter. Please note that you will not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact:

Charmyn M. Kirton (Graduate Student)

Dr. Elizabeth Bondy, (Faculty Supervisor)

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant in the study, you may contact:

IRB02 Office  
P. O. Box 112250  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, FL 32611-2250  
Phone: (352) 392-0433

Please sign this letter below and return in the enclosed envelope. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you are giving me permission to report your responses anonymously in the final manuscript to be submitted to my faculty supervisor as part of my course work.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Charmyn M. Kirton

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**I have read the procedure described above for the interviews to be conducted with novice school principals of high-poverty, low-performing schools. I voluntarily agree to participate in the three interview sessions. I have received a copy of the initial questions that will be utilized in the interviews.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Interview 1 – Becoming Acquainted**

1. Describe your professional background, including the preparation that you have had for your role as principal.
2. Were you working in an Education Transformation Office school prior to your appointment? Please explain.
3. Did your training adequately prepare you for your position? Please explain.
4. Were you a Project Lead Strong participant prior to your appointment? If so, did your participation in the program prepare you for your position? Please explain.
5. Describe your school, including the students and staff.
6. What were your first impressions of your school?
7. Tell me a story about one of your first experiences at the school?
8. What do you wish you had known before moving into your position? How would this have helped you?

### **Interview 2 – The First Year**

1. What challenges did you encounter as a first-year principal at this time?
2. How did you respond to the challenges?
3. What opportunities did you encounter as a first-year principal?
4. How did you respond to those opportunities?
5. Looking back, would you change your response to the challenges/opportunities? If so, how and why?
6. What supports did you receive during your first year? From whom did you receive support?
7. What kinds of supports do you wish you had received during your first year? Please explain.
8. Tell me a story from your first year as principal. Make it a story that captures what that year was like for you.
9. What is your advice for novice principals?

10. What is your advice for the supervisors of novice principals?

### **Interview 3 – Looking Back and Looking Ahead**

1. As you look back on your first year, what stands out for you?
2. Has your leadership practice changed since your first year? In what ways?
3. How do you account for the changes you have made?
4. What are your short-and long term goals for the school as you look ahead?
5. What kinds of support are you receiving from the district this year?
6. What support do you need moving forward to be successful in meeting your goals for the school?
7. What do you wish district administrators understood about your school?
8. Tell me a success story about you and your school.
9. Tell me about a disappointment you have experienced this year.
10. What do you think new principals at schools like yours need to know and do to have success?

APPENDIX C:  
ANALYSIS OF DATA TABLES

Table C-1. Data organized by interview question and participants

| Interview Questions   | Principal 1 (P1)   | Principal 2 (P2)   | Principal 3 (P3)   |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Question #6</p> <p><b>What were your first impressions of your school?</b></p> <p>My Notes:<br/>Principals had a sense of pride speaking of their school and were hopeful and excited to see the changes.</p> <p>They were appointed to schools with no systems and structures</p> <p>Challenging year</p> | <p>No systems, no structures. Students were running the building. Many fights. Teachers felt they were not supported.</p> <p>“So I’ll never forget my first day here I went home and I cried, and I told my husband I can’t do this. And my husband said, “Yes you can, you’ve been sent to this school. This is what you’re all about; toughen up – you’re a leader; you will turn that school around. Give yourself time” (P1-p6).</p> <p>Response: Looked at systems, structures such as kids entering and leaving school. Entering and exiting classrooms, procedures (P1-p6).</p> <p>Confronted with transfers the first week. “People wanted to transfer; they didn’t know who I was” (P1-p6).</p> <p>Had to change mindset of teachers, parents and students.</p> | <p>Scared to death “scared to death was my feeling and I really felt so prepared” (P2-p9).</p> <p>Amazing pride in school. Small staff. Some live close to the school and some far away. Good balance (p6).</p> <p>Staff highly motivated to get the work done. “Definite challenges, high hopes, wonderful energy” “Even though it is labeled an F, it doesn’t look like an F, it doesn’t feel like an F and we won’t allow it to be an F again” (C1-p6).</p> <p>Low socio-economic community. Parents have high hopes for the children (p6).</p> <p>“It is intimidating place for parents. Everyone has at least one degree; some two, some three some four and they do not have high school diplomas. How do I make you feel comfortable coming to this place unless I give you tools so that you realize when you come . . . the teacher can’t talk over your head because I’m educating you too” (P2-p8).</p> | <p>There was a lot of work to be done. No structures – no order</p> <p>“I got into so much trouble that first week that my first impression was that I am in a different environment than I expected” (P3-p11).</p> <p>Lax security. Parent came in and cussed 2<sup>nd</sup> grader for bothering her child. No knowledge of who was in the building (P3-p11).</p> <p>Closed many gates and changed entrance for parents. Was cussed out when requesting parent to leave building.</p> <p>“Maybe I did too much, maybe too much change too quickly. . . everybody hated me” (P3-p11).</p> <p>First year was a rollercoaster and exhausting.</p> <p>“You had these moments that were just the worst days of your life, . . . because it was just one fight after another after another . . . I just had to fight so many people” (P3-p12).</p> |

