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DISTRICT OFFICE LEADERS SUPPORTING OVERLOADED URBAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: A QUALITATIVE MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Dedication/Acknowledgements Page

I would like to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Anthony Luevanos, my committee chair for all his support and pushing me through to the end of this journey. To my committee members, Dr. Curt Adams, Dr. Brittany Hott, and Jeffery Maiden, thank you for taking the time to serve on my committee. I appreciate your diverse expertise and feedback that assisted on this journey.

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Throughout my life and career, my purpose has always been to be a connector and supporter for others. It is my hope that this study reflects that purpose and contributes, in some small way, to strengthening the systems of support around the leaders who give so much every day.

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Abstract

This qualitative multiple case study explores how district leaders in Oklahoma City Public Schools support urban high school principals facing increased stress from growing job demands. Principals are expected to lead instruction while managing complex responsibilities, from compliance and staffing to student behavior and mental health concerns. The study investigates which stressors are most pressing and how district office leaders can better support principals in their instructional leadership roles. Data included surveys from seven high school principals and two district office leaders, plus reflective journals and semi-structured interviews with four selected principals. This research seeks to identify actionable strategies that enhance principal effectiveness and to reduce burnout. The researcher aims to guide district leaders in developing more targeted systems of support that promote stability and improve school outcomes. In light of rising turnover and post-pandemic challenges, this study emphasizes the need for responsive district leadership that prioritizes sustainable change over top-down mandates.

Keywords: urban school district-level support, principal stress, principal workload, instructional leadership, principal burnout

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Principals are critical to a school's success. They play an integral role in setting the school culture, leading teams toward reaching instructional goals, and managing a school. The pressures for success that communities place on schools create demands on principals that are increasingly complex. A principal's day is consumed with management tasks such as scheduling, reporting, handling relations with parents and the community, along with various critical student issues and special situations that happen throughout the school day (Fink & Resnick, 2001). It has been stated for many years that district leaders and principals must change the focus from management to being instructional leaders. However, there is little time in a principal's day to focus on instructional leadership. Principals work tirelessly to create significant changes that positively impact student instruction. Today's climate for accelerating school reform and making critical improvements within a school, that create higher student performance, cannot be attained without direct and intentional support from district office leaders (Honig et al., 2010). These increasing demands are not simply the result of the complexity of the principalship, but are produced by district-level systems, expectations, and accountability structures that shape how principals allocate their time and prioritize their work.

District office leaders continuously experience pressures to improve student achievement similar to those faced by principals, particularly within accountability-driven educational systems (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Elmore, 2000; Honig, 2012). They struggle with finding a balance between granting autonomy to principals and putting structures in place to support principals in meeting the high expectations set forth by the community, state governmental leaders, and local school boards. Research in the early to mid 2000's focused on school

improvement through leadership styles and responsibilities of principals and teachers (Robinson et al., 2008). The burden of all of the responsibility for school improvement should not be placed on principals and teachers alone. How can district office leadership provide assistance and support instead of handing down mandates and expectations to unhappy, tired, frustrated and overwhelmed principals; especially when there are minimal gains in student success? What should the role and support look like from the district office leadership? These questions point to a broader issue: principal workload and stress are not isolated experiences but are shaped by how district systems are designed and implemented.

This qualitative multiple case study will focus on the lived experiences of high school principals within district support systems in Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS), specifically examining how district leadership structures, expectations, and supports influence principals' ability to function as instructional leaders while managing increasing job demands. The central focus of this study is the lived experience of principals within district support systems, which serves as the anchor for examining principal stress, workload, and the effectiveness of district-level support. At the conclusion of the study, as the researcher, I will be able to share information with OKCPS that will assist in creating district level support for principals.

As the researcher, I bring prior experience as a district-level administrator within Oklahoma City Public Schools, where I directly supported principals in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and leadership development. This experience provides valuable contextual understanding of the district systems examined in this study, while also requiring intentional reflection to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in participant experiences rather than my personal assumptions.

Purpose of Study

One purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to identify specific factors that are causing the most stress to principals and determine additional support needed from district office leaders to ensure the success of principals as instructional leaders. The second purpose of this study is to investigate, explore, and examine lived experiences to gain a better understanding of the direct needs of principals and how district office leaders can support efforts for student success. This research will identify strategies that will help OKCPS district office leaders attain their goals and meet their needs with instructional leadership.

The job of the building principal has become more difficult. Principals are expected to manage an expanding scope of responsibilities on a daily basis. The expectations and demands placed on principals are substantial and include high stakes testing, pressures on student achievement and outcomes, creating a safe and positive school climate, hiring highly qualified staff, having more emergency and alternative certified teachers to train and guide, developing qualified emergency and alternative certified teachers, evaluating teachers, addressing student discipline, mental health issues of students and staff, and staying current on federal and state laws along with district office policies and procedures (Fullan, 2016; Carbaugh et al., 2015). Principals often find it difficult to balance managerial and operational responsibilities, including student discipline, with their role as instructional leaders (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger, 2005; Horng et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011). Many times, principals have managerial tasks that are district and state mandated. Valentine & Prater (2011) concluded there are instructional gains with students when principals focus on certain factors of instructional leadership. District office leaders should be cognizant of the managerial tasks that are being placed upon principals and assist in streamlining or finding solutions to save time and alleviate tasks. If principals are able to

focus on being the instructional leaders versus the mounting managerial tasks, they, with the help of district office leaders, could take academic performance to a higher level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the expectations and stress levels placed on principals and brought greater demands on the principalship. Principals are the leaders of schools, and guide the direction of the school, amid all internal and external factors that must be managed on a day-to-day basis. In this study, principal stress is understood as the result of sustained organizational demands, workload expectations, and structural conditions within district systems. It is difficult for principals with all the challenges that continue to pile on top of each other to stay focused as an instructional leader. This leaves principals frustrated, with a feeling of facing unsustainable expectations. District leaders are noticing increasing levels of principal turnover and dissatisfaction (Fullan, 2014; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2022; RAND Corporation, 2022), and 75% of principals report their jobs are too complex and demanding (Fullan, 2016; Markow et al., 2013). District office leaders continue to look for support that is needed for principals to have the ability to be a strong instructional leader that brings about change in their school. Silverman (2016) shared principals note high levels of satisfaction with their jobs when they have systematic and direct support from district office leadership.

Prior to the pandemic, district office leaders continually heard from building principals that they were experiencing sustained job demands and fatigue from managing multiple competing responsibilities to get everything done to be successful. The pandemic intensified existing challenges and demands for leaders significantly. Principal burnout and stress were exacerbated throughout the pandemic, leading to limited principal effectiveness and higher turnover rates (DeMatthews et al., 2021). District office leaders constantly seek fail-proof

strategies to assist and guide principals to bring about increases in student achievement. Increasing the instructional leadership capacity in building school leaders is a critical step toward increasing student outcomes. Districts need more efficient and effective strategies for supporting building leaders in raising the academic success of their students.

Principals desire positive change for their schools but experience sustained job demands that contribute to burnout. In Oklahoma City Public Schools, district office leaders often hear principals continually experience ongoing demands that challenge their ability to sustain the role. District office leaders continue to observe principals seeking other positions within or beyond their districts, often in response to job-related stress and dissatisfaction with the demands of the role (Grissom et al., 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; RAND Corporation, 2023). Recent reporting also suggests continued concern about principal turnover following the pandemic (Superville, 2023). How can we keep them in an urban district and have longevity with the position? How could district office leaders mitigate the stress of the principalship? How can district office leadership assist and support instead of pushing down mandates and expectations with little gains for success resulting in unhappy, tired, frustrated principals managing increasing and competing demands? What should the role and support look like from district leadership?

A district office leader's role is to guide and give direction to site administrators. They set the direction of the district to be carried out by site administrators. District office leaders continuously hear from principals about managing extensive and competing responsibilities, and how they cannot seem to get everything done or accomplished. Principals continue to be frustrated with all that is being asked of them and all the responsibility and pressure for the success of their buildings. Principals share in conversations with district leaders how they are responsible for a wide range of operational responsibilities, including discipline of students,

evaluations of employees, guiding new employees and employee issues. This leaves little time to be an instructional leader. The role of the district office leaders and how they support principals with instructional issues versus oversight and management of buildings needs to be analyzed. Honig and colleagues share that central office transformation entails "strengthening the professional practice of both central office leaders and building leaders while increasing teaching and learning outcomes" (2009).

Existing research has examined principal burnout, instructional leadership, and district-level support and these areas are often examined in isolation, focusing on individual variables rather than how district systems, leadership structures, and organizational expectations interact to shape principal experience. There is limited research that examines the lived experiences of high school principals within district support systems, particularly how district leadership structures, expectations, and supports interact to shape principals' daily work. Additionally, there is a lack of research that captures how these systems influence principal stress, workload, and the ability to prioritize instructional leadership in urban high school settings. This study addresses this gap by examining how district leadership practices and organizational structures collectively influence principal experience, with a focus on identifying both principal stressors and meaningful supports. Prior research tends to isolate factors such as workload, burnout, or instructional leadership; however, this study examines how these factors interact within district systems to shape the lived experiences of principals. This study uniquely addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of principals within district support systems, specifically focusing on how district leadership structures, expectations, and supports interact to shape principal effectiveness, workload, and sustainability in practice. By examining these interactions, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how district

systems produce, reinforce, and sustain the conditions that influence principal effectiveness and sustainability. This study is necessary because it shifts the focus from individual principal challenges to examining how district systems actively produce and shape those challenges in practice.

To better understand the lived experiences of principals within district support systems, the following research questions guided this qualitative multiple case study.

Research Questions

This qualitative multiple case study will be completed in Oklahoma City Public Schools, an urban school district in central Oklahoma. Through a series of principal and district leadership surveys, reflective journal, and semi-structured interviews the following research questions will be answered:

RQ 1: How do district leaders in Oklahoma City Public Schools create and implement systems of support for high school principals in their role as instructional leaders?

Supporting questions for this study:

RQ 2: What are the most significant stressors that hinder high school principals in urban school settings from effectively fulfilling their role as instructional leaders?

RQ 3: What types of support do urban high school principals need from district leaders to succeed?

Significance of Study

As principals' frustration grows and they continue to manage expanding role demands, and as district office leaders continue to struggle with the balance of support and holding principals accountable as building leaders, the significance of this study will be to identify select stress indicators that will inform district office leaders on how to mitigate principal stress and the

feeling of managing demands of the job. The study will explore ways district office leaders can create a support framework needed for principals once they know the specific details of stressors. District leaders need researched strategies and must focus on developing and supporting principals, instead of continuing to have principals balancing expanding responsibilities and experiencing increasing role strain. In this study, organizational structures within the district, professional development needs, and principal mentoring will also be explored as suspected additional areas of quality support needed to help principals learn to manage the expectations of their changing roles. This study will also aid in understanding gaps of support needed from district leadership in the area of instructional leadership for principals to inform new practices.

Definitions of Terms

For this study, the following key terms and definitions guided this research:

- *District Office Leaders* - An individual employed by Oklahoma City Public Schools and that serves to support high school principals. This would include the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Executive Directors of Curriculum and Instruction, and Principal Supervisors. District office leaders will also be referenced as district leaders.
- *Instructional Leader Directors (ILD)*- A district office leader who supervises principals and supports operations and instruction for the principal and the school. ILD's will also be referenced as supervisors or principal supervisors. OKCPS changed their official title to Executive Director for the 2024-2025 school year.
- *Principal Supervisor* - A district office leader referenced as Instructional Leader Director (ILD), supervisor or Executive Director.
- *Stress* - The mental or emotional strain on the principal due to demand of the principalship and the job responsibilities. The pressure or tension to perform at a high

level and have student success in learning with data supporting improvement on learning outcomes.

- *Frustration* - A feeling of being upset or annoyed by job responsibilities and the pressure to improve student performance. It can also include being annoyed and not confident that as the principal you can achieve what is being asked of you.
- *Overwhelmed* - The feeling of being buried or drowning from the huge mass of responsibility placed on the principal. Having the feeling of being completely defeated. The workload is too much to handle and it seems that the work will never be accomplished for student success.
- *Principal Burnout* - Being in a state of emotional and physical exhaustion while experiencing no path towards success for students. Inability to cope effectively with the unresolved stressors associated with school leadership.

Limitations of the Study

There are multiple limitations to this qualitative multiple case study that should be acknowledged. A limitation within the study is that only one urban district will participate. Therefore, this study would not be generalizable to other districts. This limits the number of participants to a sample size of up to eight high school principals and possibly four principal supervisors and multiple district office leaders with smaller results. With the research study being focused on only one district, and up to eight principal participants, possibly four principal supervisors and multiple district office leaders, the trust and vulnerability of the participants could sway results of the surveys, reflective journals, and interviews due to participants' concerns about confidentiality, potential professional repercussions, and the sensitivity of sharing honest perceptions about district leadership and support systems. Even though confidentiality

will be obtained throughout the study, principals may still be concerned with district office leaders knowing their stresses, frustrations and concerns that this may result in retribution or poor evaluations from their supervisors or the district. Another limitation may include that, as the researcher, I am a former Oklahoma City Public School district level administrator. In my former role, I was directly involved with the support principals received from the district level as the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment. I continue to have a positive relationship with the high school principals and district office leaders, and it is built on trust. I could be influenced by my own interpretations of the data collected in the study from my previous personal experiences and my possible perceptions of the needs.

As a novice researcher, I realize the complexity of completing a qualitative multiple case study and the expertise needed to carry out the study. This could be an additional limitation. External stress factors will not be considered within the study. This may include a principal being a single parent, medical issues, or going through a death or divorce. These external stress factors could compound the stresses and frustrations of the principals.

Organization of Dissertation

The organization of this dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study by sharing the purpose of the study, research questions to investigate, significance of the research, defines terms, and presents limitations of the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the challenges and barriers leading to principal burnout, the role and influence of the principal supervisor and district office leadership, and district office systems of support for principals as instructional leaders. The theoretical framework is captured and explained in Chapter 2 which begins with a philosophical worldview for the qualitative multiple case study. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology for the case study. This chapter explains the

logic, to include the school district and purpose for the study, methodology rationale, the role of the researcher, participant selection and sampling. I also present the design and data collection procedures, while I explain the organization for data analysis. Chapter 4 provides results for the qualitative multiple case study through the data analysis of surveys and interviews that relate to the research questions in Chapter 1, as well as additional findings within the research. Chapter 5 summarizes the dissertation by sharing the implication of study and suggestions for further research. The dissertation concludes with the appendix including the surveys and interview questions and protocols. This study will build on existing literature related to principal burnout and district leadership support. Next, Chapter 2 will examine the body of literature for the research and provide insight into this qualitative study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This qualitative multiple case study explores how district office leaders, in the large urban school district of Oklahoma City Public Schools, can better support high school principals. Principals play a critical role in ensuring a positive school climate and robust student learning. The job of the principal is multi-layered and is challenging to maneuver at times with all that is expected with the principalship. The responsibilities of principals have continued to increase since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic. With the pressures of increasing student achievement, providing instructional leadership, managing employees, student discipline, managing budgets, and ensuring a positive school environment, urban high school principals are overwhelmed and have continual burnout.

Due to principal burnout, there is turnover and the loss of institutional knowledge when principals change roles or leave the profession is detrimental to the success of a school (DeMatthews et al., 2021). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) conducted a survey, in 2021, of secondary principals and reported that a staggering four out of 10 principals (38%) are expected to leave the profession in the next three years (Abraham, 2022). NASSP reported principals are leaving due to stresses of the job and increased political tensions and expectations for school improvement. This is as alarming as the teacher shortages. The role and support from district office leadership for urban high school principals will be explored in this study.

Chapter 2 will provide context for this study, by presenting a critical overview of empirical literature and synthesis of the research based on literature from journal articles, dissertations, books and important reports. In this chapter, the review of literature will focus on

three areas connected to the purpose of the study. The challenges and barriers that lead to principal burnout will begin the review. The second focus will be the role and influence of principal supervisors and district office leaders in supporting principals as instructional leaders. Third, the review of literature will focus on district office systems of support for principals as instructional leaders. To conclude the literature review, a presentation of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the basis of the study will be outlined.

Challenges and Barriers Leading to Principal Burnout

Great school leadership is critical to school performance and student achievement. If the principal of the school displays burnout and dissatisfaction, the school culture could be affected which in turn affects student learning (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Burnout for the principalship has been defined as a "psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, p. 103). Even prior to the pandemic, burnout was an epidemic, says Grant (2022). Grant (2022), an expert professor in organizational psychology, shares that burnout is a problem of circumstances and can be prevented or reduced. In the 2022 October edition of *Education Leadership Magazine* from ASCD, the article titled "A Profession on the Brink", provides additional insight into the crisis facing the education profession and principal job demands. According to a Rand Corporation survey in July 2022, school principals are more than twice as likely as other working professionals to report experiencing frequent job stress. Other working adults reported frequent job-related stress about 35% of the time, while teachers reported this stress 73% of the time, and principals reported it 85% of the time. In the article, "The Power of Doing Less in Schools", Reich (2022) discusses how districts may want to reexamine their practices and look at what we can subtract from our current approaches to streamline the work of building principals.

As the challenges of the principalship continue to grow with the added responsibility of accountability measures to school improvement efforts, burnout and principal dissatisfaction increase. Prior to the pandemic, many principals reported being overtasked and had feelings of being overtasked. As early as 1996, in the article “Exploring Causes of Principal Burnout”, Whitaker identified emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of the job, and the elements of the job were causes of principal burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) further describe burnout as emotional exhaustion and loss of energy. Due to the burnout principals were feeling, discussion surrounded the need for improved principal support systems, professional development and improved principal preparation programs. “Extant literature focuses far less on principal burnout, but building principals are often expected to be selfless and willing to put the needs of others in front of their own” (DeMatthews et al., 2021). The complex school environment, along with the high demands on principals from employees, students, families and the community, and with limited resources, places enormous stress on principals and leaves the feeling of burnout. Burnout leads to principal turnover (Boyce & Bowers, 2016; Yan, 2019). In research by DeMatthews et al. (2021), burnout can be caused by heavy workloads, negative experiences on the job, challenging work conditions, long hours, unpredictable or unprecedented problems to solve, and lack of decision-making autonomy.

Burnout for principals can also be connected to the school and district factors, such as size of the school, number of students, mentoring support, parent and community trust or mistrust. Leiter and Maslach (2003) identified principals’ job-related stress relating to conditions that were set organizationally. Six domains were identified: (a) workload: too much work in too little time; (b) control: perceptions of one’s ability to influence decisions that impact their work; (c) reward: monetary, social, and intrinsic rewards that provide recognition from colleagues,

supervisors, and other groups; (d) community: social support at work; (e) fairness: the extent to which decisions are perceived by an individual as fair, including how workload, pay, promotions, and other rewards are distributed; and (f) values: the alignment between an individual's values and organizational values (Leiter & Maslach, 2003).

Since the pandemic, principals frequently experience more compound challenges with the mental health and safety of students and employees. Similarly, Leksy et al. (2023) identified that school principals experienced significantly increased levels of work-related stress during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with stress linked to expanded responsibilities, uncertainty, and heightened organizational demands. This further supports the growing complexity of the principalship in post-pandemic contexts. Unstable mental health and increasing safety concerns for students and employees are more common issues and need attention by leaders. Examples of the amplified challenges are addressing continued changing health and safety issues, rising student and employee absences, growing mental health concerns and caring for employees and students, and the learning loss of students during the last two and half years (Kaufman et al., 2021; Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). Principals continue to balance a broad scope of responsibilities and are navigating increasing role demands with all the managerial tasks along with the role of being the instructional leader. Research has identified many burnout factors for principals. However, district office leaders and principals "have limited guidance on how to reduce burnout and engage in self-care" (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p.7). The article addresses two evidence-based recommendations to address principal burnout: (a) focus on how districts might systematically address principal burnout, and (b) focus on how principals can proactively and reactively address their own burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Kaufman et al. (2021) reported that teacher shortages and resource needs, which continue to increase, are other stresses

of the job that increase dissatisfaction. Resource needs include professional learning for teachers, instructional resources, and high-quality materials to assist principals as the instructional leader. The stress of hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers and staff is becoming more difficult each year and is an added challenge to the principalship. Principal responsibilities continue to grow with the complexity of local and state mandates that continue to increase and accompany higher levels of attention and stress. These accountability pressures placed upon principals from these mandates create more stress leading to burnout (Mitani, 2018).

More recent research further reinforces these findings, as DeMatthews et al. (2023) found that principal burnout in urban districts is significantly influenced by increasing job demands, emotional strain, and organizational expectations, particularly in post-pandemic school environments. Their findings highlight that burnout is not only an individual experience but is shaped by systemic conditions within districts.

Taken together, the research on principal burnout consistently identifies workload, lack of autonomy, and increasing organizational demands as major contributors to turnover and role strain. However, much of this research focuses on the individual principal rather than examining how district systems actively produce these conditions. As a result, the field has a limited understanding of how organizational structures, expectations, and support systems interact to shape principals' daily experiences. This gap is significant because it shifts responsibility toward the individual rather than examining systemic conditions. This study addresses that limitation by examining how district systems contribute to principal stress and influence their ability to lead instructionally.

While these studies help explain the challenges principals face, they do not fully show how these challenges are shaped by district systems and leadership structures. Understanding that connection is important, which leads to examining the role of principal supervisors.

Role and Influence of the Principal Supervisor and District Office Leadership

The Wallace Foundation studied the role of principal supervisors in supporting effective school leadership and found it begins with the district creating conditions to transform the principal supervisor role, followed by principal supervisors shifting their focus to developing and supporting principals in the area of instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2018). The Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI) was launched by the Wallace Foundation in 2014 to redefine principal leadership within six districts. The focus of the PSI was to change the role of principal supervisor to develop principals as instructional leaders through five core components; revise the principal supervisors' job description to focus on instructional leadership, reduce principal supervisors' span of control and change how supervisors are assigned to principals, train supervisors and develop their capacity to support principals, develop systems to identify and train new supervisors (succession planning), strengthen central office structures to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisors role (Goldring et al., 2018). Findings at the end of the four-year Principal Supervisor Initiative brought about substantial change within the districts. The change of the principal supervisor's role to provide support and guidance instructionally to principals was perceived by principals as an improvement. The districts restructured their district office and were able to provide better support for schools that met their specific needs. Although positive results were seen by the principals, the PSI did not improve teacher perception of principals' performance (Goldring et al., 2018).

Huffman (2018) found that when first and second-year principals have mentors and have reflective activities and dialogue with a mentor or a supervisor as a mentor, they are more successful. The principal relationship and mentoring between the principal supervisor and district leadership is an important key to success and the principal feeling supported (Honig, 2008; Honig et al., 2010; Slothower, 2017). Practices utilized by the supervisors have shifted district office leadership from a supervision focus to a focus on instruction. Honig & Rainey's (2019) research found principal supervisors taking a teaching and learning approach when working with principals was successful. In research from Johnson et al. (2014), they stressed the importance of building mutually supportive and trusting relationships between district leaders and principals and highlighted the ways that culture and the external environment influence the relationship between the central office and schools.

District office leadership that effectively builds relationships with principals, and promotes and trains principals as the instructional leader, has shown increases in student achievement (Duke, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2010). The role of the principal supervisor and district leadership should wrap around support in guiding and mentoring principals with instructional leadership skills and how they can build teacher capacity. Assisting principals with strategies they can utilize to change the trajectory of learning for students through professional learning opportunities and mentoring should be the main focus of principal supervisors for urban schools (Hall & Simon, 2013; Mader, 2016; Maxwell, 2014). Developing trusting relationships between principal and supervisor is critical to establish positive professional learning opportunities. The role of principal supervisors should use routines for coaching and set expectations for professional learning. Principals need to engage in reflective practices with their supervisors for quality coaching opportunities (Honig, 2012; Saltzman, 2017).