Table C-2. Data organized by research question and participants

| RQ1  | Principal 1 (P1)  | Principal 2 (P2)   | Principal 3 (P3)   |
|--|---|--|--|
| <p><b>What are the challenges experienced by novice elementary principals that lead high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools?</b></p> | <p>High absenteeism</p> <p>High numbers of transfers</p> <p>Teachers believed they were not supported. Lack of passion about their jobs and their classrooms.</p> <p>Complained of too much paperwork, disruptive students, lack of structures and lack of support.</p> <p>Gaining trust of teachers.</p> <p>Rules not respected. Students disruptive and fighting. "Kids felt like they were in charge, knew how to run the system at the school and they knew that if I did this I would get kicked out or I would be sent home and I can ride bikes this afternoon around the neighborhood" (P1).<br/>Would have benefitted from training operational.<br/>"Spent many sleepless nights thinking how could I refine my craft? I called a few principals to help, just to seek out and say how are you doing this?" (P1-p10).</p> | <p>Many parents are high school drop outs and illiterate. Education is not a priority.</p> <p>Students with open Department of Children Family cases.<br/>Many have not seen their parents in months and are left in care of a grandmother who is struggling herself. It's hard for education to be a priority if your mom just dropped you off at your grandma's house and she hasn't come back home and you don't know, and it's been two months" (P2-p5).</p> <p>Budget. Not exposed to it as an AP. Would have liked training on connecting budget and master schedule. Would have made different decisions about the number of personnel to be hired if knew budget differently.</p> <p>Someone is always waiting in the wings for your job.<br/>"There are enough people vying for my job that if I mess up at the wrong point there are people who are ready" (P2).</p> | <p>Blatant disrespect from teachers and parents. Negativity - very vocal. Not doing it if it is not in contract (p13).<br/>Teacher threatened her personal children (p22).</p> <p>Union came with a list of "petty" complaints e.g. closing the doors. Had honest conversation with them but at a faculty meeting stated things out of context (p18).<br/>Following experience decided she could not be "open and honest with them" (P3-p18) "I have these good intentions for the students and for the school and honest . . . experience left me shattered" (P3-p18).</p> <p>No buy in from teachers</p> <p>Gaining trust of parents.</p> <p>First year was a rollercoaster and exhausting.<br/>"You had these moments that were just the worst days of your life, . . . because it was just one fight after another after another" (P3-p21)<br/>"I just had to fight so many people" (P3-p12)</p> <p>Not prepared to deal with parents. E.g. giving shoes to a student - parent was offended. Community she came from was different (p19)</p> |