Organizational structures in 2019 shifted in OKCPS. Instructional Leader Directors (ILD's) were assigned to lead principals and schools. ILD's title changed in 2024 to Executive Director Principal Supervisor with essentially the same roles and responsibilities. Their role was established to actively mentor, provide support needed, along with evaluating or supervising the site principals and school programs. Slothower (2017) reviewed the relationships and challenges viewed by the OKCPS principals of the Instructional Leader Directors. The fit and personality of the mentor or supervisor was important and confirmed in the study. The role of the Instructional Leader Director was found to be needed in Slothower's study (2017). Due to budget constraints at the time of the study in OKCPS, the Instructional Leader Directors ratio of principals/schools per Instructional Leader Director was high and the amount of time and attention the Instructional Leader Director could give to the principal/site was very low and the mentoring was not at a high level. The principal supervisor can support principals as being a mentor through coaching. Research confirms principals need coaching in the areas of developing skills and knowledge to lead a school and to lessen burnout (Goldring et al., 2009; Mitgang, 2013; O'Neil, 2015;). A key role for principals is to support high levels of student achievement. Due to the important role of principals, their supervisors and other district office leaders must support principal efforts to provide quality instruction in our urban schools (Goldring et al., 2009; Honig, et al., 2010).

Collectively, the literature emphasizes the importance of principal supervisors in providing instructional leadership support through coaching, mentoring, and relationship development. However, much of this research assumes that these support structures function as intended and does not fully examine how principals experience this support in practice. This reveals a gap in understanding the consistency, quality, and impact of supervisor support within district systems, particularly in complex urban settings. This leads to a closer examination of

district office systems of support for principals. Although principal supervisors play a critical role in supporting instructional leadership, these relationships exist within broader district systems that shape how support is structured, delivered, and experienced. This study addresses that gap by focusing on principals' lived experiences and examining how supervisor support is enacted within the district systems.

District Office Systems of Support for Principals as Instructional Leaders

Historically, district office leadership has focused on supporting principals in managerial and compliance responsibilities. More recently, this role has shifted toward supporting instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Honig et al., 2010). As expectations for student outcomes have increased, district leaders are expected to provide more targeted instructional support.

Honig (2008) emphasized that district leaders should collaborate directly with building leaders to support principals' instructional leadership, thereby enhancing learning outcomes across schools. District office structures need to have a dedicated support person for the principal as a resource, not just the traditional role of a district manager or evaluator. Research has suggested the principalship has a significant influence on instruction and school success. Principal supervisors are key for change in supporting principals to shift focus from compliance to coaching (McQueen, 2021). Stosich (2020) found principal supervisors contributed support that focused on instruction and "encouraged principals to share leadership with teachers" with the Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT) the schools created (p.42). The work of the ILT, which consisted of the principal supervisor and other district office leaders, was perceived as a joint or team effort for school success. Practices utilized by the supervisors was a shift in district office leadership from a supervision focus to a focus on instruction. Honig & Rainey (2019) research

found principal supervisors taking a teaching and learning approach when working with principals was successful. Honig & Rainey (2019) findings mentioned the importance of mentoring for principal learning and having district leaders serve as mentors was more successful than outside coaching for principals.

District leaders need to determine competencies a principal must possess to be an instructional leader and to have programs in place that build capacity in leaders to bring about growth in student learning. In the article "Leadership Coaching in an Induction Program for Novice Principals: A 3-Year Study," Lochmiller (2014) found that coaching provided to novice principals changes over time and coaching needs to be adaptable, providing coaching based on the strengths and weaknesses of the principal. Hayes and Irby (2020) found five challenges when training principals as instructional leaders. The five challenges found were listed as the following: (a) teaching instructional leadership via online courses, (b) time in the internship to focus on instructional leadership, (c) instructional leadership mindsets, (d) pedagogical knowledge for use in instructional leadership and (e) the professor's knowledge/experience in instructional leadership. They found the need to continue research on how to better prepare for the principalship. There is a high need to create powerful learning experiences through induction programs for principals' success in school leadership.

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) approved the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) school and district level standards and elements on educational leadership (2011). In the rationale of the standards, questions are asked to ensure effective district leadership. An example question is "[w]hat do our district leaders need to know, understand and do to support teachers and building-level personnel to increase student learning and achieve highly effective environments?" District leaders need to provide

multiple experiences for principals between course content and the district. An induction program "should represent a synthesis of key content and high impact field-based experiences extended over time" that follow the ELCC standards (*Educational Leadership Programs Standards,* 2011). The gap between learning to practice as a principal is essential, and the district leaders need to ensure support for the practice of principals as instructional leaders.

University preparation programs often do not fully equip future administrators with the skills required for effective instructional leadership, and districts frequently lack sustained induction supports; however, the literature highlights the importance of practice-based preparation, mentoring, and coherent leadership pipelines, pointing to a critical need to better understand how these supports can be designed and implemented—an area this study seeks to address (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2019; Young et al., 2009). Multiple studies have found that principal training at the university level and from the school district is not preparing principals for the role of leading learning in their schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Bridging the gap from learning to practice and supporting principals is essential.

In an article entitled, *"The Perceptions of New Principals Regarding the Knowledge and Skills Important to Their Success,"* Petzko (2008) shared the concern of a shortage of qualified candidates for the principalship. This tells us that the programs of study and district induction programs are needed more than ever and are extremely important to the success of an administrator. Another journal article authored by Brown and Chai (2012) stated new principals in New Zealand attend an eighteen-month induction program, called "First Time Principals". Induction programs need to meet frequently with job embedded experiences, goal setting and reflections. In the article by Meyer et al. (2019), they discussed goal setting as an important

process for principals in an induction program that emphasized instruction and student-centered leadership.

It is important for administrators to be lead learners. Research also emphasizes the importance of ongoing professional learning for both district leaders and principals. Effective leadership development requires alignment between district initiatives, instructional practices, and the daily realities of schools (Meyers et al., 2019; Fink & Resnick, 2001).

A study was conducted to review the impacts of the professional development program called the Executive Development Program, EDP (Master et al., 2021). It was determined by the researchers that the principal participants who completed the professional development program, along with coaching, had higher success by utilizing the recommended practices and strategies mastered during the EDP.

Overall, the literature confirms that districts are working to shift from a focus on management and compliance toward supporting instructional leadership through professional development, mentoring, and supervision. However, much of this research focuses on how these systems are designed rather than how they function in practice. There is limited understanding of how these systems operate when principals are managing competing demands, accountability pressures, and resource constraints simultaneously. This represents a critical gap in the literature, as it overlooks how district systems are experienced by principals in their daily work. This study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of high school principals within district support systems and how those systems influence their ability to lead instructionally.

To better understand how these organizational conditions interact, a theoretical framework is needed to examine the relationships between district systems, leadership structures,

and principal experience. In the following section of this chapter, the theoretical framework will be shared for the case study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this qualitative multiple case study begins with a philosophical worldview. “We see worldviews as a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 5). The approach to this research study is through a pragmatic worldview. As the researcher, being “problem-centered” on how to assist with the need for support of principals from district leadership and being “real world practice oriented” is important to solve the problem of practice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 6). The problem of practice for this study centers around principal burnout and stress that have both increased since the pandemic. The pressures and expectations placed upon principals include student academic success and outcomes, school safety, creating a positive climate for the school, hiring, retaining and training highly qualified staff, increased student discipline, mental health issues, and staying abreast of federal and state laws and district policies (Carbaugh et al., 2015; Fullan, 2016). Principals find it difficult to balance all their responsibilities (Spillane & Lowenhaupt, 2019). District office leaders continue to seek strategies to support and guide principals with the challenges and dilemmas they face daily in schools while working to increase student achievement.

Organizational theory is a lens through which individuals and groups are viewed inside an organization. Daft (2020) defined organization theory as the “relationship between organizations” and the people within the organization. Organizations are created with the relationships of the people within the organization (Daft, 2020). The inner workings of the school district, particularly with the individuals and groups including, district leaders, principal

supervisors and principals, and their relationships within the organization and how they are connected is important to this study. The human factor of relationships within the organization between a principal and supervisor and the support from the structures of the district office are imperative for the success of the organization. Along with the organizational relationships and an understanding of the individual principal and group interaction and how they are connected are all reasons for utilizing the organizational theory. Viewing the issue of principal burnout through the lens of human relations is important because the interactions between individuals in a group and the group inside an organization is a linchpin of value to an organization.

The approach to the study will be through an organizational theory lens, focused on human resources and relations. Organizational theory involves concepts that are related to each other and looking into how people behave within organizations. The theory looks to explain how parts of the organization connect or do not connect, along with how individuals and groups behave and are connected in working towards a goal. Griffin and Moorhead (1986) stated an organization consists of "two or more people working together to achieve a common goal" (p. 20). The bureaucracy within an organization is the administrative portion of the business and includes the top management that is responsible for executing policy and procedures (Beetham, 1987). For this study, district office leaders are the top management and take responsibility for supporting principals to execute the policies and procedures with the school organization. The common goal is student success. The relationship of the principals to district office leaders connects directly to the work of the organization being successful. Grounded in organizational theory, the organizational structure and how the upper management structures and supports for principals will be examined in this study. Utilizing organizational theory with a focus on human resources and relations is essential to this study for analyzing human aspects of leading and

relationships to give principals what they need from their supervisors and district office leadership. Trust and strong mentoring relationships between principals and their supervisors are necessary to bring about change in a school (Honig, 2008; Honig et al., 2010).

Bolman and Deal (2021) share the four frames which are structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. The theoretical framework for this study is based on the human resources section of Bolman and Deal's (2021) Four-Frame model. Figure 1 showcases the four frames and the metaphors, central concepts, images of leadership, and the leadership challenges for each frame.

Figure 1

Bolman and Deal Four-Frame Model

Exhibit 1.1.
Overview of the Four-Frame Model.

	Frame			
	Structural	**Human Resource**	**Political**	**Symbolic**
Metaphor for organization	Factory or machine	Family	Jungle	Carnival, temple, theater
Supporting disciplines	Sociology, management science	Psychology	Political science	Anthropology, dramaturgy, institutional theory
Central concepts	Roles, goals, strategies, policies, technology, environment	Needs, skills, relationships	Power, conflict, competition, politics	Culture, myth, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, heroes
Image of leadership	Social architecture	Empowerment	Advocacy and political savvy	Inspiration
Basic leadership challenge	Attune structure to task, technology, environment	Align organizational and human needs	Develop agenda and power base	Create faith, belief, beauty, meaning

Note. Reprinted from *Reframing Organizations* (p. 21), by L. G. Bolman & T. E. Deal, 2021, Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2021 by Jossey-Bass.

Defining characteristics of a human resources frame focus on relationships of the individuals to the organization, improving the fit for people and the organization, people are valued as key to the organization; organizations are the collection of the people (Bolman & Deal, 2021). The central concepts of the frame are centered around relationships, needs and developed skills. Bolman and Deal (2021) share that the relationship between people and the organization is important, as the organization needs people and people need the organization. The needs should be aligned for the people and the organization. Rousseau (1995) states, "Identification is a psychological state wherein an individual perceives himself or herself to be part of a larger whole," and organizational identification is "wherein individuals perceive themselves to be a part of a larger organization (p. 241). "When the fit between the people and organization is poor, one or both suffer" (Rousseau, 1995, p. 133) and workers feel disconnected to the organization. The organization might then fail due to employees no longer focusing their efforts on the purposes of the organization. As a principal, being connected to the organization and understanding the "why" of the organization is essential to leading a school to success.

Sinek (2011) describes the importance of knowing the "why" with his concept of the Golden Circle. "Starting with the WHY is just the beginning" (p. 65) as individuals in an organization need to have clarity as to how they fit with their WHY and how they connect to the organization. Principals, as leaders of a school, do not have to have all the answers or hold all the information, however, they should have surrounding support. In Bolman and Deal's (2021) Human Resource Frame, the concept of *family* is central to fostering a sense of belonging within a team. District leaders can support principals in learning to trust the "family of the organization" and to rely on one another. "Leaders don't have all the great ideas" and they achieve very little by themselves. District leaders supporting principals can inspire people to come together for the

good of the organization (Sinek, 2011). Leaders generally know what needs to be done within the organization. However, leaders should "start with the WHY we need to do things" (Sinek, 2011, p. 228). Principals need to feel a part of the district with the work and initiatives that are directed from the district level, and they need to feel supported by the district for their overall effort and success. The work and initiatives focus on student achievement and overall school success through state and district accountability measures. Highly successful organizations have invested "in people on the premise that a highly motivated skilled workforce is a powerful competitive advantage" states Bolman & Deal (2021). District office leaders should invest time, support, and professional learning opportunities for their principals to support their needs and ensure their basic needs are met. Bolman & Deal (2021) identify how principals are motivated to do the incredibly stressful and challenging job of leading a school in their Model of Motivation at Work. This model also identifies how district administrators can motivate and support principals. Bolman & Deal (2021) share the models of motivation at work with Maslow's hierarchy of needs being utilized in the human resources frame. In Figure 2, *Model of Motivation at Work,* Bolman & Deal (2021) share several various authors and the workers' needs and what motivates a person to work.

Figure 2

Models of Motivation at Work

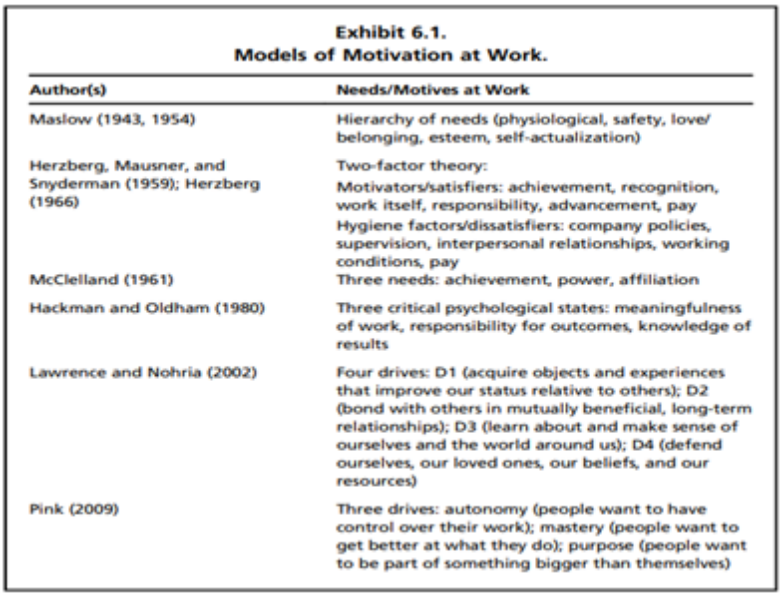


Exhibit 6.1.
Models of Motivation at Work.

Author(s)	Needs/Motives at Work
Maslow (1943, 1954)	Hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization)
Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman (1959); Herzberg (1966)	Two-factor theory: Motivators/satisfiers: achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility, advancement, pay Hygiene factors/dissatisfiers: company policies, supervision, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, pay
McClelland (1961)	Three needs: achievement, power, affiliation
Hackman and Oldham (1980)	Three critical psychological states: meaningfulness of work, responsibility for outcomes, knowledge of results
Lawrence and Nohria (2002)	Four drives: D1 (acquire objects and experiences that improve our status relative to others); D2 (bond with others in mutually beneficial, long-term relationships); D3 (learn about and make sense of ourselves and the world around us); D4 (defend ourselves, our loved ones, our beliefs, and our resources)
Pink (2009)	Three drives: autonomy (people want to have control over their work); mastery (people want to get better at what they do); purpose (people want to be part of something bigger than themselves)

Note. Adapted from *Reframing Organizations* (p. 121), by L. G. Bolman & T. E. Deal, 2021, Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2021 by Jossey-Bass.

District office leaders help principals find meaning for their work, as they work so diligently to lead their schools. “When individuals find satisfaction and meaning in work, organizations profit from the effective use of their talent and energy” (Bolman & Deal, 2021, p. 156). Bolman & Deal (2021) state that a combination of methods with a “comprehensive strategy” and a “long-term human resource management philosophy” is important within the human resources frame (p.156).

Team dynamics and interpersonal relationships of the individuals within the organization hinge on worker satisfaction and the effectiveness of the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2021). In my study, the relationship of the supervisor of principals and the structure of support from district office leaders will be analyzed. Bolman and Deal (2021) share the human resources frame “centers on what organizations and people do to and for one another” (p. 113). There are

six basic human resource strategies in Bolman and Deal's human resource frame. The six strategies are listed as follows: to build and implement an HR strategy, hire the right people, keep them, invest in them, empower them, and promote diversity (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Each strategy has practices to focus upon for leadership that is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Basic Human Resource Strategies

Exhibit 7.1.
Basic Human Resource Strategies.

Human Resource Principle	Specific Practices
Build and implement an HR strategy.	Develop and share a clear philosophy for managing people. Build systems and practices to implement the philosophy.
Hire the right people.	Know what you want. Be selective.
Keep them.	Reward well. Protect jobs. Promote from within. Share the wealth.
Invest in them.	Invest in learning. Create development opportunities.
Empower them.	Provide information and support. Encourage autonomy and participation. Redesign work. Foster self-managing teams. Promote egalitarianism.
Promote diversity.	Be explicit and consistent about the organization's diversity philosophy. Hold managers accountable.

Note. Reprinted from *Reframing Organizations* (p. 138), by L. G. Bolman & T. E. Deal, 2021, Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2021 by Jossey-Bass.

Bolman and Deal (2021) share the human resources frame "centers on what organizations and people do to and for one another" (p. 113). At the core of this study is instructional leadership and how district leaders and principal supervisors support principals. The conceptual framework of this study focuses on principal supervisors' and district leaders' practices and strategies that will build instructional leadership and develop capacity within principals. How principal supervisors and district structures support principals and how they focus on the human

needs of principals along with the organizational expectations of principals and their supervisors will be researched. The needs of principals and how district leaders nurture, motivate, grow and empower principals is central to this research and the human resources framework.

The human resources frame from Bolman and Deal (2021) provides an important lens for this study by focusing on the relationship between individuals and the organization. This framework helps guide the study by examining how district leadership structures and systems either support or create challenges for principals. It also connects directly to the research questions by focusing on how principals experience support, relationships, and expectations within the district. In Chapter 4, this framework will be used to interpret how themes related to workload, support, autonomy, and relationships reflect the alignment, or misalignment, between principals and district systems and structures.

The literature consistently highlights the increasing complexity of the principal role, the importance of district support systems, and the role of principal supervisors in supporting instructional leadership. However, these areas are often studied separately, which limits understanding of how they work together within district systems. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of high school principals within district support systems, providing a more complete understanding of how district structures, expectations, and supports influence principal effectiveness and sustainability.

Grounded in organizational theory and the human resources frame, this study also examines how relationships, support structures, and organizational expectations align, or do not align, with the needs of principals. This lens provides a way to better understand how district systems influence principal experience and contributes to a deeper understanding of how to support principals as instructional leaders.

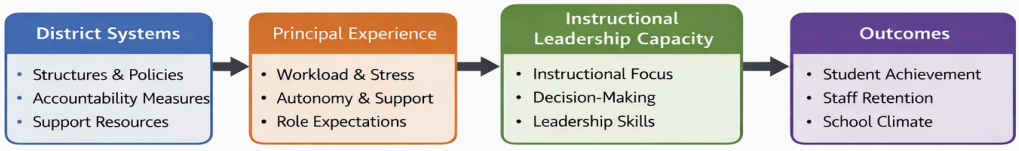
This framework not only provides a lens for understanding organizational relationships but also guides the interpretation of this study. Through the human resources frame, this study examines whether there is alignment or misalignment between district expectations and the needs of principals. The framework predicts that when there is a lack of alignment between organizational structures and individual capacity, principals will experience increased workload, limited autonomy, and reduced effectiveness in instructional leadership. This perspective allows the study to move beyond describing principal stress to examining how district systems contribute to these conditions. This study is necessary because it shifts the focus from individual principal challenges to examining how district systems shape those challenges in practice.

This study is grounded in organizational theory, with a specific emphasis on Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model as the primary analytical lens. While this study centers on the human resources frame, the structural, political, and symbolic frames also provide critical insight into how district systems function and influence principal experience. This framework guides the development of the research questions by focusing on how organizational structures, relationships, power dynamics, and role expectations shape the lived experiences of principals. Additionally, this framework informs the interpretation of findings in Chapter 5, allowing for a deeper analysis of how district systems contribute to principal stress, instructional leadership capacity, and sustainability.

Based on the literature and theoretical framework, a conceptual model shown in Figure 4 was developed to illustrate the relationship between district systems, principal experience, instructional leadership capacity, and outcomes.

Figure 4

Conceptual Model of District Systems and Principal Experience



Note. This conceptual model illustrates how district systems (e.g., structures, policies, accountability measures, and support resources) influence principal experience, including workload, autonomy, and role expectations. Principal experience, in turn, shapes instructional leadership capacity, which includes instructional focus, decision-making, and leadership skills. These factors collectively impact organizational outcomes such as student achievement, staff retention, and school climate.

The model indicates that district systems, including structures, expectations, and accountability mechanisms, directly influence principal experience, which includes workload, stress, autonomy, and relational support. These experiences, in turn, shape principals' ability to function as instructional leaders, ultimately impacting school-level outcomes. This conceptualization highlights the interconnected nature of organizational conditions and leadership effectiveness.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

This chapter explains the methodology used for the study, the rationale for the design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and data analysis. The research study focused on how Oklahoma City Public Schools district leaders supported high school principals as instructional leaders. The research is grounded in a pragmatic worldview and utilizes a qualitative multiple case study design. According to Yin (2011), a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p.18). The approach allows for both an in-depth analysis and holistic understanding of the phenomenon. As Merriam (2009) notes, case studies are especially valuable for generating rich, contextual data. In this study, the case study design facilitates a deeper understanding of how principals perceive the support they receive from district leadership and principal supervisors.

The guiding question for this study is:

RQ 1: How do district leaders in Oklahoma City Public Schools create and implement systems of support for high school principals in their role as instructional leaders?

Additionally, the supporting questions for this study are:

RQ 2: What are the most significant stressors that hinder high school principals in urban school settings from effectively fulfilling their role as instructional leaders?

RQ 3: What types of support do urban high school principals need from district leaders to succeed?

The qualitative multiple case study included method components beginning with an online survey of secondary high school principals and district office leaders which included Instructional Leader Directors. In the secondary phase of the study, the chosen principal

participants for interviews were given a reflective journal to complete prior to a semi-structured interview. The data were triangulated and cross referenced with all four datasets which will include principal and district office leaders surveys, principal reflective journal entries and principal interviews. Contents of this chapter provide method elements for the case study and include: (a) a review of the purpose of the study; (b) methodology rationale; (c) role of the researcher; (d) reflexivity; (e) design and data collection procedures; (f) participant selection and sampling; (g) data analysis methods; and (h) strategies for trustworthiness.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to identify the primary sources of stress among high school principals and to examine the types of support district office leaders can provide to enhance their effectiveness as instructional leaders. Through an exploration of principals' lived experiences, the study seeks to better understand their specific needs and how district office leadership can align its support to improve student outcomes. This research will address a gap in the literature and offer practical guidance for Oklahoma City Public School (OKCPS) leaders seeking to strengthen principal support systems.

District office leaders play a critical role in guiding and supporting site administrators in the execution of district priorities. In many districts, including OKCPS, principals frequently report that their workloads are unmanageable describing their responsibilities as overwhelming and their time stretched across competing demands. Tasks such as student discipline, staff evaluations, onboarding new employees, and managing personnel issues often dominate their day, leaving limited time for instructional leadership. This disconnect calls for an examination of how district leaders balance their oversight responsibilities with the need to provide instructional support. Honig, Lorton and Copland (2009) emphasize that central office transformation requires

"strengthening the professional practice of both central office leaders and building leaders while increasing teaching and learning outcomes" (pg. 32). This study centers on understanding how principals experience district support systems in order to better align leadership practices with the realities of the principalship.

Methodology Rationale

This research study focused on how OKCPS district leaders support high school principals as instructional leaders. Guided by a pragmatic worldview, the researcher utilized a qualitative multiple case study method approach, which is appropriate for exploring complex, real-world experiences within a bounded system (Yin, 2011). A case study design will allow for direct engagement with participants and the use of multiple data sources to illuminate different dimensions of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

A multiple case study design was selected rather than a phenomenological approach because the purpose of this study was not only to understand the essence of principal experience, but also to examine how that experience was shaped within a specific district context across multiple principal cases. A phenomenological design would have centered primarily on the shared essence of the experience itself, while a multiple case study design allowed for examination of both individual principal experiences and cross-case patterns related to district systems, supports, and organizational conditions. This design was most appropriate because it aligned with the study's focus on how district structures influenced principal experience in practice.

In this qualitative multiple case study, each participating high school principal served as an individual case. For the purpose of this study, each high school principal represented a single case, with their lived experience within district support systems serving as the unit of analysis.