Table C-3. Data organized by research question across participants

| <b>RQ1: What are the challenges experienced by novice elementary principals that lead high-poverty, low-performing elementary schools?</b> |  |   |   |
|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Emerging Themes</b>   | <b>Principal 1 (P1)</b>  | <b>Principal 2 (P2)</b>   | <b>Principal 3 (P3)</b>   |
| <b>Resistance</b>  | High absenteeism. High numbers of transfers. Teachers believed they were not supported. Complained of too much paperwork, disruptive students, lack of structures and lack of support.   | (No resistance noted in interview)  | Blatant disrespect from teachers and parents. Negativity very vocal. Not doing it if it is not in contract (p13). Coaches were also very vocal. No buy in from teachers. Resistant Teachers (p15)<br>Teacher threatened her personal children (p22)   |
| Teacher  |  |   |   |
| Parents  |  |   |   |
| Students   | Rules not respected. Students disruptive and fighting.<br>"Kids felt like they were in charge, knew how to run the system at the school and they knew that if I did this I would get kicked out or I would be sent home and I can ride bikes this afternoon around the neighborhood" (P1).   |   | Students did not respect the rules initially – did what they wanted.<br><br>Closed many gates and changed entrance for parents. Cussed out by parent when requesting parent to leave building.<br>"Maybe I did too much, maybe too much change too quickly. . . everybody hated me" (p11)   |
| <b>Lack of Expertise</b>   | Not being accepted by the community – do not live in community, not raised in community, came from a different background. "This female was placed in this building with no understanding of what our neighborhood is all about" (P3-p10)  |   |   |
| <b>Mentoring would be beneficial</b>   | Would have benefitted from training operational. "Spent many sleepless nights thinking how could I refine my craft? I called a few principals to help, (p10)<br>Veteran mentor principal beneficial "I was exhausted. . . getting so overwhelmed with things that I thought I had to take care of all the time, and I saw her delegate a lot of these things (p8). | Budget. Not exposed to it as the AP. Needed training on connecting budget and master schedule. Would have made different decisions about the number of personnel to be hired. "Novice principals call me about assistance with budget. I think it's just the area we have to invest more time in" (P2-p2)<br>No mentor assigned | Operation aspect of job weakest area especially Budget. No training in that area<br><br>"I had to hire a treasurer from another school and she would come over, she would help me, she would teach me, she would . . . and this is a treasurer from another school teaching a principal. I was clueless" (P3)<br><br>Mentor called once and never followed up after the initial call. |

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Charmyn M. Kirton graduated from the University of Florida, in 2014 with the Doctor of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction. In 1979, she graduated from Andrews University, Berrien Springs Michigan, with a bachelor's and master's degrees in Music Education. Charmyn began her teaching career in Buffalo, New York and has also taught in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, before moving in 1986 to Miami, Florida where she has resided for the past 27 years. Working for the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, she has taught at Royal Green Elementary, Oliver Hoover Elementary and Claude Pepper Elementary where she was also appointed as an Assistant Principal in 1997.

In 2000, Charmyn became the Principal of the Irving and Beatrice Peskoe K-8 School where she was successful in leading the school from a D to an A school based on the grading system of the State of Florida. Charmyn was then appointed to open a new public school in 2006, and was the founding principal of Norma Butler Bossard Elementary School. She is currently the Administrative Director for Curriculum and Instruction in the Education Transformation Office of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools. Her responsibilities include leading a team of Instructional Supervisors and Curriculum Support Specialists to provide instructional support to administrators, teachers and students in 68 of the district's lowest performing elementary and K-8 schools.

Charmyn is a native of Trinidad and has two children. Her son, Dr. Lee C. Buddy, Jr., is an Assistant Principal in Clayton County Public Schools, Jonesboro, Georgia; and her daughter, Dr. Cherisse M. Buddy, recently graduated from the Physical Therapy program at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. She is very proud of their

accomplishments and commitment to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate. She credits them with inspiring and motivating her to complete the Doctor of Education program.

Charmyn remains committed to her work in high-poverty, low performing schools. She constantly seeks to find solutions that will close the gaps of achievement and expectation. It is her belief that an improvement in the quality of education will serve as a catalyst to break the cycle of poverty and inequity, and increase student achievement. She states of her work, "I believe that I am in this position at this time to lead boldly, creating change in the face of unimaginable challenges and consequences . . . I have found my purpose and accepted the challenge."