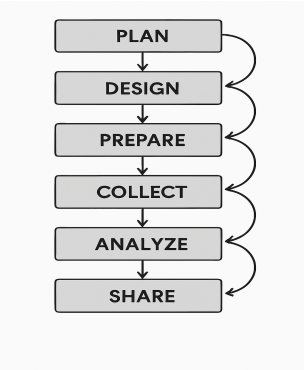
Oklahoma City Public Schools serves as the setting for this study, providing the district context in which principals' experiences are examined. The study is focused specifically within this district, allowing for a deeper understanding of how district systems and leadership structures influence principals' daily work.

As Bromley (1986) explains, case study research enables the investigator to observe participants in their natural settings and gain insight into their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Gustafsson (2017) notes that the case study method promotes collaborative meaning-making, as participants often share personal narratives to contextualize key issues. This study followed Yin's (2017) six-step model, which includes: (1) planning the research, (2) designing the case study protocol, (3) preparing the instruments and logistics, (4) collecting the data, (5) analyzing the data towards findings, (6) reporting the results (see Figure 5).

This structured yet adaptable framework aligned with the study's objective of understanding how district-level leadership practices shape principal effectiveness in instructional leadership roles. Lastly, the case study design generated rich, contextual insights. It delved into the support systems that principals perceive as most beneficial, as well as the stressors that may inhibit their ability to lead effectively.

Figure 5

Case Study Research Process



Note. This figure illustrates the iterative stages of case study research. *Adapted from Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed., p. 2), by R. K. Yin, 2017, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2017 by SAGE.

This design was appropriate for the study because it allowed for close examination of principal experience within a bounded district context while also identifying patterns across cases. The multiple case study approach strengthened the study's ability to connect individual lived experiences to broader organizational structures, which was central to understanding how district systems influenced principal stress, support, and instructional leadership.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative case study research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Yazan, 2015). In this study, the researcher conducted interviews, interpreted participant responses, and documented observations in alignment with case study methodology. The researcher possessed prior experience as a principal, principal supervisor, and district office leader, including service within OKCPS. This background was expected to enhance contextual understanding of the participant perspectives and institutional dynamics.

Due to this prior affiliation, the researcher may be perceived by participants as an "insider." While such positioning may facilitate rapport and trust, it also introduces the possibility of bias. To address this concern, the researcher employed a reflective and systematic approach throughout data collection and analysis. Bias was mitigated through repeated transcript review, consistent use of a shared code frame across datasets, peer debriefing during the coding and theme development process, and triangulation across surveys, reflective journals, and interviews. These steps helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participant data rather than the researcher's prior professional experiences or assumptions.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process by which researchers continuously assess how their own identities, experiences, and values may influence the research process and its outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the researcher's prior professional relationship with the study site may shape the interactions with participants and the interpretation of data. This positionality, while potentially beneficial for accessing deeper insights, also requires a disciplined commitment to objectivity and transparency.

To support reflexivity, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis. Reflexivity was addressed through deliberate attention to personal assumptions, repeated review of the data, peer debriefing, and ongoing efforts to ground interpretation in participant narratives. Additionally, participants were invited to review their interview transcripts and clarify any inaccuracies, a process known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which enhanced the study's trustworthiness.

The researcher took deliberate steps to recognize and bracket personal assumptions, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in participant narratives rather than prior experiences

or expectations. Reflexivity and positionality remained central to the researcher's methodological integrity throughout the study.

Design and Data Collection Procedures

This study followed a two-phase data collection design. Phase One involved an online survey administered through Qualtrics. One survey was given to principals and a second survey for district office leaders who are employed by Oklahoma City Public Schools. The two online surveys were designed to identify the most significant stressors experienced by high school principals within OKCPS and how district office leaders support high school principals. The initial sample included all OKCPS high school principals and district office leaders who provide informed consent to participate in the study. The survey contained approximately thirty items and was distributed via email. Participants had two weeks to complete the survey, with reminder emails sent at the one-week mark and again during the final three days before the survey closes.

The surveys began with demographic questions, including years of service as an administrator, number of students enrolled, number of assistant principals, socioeconomic makeup of the school community and levels of experience as a principal or district level administrator. Following this, participants responded to Likert-scale items, yes/no questions, and multiple-choice questions focused on task distribution, workload, and key sources of stress in their roles. Specific items addressed issues such as student discipline, teacher evaluations, and employee management. Additional questions explored principals' perceptions of the support provided by district office leadership and how that support impacts their ability to lead instructionally and influence student achievement.

In this study, the surveys were used as descriptive and contextual tools rather than for statistical or inferential analysis. The purpose of the survey data was to provide participant

context, identify initial patterns related to workload, support, and stress, and inform purposeful selection for phase two interviews. The survey results were not analyzed independently but instead used to support and strengthen the interpretation of qualitative data collected through reflective journals and interviews.

After survey data collection was complete, the responses were reviewed and analyzed to identify principals who met the selection criteria for phase two of the study. Purposeful sampling was used to select four principals for reflective journals and follow-up interviews based on predetermined qualifier metrics, including total student enrollment, school-level socioeconomic demographics, and the number of stressors identified in the survey.

In phase two, the selected principals were invited to participate in reflective journaling and individual, in-person or virtual interviews. Each participant provided informed consent to participate and to be audio-recorded and videoed during the interview process. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the conversations while allowing flexibility to explore participant-specific insights.

Interview questions were developed around key themes emerging from the survey data. Interview prompts included:

- Can you describe a recent situation where you felt overwhelmed by your responsibilities as a principal?
- In your experience, how do district office leaders either alleviate or add to your workload?
- What types of support from the district would make the biggest difference in your day-to-day responsibilities?
- How has your relationship with district leadership evolved over time?

- If you had the chance to redesign the way district leaders support principals, what changes would you suggest?
- What types of support from district office leaders would help you manage your responsibilities more effectively?

Each interview was conducted virtually and recorded using Microsoft Teams. Transcriptions were generated using the Microsoft Teams transcription application and subsequently reviewed and corrected by the researcher to ensure accuracy. All transcripts were reviewed at least twice to confirm they reflect the participants' responses verbatim. Participants were also given the opportunity to review and verify the accuracy of their transcripts as part of a member checking process, enhancing the credibility and validity of the data.

Participant Selection and Sampling

Participant selection is a critical component of qualitative research, particularly when the aim is to gain deep insight into a bounded case. This study focused on Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS), a large urban district in Oklahoma. All eight high school principals within OKCPS and district office leaders in Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment were invited to participate in phase one of the study. In phase two, selected principals participated in reflective journaling and semi-structured interviews. Following the administration of the phase one survey, purposeful sampling was employed to select participants for interviews. Purposeful sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when the goal is to explore and understand the experiences of individuals with deep, context-specific knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The phase one survey included specific screening questions and metrics that served as qualifiers for interview selection.

Selection criteria for targeted interview candidates included:

- Scores of 4–5 (“Agree”/“Strongly Agree”) on overload indicators (Q6–Q10)
- Scores of 1–2 (“Strongly Disagree”/“Disagree”) on support-related items (Q11–Q15)
- Comments in Q21–25 indicating high stress, burnout, or specific calls for more support

Listed below is the ideal principal interview candidate profile considered for phase two selection:

- Principals who demonstrate high overload and low perceived district support
- At least 2+ years in role to ensure reflective experience
- Currently working in a school with 60%+ low-income population (as proxy for urban context)

Based on the responses to these metrics and the ideal profile, four principals were selected for participation in phase two. These principals were asked to complete a brief reflective journal prior to their scheduled interviews. This journaling activity served to enhance data triangulation by capturing pre-interview insights that complement the survey and interview data. All interviews were conducted virtually and followed a semi-structured interview protocol, allowing for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore emerging themes.

Data Analysis

The organization of materials played a central role in facilitating the analysis of data collected from surveys, interviews, field notes, and reflective journals. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the structured organization of data is essential for enabling both within-case and cross-case analysis. It supports the development of generalizations across multiple cases. In this study, data was organized thematically and categorized based on emerging patterns and participant responses.

The data analysis process followed a systematic progression from initial coding to theme development. The analysis was conducted using a combination of manual review and NVivo qualitative data analysis software. First, all interview transcripts, reflective journals, and survey responses were reviewed multiple times for accuracy and familiarity with the data. Second, the data were uploaded into NVivo and first-cycle coding began using deductive codes derived from the research questions, problem of practice, and theoretical framework. Third, as additional patterns emerged from participant responses, inductive codes were added to capture ideas not fully reflected in the initial code set. Fourth, in the second cycle of coding, related codes were compared and grouped into broader categories. Fifth, these categories were analyzed across cases and data sources to identify larger organizational tensions. Finally, those tensions informed the development of the six themes presented in Chapter 4.

In the first cycle of coding, deductive codes were applied based on the research questions, problem of practice, and theoretical framework, while additional inductive codes were identified as patterns emerged from the data. In the second cycle of coding, these codes were reviewed, compared, and grouped into broader categories based on recurring patterns across the datasets. From these categories, themes were developed to represent the shared experiences of participants. This process allowed for a structured progression from raw data to codes, from codes to categories, and from categories to themes.

An inductive and deductive coding process was employed to analyze the qualitative data. Inductive coding allowed themes to emerge directly from the data, while deductive coding was informed by the study's research questions and conceptual framework. Coding was applied to survey results, interview transcripts, and reflective journals submitted by principals. Cross-case analysis was conducted by examining commonalities and differences across principals and

principal supervisors to identify shared experiences and divergent perspectives. Within-case analysis was first used to understand each principal's individual experience, followed by cross-case analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and differences across the principal cases.

Data from the phase one survey were used to inform and contextualize the interview responses. The survey findings were used descriptively to identify general patterns in principal stressors, perceived district support, and participant context. These survey responses supported purposeful participant selection and inform the interpretation of interview and reflective journal data rather than serving as a source of statistical analysis. These findings were triangulated with interview data and reflective journals to ensure validity and depth of understanding and enhance the credibility of the findings.

All identified themes were aligned with the guiding and supporting research questions. The analysis aimed to identify patterns of meaning across cases and participant groups, which informed the interpretation of findings, and the development of conclusions related to how district leadership supports high school principals in their instructional leadership roles.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research involves having rigorous strategies to ensure that the study's findings are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). By integrating multiple techniques within the study, it upheld methodological integrity across each phase of the research process.

Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation, incorporating diverse sources such as surveys, interviews, reflective journals, and field notes to substantiate emerging themes. Additionally, member checking was utilized, enabling participants to review and validate their

interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretations. This practice helped ensure that the findings genuinely represent participants' lived experiences rather than researcher bias.

Transferability was supported through the use of rich, thick description of the research setting, participant demographics, school contexts, and organizational conditions within Oklahoma City Public Schools. Providing this level of contextual detail allows readers to determine the extent to which the findings may transfer to similar urban school district settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability was addressed through the use of an audit trail that documented key methodological decisions throughout the study. The audit trail included records of participant selection decisions, procedural deviations, coding development, category formation, theme refinement, and analytic memos created during the data analysis process. This documentation strengthened transparency and provided a clear record of how findings were developed.

Confirmability was strengthened through systematic coding procedures, triangulation across multiple data sources, and peer debriefing during the analysis process. Although reflexive journaling was used, the researcher engaged in ongoing self-monitoring of assumptions and relied on repeated data review to ensure findings were grounded in participant responses rather than personal perspectives. These strategies supported neutrality and helped strengthen the confirmability of the study.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the qualitative research design and methodological approach that guided this study. Through a multi-phase data collection process—including surveys, reflective journals and interviews, the study aimed to generate rich, contextual insights into how

Oklahoma City Public Schools district leaders, including principal supervisors, support high school principals in their roles as instructional leaders.

The findings aimed to inform actionable recommendations for improving support structures at the district level. Additionally, these recommendations may include strategies related to mentoring, professional development, and organizational systems that empower principals to lead more effectively and promote sustainable improvements in student achievement across OKCPS high schools.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction to Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how district office leaders support urban high school principals within OKCPS. This study focused on identifying gaps in systems of support to assist principals as instructional leaders and determine obstacles and stressors of the high school principal's position. The intent was to provide research for district leaders, and instructional directors who supervise principals, to explore what types of supports principals perceive as most beneficial from their supervisors and the district leaders. These findings can guide district reviews of principals stressors and support systems. This chapter presents findings from OKCPS principal surveys, reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, along with the OKCPS district leaders from surveys of the high school principals Instructional Directors. The results will be organized and aligned directly to the three research questions established in Chapter 1. Data will be presented descriptively which were derived through thematic analysis. Through the thematic analysis process, codes, categories and themes emerged to answer the research questions and were aligned to the theoretical framework of the study.

The focus of this chapter is on what principals experienced within district support systems, rather than the process used to analyze the data. The findings highlight patterns related to workload, district expectations, supervisor support, and organizational structures that shape the principal experience.

Chapter 4 of this study will begin with a review of the three research questions. After the review of research questions, a description of the number of participants, to include demographics and the characteristics of the participants, will be defined. Next in this chapter,

there will be a summary of the data collection, which will describe how the data was gathered. Any data issues that were encountered shared and a detailed description of how the qualitative data was coded, categorized and six themes were developed. A summary of the steps taken and the thematic analysis process, including the transcription process while checking for assumptions, will be explained for the study. Next, data preparation will be described and the steps taken in gathering the data. How the data was coded and the thematic analysis process will be shared. Lastly, basic descriptive findings will be shared and the analysis of the findings, by the six themes developed, will be indicated. I will begin with the review of the research questions.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study:

RQ1:How do district leaders in Oklahoma City Public Schools create and implement systems of support for high school principals in their role as instructional leaders?

Supporting questions for this study:

RQ2: What are the most significant stressors that hinder high school principals in urban school settings from effectively fulfilling their role as instructional leaders?

RQ 3: What types of support do urban high school principals need from district leaders to succeed?

Chapter 4 will present the findings from surveys, reflective journals and interviews conducted with urban high school principals and principal supervisors from the district office leaders. The findings are organized around six themes that emerged through deductive coding, and a thematic analysis process, which aligned with the study's research questions and

theoretical framework. Next for this chapter is the description of participants for the qualitative case study with OKCPS.

Description of Participants

Participants in this study were administrators and employees of OKCPS. The site administrator participants were high school principals. Seven high school principals participated in completing the Qualtrics survey. Only one principal had eight to fifteen years serving as a high school principal. Four principals had served four to seven years as the high school principal and two of the participants had zero to three year's experience. The number of years of principalship at their current high school did not exceed five years. Four of the principals had four to seven years at the same high school and three high school principals had zero to three years at their high school. Only one principal had 1,500+ students, and another had between 1,001 and 1,500 students enrolled. The remaining five principals had fewer than 1,000 students, with three principals having fewer than 500 students.

The number of assistant principals they had to support their school varied. Three high schools had three plus assistant principals, three schools had two and one school had one assistant principal. As for student socioeconomic status, one of seven principals reported in the survey to be mixed-income. The other six were predominantly low-income socioeconomic status.

Four participants from the principal survey were chosen and completed the reflective journaling and participated in a semi-structured interview. The four participants were named as Principal A, B, C, and D for the study. Two of the principals served as a high school principal and in their current position for four to seven years and the other two for zero to three years. The student enrollment varied as only one had one thousand and five hundred plus students and two

schools had five hundred and one to a thousand and only one had a hundred and one to five hundred students enrolled. The number of assistant principals they had at their school was fairly consistent with only one principal having two assistant principals and the other three having three plus assistant principals. Three schools were considered low income for student socioeconomic status with only one of the schools being mixed income. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the principal participants.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics - High School Principals

Principal	Years as Principal	Years at Current School	Student Enrollment	Assistant Principals	School SES
A	4-7	4-7	1,500+	3+	Low
B	0-3	0-3	500-1,000	3+	Low
C	4-7	4-7	500-1,000	3+	Mixed
D	0-3	0-3	101-500	2	Low

Note. SES = socioeconomic status.

The district administrator participants were district office leaders in the position of Instructional Leader Directors. The Instructional Leader Directors position in OKCPS is the direct supervisors of the high school principals and the high schools. Two Instructional Leader Directors participated in the Qualtrics district leader survey. One Instructional Leader Director had eight to fifteen years of experience in district leadership and the other had four to seven years. Both had zero to three years in their current leadership role. One of the directors served three high schools and the other served only one. When asked how frequently they interact with

the high school principals in their current role they answered differently. One director said they interact four to six times a week and the other only two to three times weekly. Both participants had served as principals; however, neither had served as a high school principal. Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the district leader participants.

Table 2

District Leader Participants

Participant	Years in District Leadership	Years in Current Role	Schools Supervised	Interaction Frequency
DL1	8-15	0-3	3	4-6 times weekly
DL2	4-7	0-3	1	2-3 times weekly

Next in this chapter the data collection summary will be given to describe how the data was gathered while noting any deviations from the planned methodology.

Data Collection Summary

Data for this study were collected from four sources: principal surveys, reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and district leader surveys. Seven high school principals and two district leaders participated in the survey phase, with four principals participating in reflective journaling and interviews.

Chapter 3 stated the survey would be given to principals and they would have two weeks to complete and there would be a reminder after week one and then again within the last three days of the closing of the survey. The two-week timeline was established when principals received the survey, and the reminders were sent after one week and three days prior to the closing of the survey. However, the deadline was extended to give more time to more than half of

the principals who committed to participate in the study. The survey was open for four weeks. This was a deviation from the design from what was established in Chapter 3.

Reflective journaling was conducted over a one-week period prior to the semi-structured interview. The four participating principals were given a prompt for their reflective journaling. The prompt was to reflect on a time when they felt particularly supported, or unsupported, by district leadership and to describe the situation, your emotional and professional response, and how it influenced your leadership practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same four principals to provide deeper understanding into the themes emerging from the surveys and reflective journals.

Only two district office leaders signed the consent and completed the survey. The two district office leaders were Instructional Leader Directors. The survey gathered data regarding their perceptions of principal support and district expectations.

There were slight additional deviations from the planned methodology. One deviation was there were no additional district office leaders other than the two Instructional Leaders Directors that participated in the surveys. It was stated in Chapter 3 the study would have interviews with four principal supervisors and district office leaders. Interviews were not conducted with all principal supervisors or district office leaders. Survey responses and interviews from additional district office leaders could have been utilized to provide additional perspective and support additional triangulation of the data sources for the study.

This deviation had important implications for the interpretation of the findings. The limited participation from district office leaders and the absence of district leader interviews resulted in a stronger emphasis on principal perspectives, which shaped the findings to more heavily reflect principals' lived experiences within district systems. As a result, the findings

provide a more in-depth understanding of how support is experienced rather than how it is intended by district leadership.

Additionally, the absence of multiple district leader perspectives limited the ability to fully examine alignment or misalignment between district leaders and principals across roles, which may have provided a more balanced view of system implementation. However, this limitation also revealed a key insight, as the consistency of principal responses across surveys, reflective journals, and interviews highlighted strong patterns of shared experience, reinforcing the credibility of the findings related to principal workload, stress, and support.

The extension of the survey timeline allowed for increased participation, which strengthened the dataset; however, it also reflects the competing demands on principals' time, further supporting the findings related to workload and capacity constraints. Overall, these deviations did not weaken the study but instead provided additional context for understanding how organizational conditions shape both participation and the experiences described in the findings. These deviations also reflect the realities of conducting research in complex educational environments, where participant availability and organizational structures influence both data collection and findings.

Data Analysis Methods

Data preparation began prior to analysis within NVivo of the data collected. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions were reviewed several times to ensure they were correct, from the recordings, to prepare placement into NVivo for coding. All transcripts and reflective journaling sources were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy before the coding process started. As well, the reflective journals and all surveys were reviewed, preparing them for coding within the NVivo software platform. Once the transcriptions of the

interviews, data from the surveys from the high school principals and the district instructional directors, were uploaded into NVivo, the coding process was able to begin.

Coding was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. A deductive coding approach was initially used based on constructs derived from the research questions, problem of practice, and theoretical framework. Initial deductive codes included concepts such as stress, overwhelm, autonomy, instructional leadership expectations, and district support structures.

During the coding process, the data were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and consistency. As patterns emerged from participant responses, additional inductive codes were created to capture ideas that were not fully represented within the initial coding framework. Through this iterative process of reviewing, refining, and grouping codes, the initial codes were organized into broader categories that informed the development of the final themes presented in this chapter.

The coding process occurred in two cycles. In the first cycle, deductive codes were applied based on the research questions, problem of practice, and theoretical framework, while additional inductive codes were added as new ideas emerged from the data. In the second cycle, these codes were reviewed, compared, and grouped into broader categories based on recurring patterns across the datasets. From those categories, larger areas of organizational tension were identified, which then informed the development of the final themes. This process made it possible to move from raw data to codes, from codes to categories, and from categories to themes in a systematic and transparent way.

One coding framework, a shared code frame, was applied across all the datasets for this qualitative case study. The same categories and codes were utilized across every dataset, so they

were able to be compared. Each data source was separately coded and analyzed within itself. District leadership survey responses were coded first. Next principal surveys were coded. Reflective journal entries were coded third and principal interview transcripts were coded last. During the coding process it was confirmed the reflective journal entries were confirmed by many interview statements. For example, journal reflections frequently reinforced principals' interview comments about time constraints during implementation. Throughout the process of coding and recognition of patterns were established, peer debriefing aided with the triangulation of data. Peer debriefing helped ground the conclusions from the cross-case analysis of the datasets. One colleague assisted with the peer debriefing. These steps preserved the unique voice of each source before they were compared across the one coding framework, a shared code frame.

The data were coded using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Through the coding and analysis process, consistent reports of workload overload appeared across all datasets and participant responses. Initially, the patterns were organized into categories based on the thirty deductive codes from the initial review of the data sources of the participants' responses. There were seven categories that emerged which included district mandates and compliance pressure, principal workload and role complexity, principal supervisor relationship, staffing and capacity constraints, instructional leadership versus managerial demands, principal well-being and sustainability, and autonomy and decision-making authority. Four focus areas of tension emerged from the codes and established categories. The four tension areas were compliance versus instruction, expectations versus capacity, accountability versus autonomy, and support versus supervision.

After reviewing the coded data from all data sources through surveys, reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, the relationships were identified among the seven categories, and the four areas of tension, to determine the six overarching themes created to capture the primary experiences and perspectives shared by all the participants of this study. Through the coding process, initial codes created within NVivo were grouped into categories that revealed key organizational tensions that helped to develop the final themes. A detailed table outlining this progression is provided in Appendix A.

Findings were presented through six themes that demonstrate how district structures, supervisor relationships, and role expectations influence the daily experiences of OKCPS high school principals. The findings were guided by the theoretical framework grounded in Organizational Theory and Human Resources Framework by Bolman and Deal. The six themes provide insight into stressors impacting the high school principals and the types of district level supports that are needed to strengthen organizational effectiveness and instructional leadership. Following the coding and theme development process, triangulation procedures were used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The triangulation process is described in the following section.

For this study, methodological and data source triangulation was utilized. District leader surveys, principal surveys, principal reflective journaling and principal semi-structured interviews were conducted to have multiple forms of qualitative data to collect and analyze. This allowed the examination of multiple data sources to compare perspectives across the two roles of district leader and high school principal and be able to examine all patterns that emerged across the datasets.

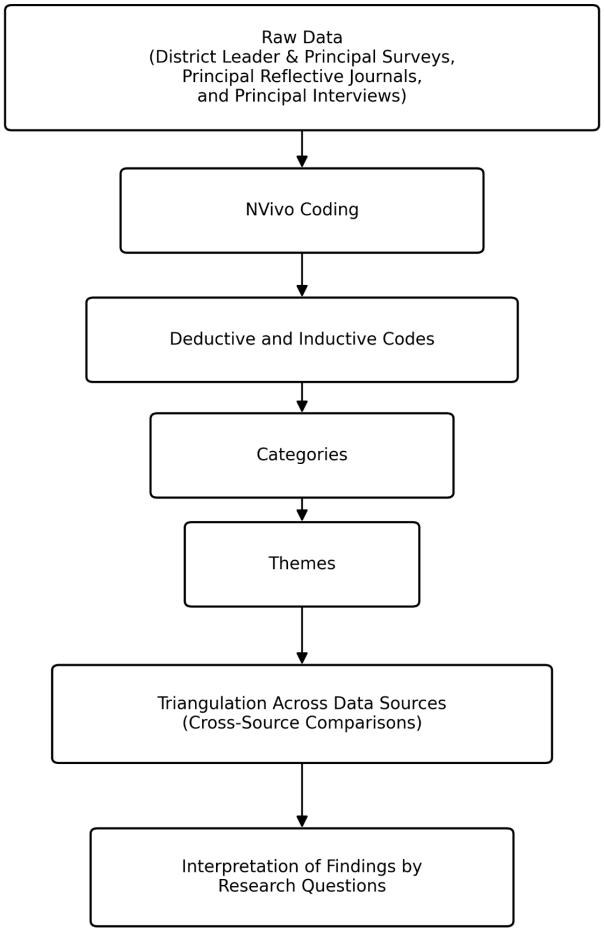
NVivo software was utilized to assist with the data sources and analyzing the datasets with a thematic analysis process. Codes were first generated from the data and then turned into categories where themes emerged. The shared code framework was utilized with all datasets and this allowed for cross-source comparison of the findings.

After the themes were developed, a triangulation matrix was created to compare all pieces of evidence from the four data sources. Next, there were areas of convergence, partial convergence and divergence identified from the participant groups and the datasets that were collected. Differences of experiences from district leaders to the high school principals were examined and in several cases the principals' experiences differed from those of district leaders when sharing about system structures and expectations for the role of high school principal. The differences provide understanding into the organizational structures and relationship dynamics in OKCPS.

The reflective journaling by the principals frequently supported the patterns that emerged from the surveys and interviews which strengthened the findings. Utilizing the multiple datasets and having a systematic process for comparing across the datasets, showing the triangulation of data increased the credibility and dependability of this study. Figure 5 presents the data analysis process.

Figure 5

Qualitative Data Analysis Process



Appendix B illustrates a triangulation matrix across all four datasets. The matrix shows the study's themes, research questions alignment, the four data sources, convergence patterns and an initial interpretation of all data source comparisons. The following sections present the findings through six themes.

Presentation of Findings

The findings were presented through six themes that demonstrate how system structures, relationship dynamics with district office leaders, and leadership expectations influence how OKCPS high school principals experience their job. The findings were guided by the theoretical framework grounded in organizational theory and human resources frame by Bolman and Deal. The six themes provide insight into stressors impacting the high school principals and the types of district level supports that are needed to strengthen organizational effectiveness and instructional leadership. Each of the themes addressed at least two research questions and at times all three research questions. Table 3 illustrates how the six themes developed through the coding process align with the study's research questions.

Table 3

Alignment of Themes to Research Questions

Theme	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Theme 1: Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership	X	X	
Theme 2: Increasing Workload and Role Expectations		X	
Theme 3: Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures	X	X	
Theme 4: Structural Capacity Constraints	X	X	X
Theme 5: Relational Trust and Supervisor Support	X		X
Theme 6: Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability	X	X	X

Note. RQ1 = How do district leaders in Oklahoma City Public Schools create and implement systems of support for high school principals in their role as instructional leaders? RQ2 = What are the most significant stressors that hinder high school principals in urban school settings from effectively fulfilling their role as instructional leaders?

RQ3 = What types of support do urban high school principals need from district office leaders to succeed as instructional leaders?

Several themes addressed multiple research questions and demonstrated the interconnection of principals' experiences with district systems, organizational structures, and leadership support. Themes related to competing priorities, compliance structures, and capacity constraints primarily show the systemic stressors experienced by principals, while themes related to supervisor support and autonomy highlight the types of district-level supports perceived as most impactful for strengthening instructional leadership and principal longevity.

Table 4 demonstrates the interpretation of the alignment. RQ1 addresses systems of support. Themes 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 align with RQ1 because they emphasize organizational structures and leadership support. RQ2 was described as stress factors of high school principals and why principals feel overwhelmed. Theme numbers one, two, three, four and six aligned to RQ2. RQ3 described needed support. Theme numbers four, five and six aligned with this third research question highlighting what principals need from district leadership.

Table 4

Interpretation of the Alignment

Research Question	Interpretation	Related Themes
RQ1 - Systems of Support	Themes highlighting organizational structures and leadership support	Theme 1, Theme 3, Theme 4, Theme 5, Theme 6
RQ2 - Stress Factors	Themes explaining why principals feel overwhelmed	Theme 1, Theme 2, Theme 3, Theme 4, Theme 6
RQ3 - Needed Supports	Themes showing what principals need from district leadership	Theme 4, Theme 5, Theme 6

The six themes that were developed have basic descriptive findings from the research and thematic analysis was utilized in this study. The theoretical framework from Chapter 2 centered around organizational theory as reflected in Daft (2020) and Griffin and Moorhead (1986), along with Bolman and Deal's Human Resources Frame, along with literature on instructional leadership and principal burnout. Through these lenses the study examined relationships within the OKCPS organization, structural alignment, human needs of high school principals within the OKCPS organization, leadership capacity, organizational support systems for high school principals. During the coding and analysis, it showed organizational misalignment between district structures and principals, which aligns with organization theory and human resources frame.

Six overarching themes resulted from the thematic analysis process. The six themes described the experiences of high school principals within OKCPS organizational structure. Patterns were identified across surveys, reflective journals, and interviews with high school principals, as well as survey data from two instructional leader directors. Highlighted within the six themes are structural challenges and supports that interfere with the principal's ability to focus on instructional leadership. The six themes include: (1) Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership, (2) Increasing Workload and Role Expectations, (3) Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures, (4) Structural Capacity Constraints, (5) Relational Trust and Supervisor Support, and (6) Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability. Appendix C has a table highlighting evidence supporting each of the six themes with the data source, evidence and an example quote or reference. The following sections present each of the six themes, supporting evidence, and connections to the theoretical framework.

The analysis revealed six interconnected themes that describe how district systems, leadership expectations, and support structures shape the lived experiences of high school principals. These themes highlight patterns of organizational misalignment that influence both principal workload and their ability to function as instructional leaders.

Theme One: Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership

A consistent pattern across all cases was the tension between expectations for instructional leadership and the reality of daily operational demands. Principals described spending the majority of their time responding to district requirements, managing compliance tasks, and addressing immediate operational issues, which limited their ability to focus on instruction.

Multiple data sources provided emerging evidence for this theme. Participants frequently referenced, in all datasets, competing demands of responsibilities or tasks that need to be completed and shifting priorities by the district, as barriers to focusing on instruction. These competing priorities confirmed a perception among principals that instructional leadership was often overshadowed by operational responsibilities and compliance expectations conflicting with leading instruction.

A majority of the principal survey responses indicated spending significant portions of time addressing compliance tasks and district requests instead of the ability and flexibility of engaging in instructional leadership activities within their schools. Frequently described by principals through the reflective journal entries was the difficulty principals experience in balancing operational responsibilities with instructional priorities. One principal shared during the interview process, " [m]ost of the day is spent responding to district requests and operational issues. Instructional leadership often gets pushed to the side." This experience reflects a

persistent sense of fragmentation in the principal role, where attention is constantly redirected, making it difficult for principals to sustain focus on what they identify as their most important work. Another participant described the role as being driven by competing expectations, stating "priorities continue to shift quickly," making it difficult to focus on instruction. The district instructional directors acknowledged the number of district initiatives and expectations placed on principals. Reflective journaling reinforced the findings for theme one. A principal described their experience as "spinning our wheels" sharing that constant changes in direction makes it difficult to stay focused on instructional priorities. This pattern was consistent across all four principals interviewed, as well as reflected in survey responses and reflective journals. Regardless of years of experience or school size, principals described similar challenges in managing competing priorities, suggesting this is not an individual issue but a shared experience across the district. This theme directly connects to Research Questions 1 and 2, as it demonstrates how district systems of support are experienced in practice and identifies competing priorities as a key factor limiting instructional leadership. The codes that contributed to theme one showed patterns related to workload, managerial overload, district mandates, competing demands and compliance distractions.

The theoretical framework alignment for theme one reflected structural misalignment within the OKCPS organization and a disconnect was found between the high school principals and district leadership. These findings align with the organizational theory that confirms organizational structures influence leadership behaviors. Through coding and analysis, I found principals describe differences between organizational expectations and their daily responsibilities. Bolman & Deal's Human Resources Framework emphasizes the "fit between people and the organization." During coding and analysis, it was found the job design and

expectations did not match the true expectations and managerial tasks expected by high school principals which creates inefficiency and frustration by principals and their supervisors with district leadership. From the perspective of the human resources frame, these findings highlight a clear misalignment between the expectations placed on principals and their capacity to meet those expectations. Principals are expected to lead instruction, yet district structures and demands consistently pull their time toward operational and compliance tasks, limiting their ability to fulfill that role. This finding indicates that district structures are systematically shaping principal priorities in ways that limit instructional leadership, reinforcing that these challenges are driven by organizational design rather than individual principal capacity. From the structural frame perspective, this finding highlights how organizational design and competing system priorities create conditions that limit principals' ability to focus on instructional leadership.

Theme Two: Increasing Workload & Role Expectations

Consistently participants described the significant expansion in both scope and complexity of the principal role. All four principals interviewed shared that they are responsible for a wide range of management responsibilities that extend beyond the traditional expectations of the role, including tasks related to student and staff mental health concerns, student discipline, community engagement, budgeting, staffing challenges and instructional leadership.

Across datasets, principals shared that the increasing workload and responsibilities required extended work hours outside the traditional school day. Principals A, B and D described having to often work late evenings and weekends to keep up with the demands. There was a sense from principals, and their instructional leader directors, that the demands on the high school principals continue to grow without any adjustments in organizational support or capacity.

Evidence supporting this theme was consistent across the surveys, reflective journals and interviews. Survey responses indicated principals often feel overwhelmed by the volume of principal responsibilities and frequently work late evenings and over the weekend to get the job completed. The principals described in reflective journal entries the same concerns with long hours and competing priorities and having difficulties managing all the tasks.

Furthermore, the principal interview data supported these same findings. One principal described an experience of being a high school principal by sharing, “[t]here were so many things that I should be doing…I didn't even know where to begin or what to prioritize.” This statement reflects a deeper sense of role ambiguity and overload, where the volume of responsibilities not only increases workload but also creates uncertainty in decision-making and prioritization. Another principal shared about the increasing expectations sharing, “[n]othing is being taken away. It feels like the role just keeps growing.” This pattern was consistent across all participants, indicating that the expansion of the principal role is not isolated to individual experiences but reflects a broader systemic condition across the district. While the majority of principals described significant increases in workload, there were slight differences in how principals managed these demands, with some indicating the ability to prioritize more effectively than others. This theme directly connects to Research Question 2, as the expansion of the principal role was identified as a primary source of stress that limits principals’ ability to effectively lead instruction.

Organizational theory is connected to the findings for theme two. This explains how role expansion occurs when there is an increase in responsibilities without any structural adjustments or extra help. Principals consistently reported the increase of responsibilities and reflected on

how OKCPS expectations have expanded for principals without any redesign of any support for these changes.

The human resources frame was highlighted through the findings on aligning workload with individual capacity. Expectations are exceeding the available time and resources of principals therefore causing stress and burnout to be experienced by the leaders. Findings emerged where principals are working beyond a sustainable capacity which could impact their well-being and ability to lead effectively.

These findings highlight from the perspective of the human resources frame a misalignment between the increasing expectations of the principal role and the capacity of principals to meet those demands. As responsibilities continue to expand without adjustments in time, staffing, or support, principals are placed in positions where expectations exceed what is realistically sustainable. This imbalance contributes to ongoing stress and limits their ability to effectively lead their schools. This indicates that the principal role has expanded beyond its original design without corresponding structural adjustments, reinforcing that workload challenges are driven by systemic conditions rather than individual capacity. From a symbolic frame perspective, these findings reflect how the expectations of the principal role continue to evolve, yet the meaning of the role as an instructional leader is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain in practice.

Theme Three: Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures

An additional theme emerged through participants identifying compliance-driven accountability structures as a significant factor on principal daily work. District reporting requirements, curriculum expectations, assessment and accountability measures were described as requiring consistent attention and frequently adjusting to changing deadlines and expectations

from the district. In the perspective of the principals the expectations compound and are often creating extra pressures and take away from the focus on instructional leadership.

Principals indicated in survey results frequent time was spent on compliance tasks and documentation requirements. District Instructional Leader Directors shared the same concern of principals' time being dominated by compliance tasks. The reflective journaling from principals and open response survey questions revealed challenges of aligning district expectations with the specific needs for their individual schools, students and community. One principal interviewed expressed, “[t]here are constant requests for reports and updates and by the time you complete one, another one is already due.” This reflects a cycle of reactive work, where principals are continuously responding to external demands rather than leading proactively, contributing to a sense of pressure and reduced control over their time. Several principals stated that district priorities often shift quickly and described their experiences as always having to be reactive.

Through reflective journaling, participants consistently described the pressures of meeting compliance expectations and the feeling of “undoing and redoing work that we had already thoroughly developed at the site level.” This pattern was consistently reflected across all participants and data sources, indicating that compliance-driven accountability structures are embedded within district systems and shape the experiences of principals across cases. This theme connects to research questions 1 and 2 by demonstrating how district accountability systems shape principal behavior and contribute to workload demands that limit instructional leadership. Table C3 in the appendix shows evidence supporting theme three.

There is a connection to the organization theory with these findings, which explains role expansion and how it can occur when there is an increase in responsibilities without any structural changes. Principals describing the overload of responsibilities that reflects how

organizational expectations have expanded the principalship over time without any redesign of the position responsibilities to support the additions to the role.

From the human resources frame, these findings show the importance of aligning the scope of work with individual capacity. Available time and resources to do the job exceed the expectations and workload, which cause burnout and stress. As found in theme two, principals could be operating beyond sustainable capacity. In the appendix Table C3 shows evidence supporting theme three.

From the perspective of the human resources frame, these findings reflect a misalignment between organizational expectations for accountability and the support needed to meet those expectations. Compliance-driven structures require significant time and attention from principals, yet they do not provide the flexibility or support necessary to prioritize instructional leadership. This imbalance shifts principals' focus away from teaching and learning and toward task completion and reporting. This demonstrates that accountability systems are structurally shaping how principals allocate their time and attention, reinforcing that instructional leadership is constrained by organizational priorities rather than principal decision-making. From a political frame perspective, these findings suggest that accountability systems function as mechanisms of control, where district priorities and mandates shape principal behavior and limit flexibility in decision-making.

Theme Four: Structural Capacity Constraints

Participants in this study identified a major factor that impacted their ability to effectively lead due to structural capacity constraints. Staffing limitations, high administrator and counselor to student ratios, and access to support services were described by principals and their

instructional leader directors as ongoing challenges. Due to the constraints, principals often assumed more responsibilities within their schools.

Responses on surveys indicated principals' frustrations with insufficient staffing and resources to meet the expectations by the district. Multiple reflective journal responses described the feeling of being overburdened with managing compiling operational needs and instructional responsibilities without adequate support.

Interview data supported the findings further. A principal stated, “[w]e do not have enough people to do everything that is expected and we end up covering multiple roles.” This experience highlights the strain placed on principals to compensate for systemic gaps, often requiring them to absorb additional responsibilities that extend beyond their intended role. The need for additional staffing was mentioned by all principals, and one noted that even with existing supports, “we could absolutely use more staff, both instructional and mental health support.”

The reflective journal entries also highlighted constraints impact on the schools. It was shared by one principal that decisions by district offices often do not account for the specific needs for their sites and community. It was stated by two principals and one instructional leader director that directives at times are given “without truly understanding that our schools are not the same.” Across all datasets, findings were consistent suggesting structural capacity limitations impact principals’ ability to focus on instructional leadership and their ability to meet the district expectations. This theme directly connects to all three research questions, as capacity constraints influence how support systems are experienced (RQ1), contribute to principal stress (RQ2), and highlight the need for additional staffing and resources (RQ3).

The findings for theme four align with organizational theory, which shows the importance of structural capacity and allocating of resources of an organization. It is difficult for individuals to meet the demands of the job when expectations are set without sufficient resources and staffing. These findings highlight the need to align resources with the needs of individuals in the organization which aligns with the perspective of the human resources frame. If principals lack support, stress increases and they are not as effective in their leadership.

These findings highlight a misalignment through the human resources lens, between the demands placed on principals and the resources available to meet those demands. Principals are expected to manage both operational and instructional responsibilities yet staffing and support systems are not aligned to support those expectations. This lack of alignment creates inefficiencies within the organization and limits principals' ability to lead effectively. This demonstrates a systemic mismatch between expectations and available resources, reinforcing that principals are operating within organizational conditions that limit their effectiveness rather than deficiencies in leadership capacity. From both a structural and political frame perspective, these findings highlight how resource allocation decisions and competing district priorities influence the distribution of support, often leaving principals with insufficient capacity to meet expectations.

Theme Five: Relational Trust & Supervisor Support

Principal participants focused on the importance of trust and support from their direct supervisors and district office leaders. Structural challenges were present across all four datasets. Principals frequently identified direct supervisor relationships being a key factor that influences their experiences within the principalship role. Responsiveness, trust and communication were found as important components of the principals feeling effective support.

Principal survey responses indicated variations with the level of support they experienced with their direct supervisors. Two principals felt support from their supervisors and two principals indicated their supervisors were not able to assist at times in a timely manner which causes frustrations. Survey open responses captured both challenging and positive experiences and highlighted the need for consistent and timely communication and importance of clarity with the why behind decisions.

Additional context was provided through the findings within the interview data. The principal stated, "[h]aving someone to call and walk through a situation, that's the most important thing to me." It was emphasized by one participant that support would be strengthened if supervisors and district leaders were more visible in their buildings and engaged in the daily work of the schools they serve.

Additionally, the reflective journal entries supported the findings for theme five. It was stated by one principal, "I feel supported by my direct supervisor, but not always by district leadership as a whole." This reflects a reliance on individual relationships rather than consistent systems of support, where the quality of support is dependent on the responsiveness and engagement of specific leaders. Another principal shared that support exists; however, it is sometimes delayed, not clear, inconsistent which requires principals to spend time seeking clarity and searching for answers through several channels. While experiences varied across participants, a consistent pattern emerged that relational trust and supervisor support significantly influence how principals experience district systems. For example, some principals described strong, consistent support from their supervisors, while others reported delays and inconsistencies, highlighting variability in how district support is experienced across cases. This theme connects to Research Questions 1 and 3 by illustrating how principals experience district

support through relationships and identifying trust and communication as critical components of effective support.

Organizational theory is connected to the findings within theme five by emphasizing how important relationships are within an organization and relationships influence organization effectiveness and communication. The relationship and communication between principals and their direct supervisor are key in connecting district leadership to schools and the principals. From the human resources frame perspective, these findings show the importance of communication, support and having a trusting relationship between principals and their direct supervisor. Having strong relationships and support increases the principal ability to be effective in their role while navigating all the challenges of leading a school.

From the perspective of the human resources frame, these findings emphasize the importance of alignment between relationships, support, and organizational expectations. When trust, communication, and responsiveness are present, principals experience stronger support and are better able to navigate district demands. However, when these elements are inconsistent, it creates a misalignment between the support principals need and what is provided, which contributes to frustration and limits effectiveness. This demonstrates that relational trust is a critical organizational condition shaping how principals experience support, reinforcing that the effectiveness of district systems is dependent on the consistency and quality of relationships within the system. From a symbolic frame perspective, these findings emphasize that trust and relationships shape how principals interpret their role within the district, influencing whether they feel valued, supported, and connected to the broader organizational mission.

Theme 6: Autonomy Within Accountability & Sustainability

Principal participants described a consistent tension between the authority to decide and accountability expectations by the district. Principals shared they have limited authority to make site-based decisions needed to influence instructional outcomes for student achievement while being held responsible for successful outcomes on school performance measures. This contributed to frustration and concerns of sustainability in the principalship role.

It was indicated in the survey responses by three of five principals the experience of district accountability and expectations without having corresponding autonomy to have site-based decision making. In survey open responses it frequently referenced challenges related to decision making limitations and lengthy district approval processes.

Interview data further indicated the tension. A participant shared, "[w]e are accountable for the results, but we don't always have the authority to make the decisions needed to get there." This reflects a tension between responsibility and control, where principals are expected to deliver outcomes without the authority needed to influence those outcomes effectively. One principal described how they need approval from multiple levels and that "everything has to go through multiple people before decisions can be made."

Reflective journal entries reinforced the frustration of district level decision making, and one principal stated that initiatives are often implemented, "without high school principals at the table to discuss and share experiences." Emotional exhaustion and concern of longevity in the position was described by more than half of all participants. This pattern was consistent across all participants, indicating that the tension between accountability and autonomy is a systemic condition within the district. Although all principals described limited autonomy, the degree to which this impacted their leadership varied depending on their school context and level of

experience. This theme directly connects to all three research questions, as it highlights how district systems influence principal autonomy (RQ1), contribute to stress and frustration (RQ2), and identify increased decision-making authority as a key support need (RQ3).

These findings supporting the final theme connect with organizational theory through the examination of structures of authority and decision-making structures within OKCPS. Principals are held accountable for the outcome of their building, yet the findings indicate the decision-making authority is often limited for the principal in making site-based decisions, creating structural tension. From the perspective of the human resources frame, the findings from theme six highlight the significance of empowering leaders to have some autonomy and empower them to make decisions that they feel is best in their situations. When autonomy is limited, principals may have burnout, frustration, and could be not as effective in their role.

Through the lens of the human resources frame, these findings highlight a significant misalignment between accountability expectations and decision-making authority. Principals are held responsible for outcomes, yet they do not have the autonomy needed to make decisions that directly impact those outcomes. This imbalance creates ongoing tension within the organization and contributes to concerns about long-term sustainability in the principal role. This reflects a systemic imbalance between accountability and decision-making authority, reinforcing that sustainability challenges in the principal role are driven by structural conditions rather than individual resilience. From a political frame perspective, this tension reflects power dynamics within the organization, where decision-making authority is centralized at the district level while accountability remains at the school level.

While each theme represents a distinct aspect of principal experience, the findings indicate that these themes do not function independently. Instead, they are interconnected and

reinforce one another. For example, compliance-driven accountability structures and increasing workload demands contribute directly to competing priorities, which limit principals' ability to focus on instructional leadership. Similarly, structural capacity constraints and limited autonomy further intensify these challenges, creating a system in which principals are consistently managing competing expectations. These cross-theme relationships highlight how district systems operate as an interconnected structure rather than as isolated components.

Conclusions

Chapter 4 presented the study's findings of examining how district leaders support urban high school principals within OKCPS. Six themes emerged through thematic analysis of surveys, reflective journals and interviews that described structural systems and conditions of the systems, leadership expectations and job tasks and relational dynamics influencing principals.

Findings indicated tensions between principals and district expectations for instructional leadership and operational demands, in relation to compliance requirements and managerial tasks, workload and structural capacity constraints and gaps. All participants emphasized the importance of relationships and trust and support needed from district leaders. The role of autonomy and decision-making authority to support principal sustainability and instructional leadership effectiveness was highlighted in the findings. The systemic misalignment between district structures and principal role expectations contribute to much of the principal stressors and indicates sustainability concerns exist in the future.

The findings provide insight into potential organizational support structures and systemic challenges that influence principal instructional leadership and effectiveness in their role. Chapter 5 will provide further interpretations of the findings and share implications of district leadership practices, system structures and future research.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Introduction

Chapter 5 will provide a detailed interpretation of the findings for this qualitative multiple case study. The purpose of this study explored how district leaders support high school principals as instructional leaders within OKCPS, while identifying the primary sources of stress that impact principals' ability to effectively lead their schools. Previous chapters established that the role of the high school principal has become increasingly overwhelming in the complexity and demands of the job. Particularly post-pandemic, high school principals are navigating greater demands associated with expanding expectations connected to student achievement, expanding community needs, state and district compliance and management of the school operations.

These growing expectations have escalated concerns on principal burnout, overloaded workload, and the ongoing tension between operational responsibilities and instructional leadership. At the foundation of the study is the problem of practice, which is principals being expected to be instructional leaders for their school, while simultaneously managing the increasing scope of operational demands.

The study searched for lived experiences of OKCPS principal and district leaders, including principal supervisors, to gain a deeper understanding of challenges principals face as they balance operational responsibilities with the high expectations for instructional leadership. The study also aimed to identify various types of support perceived as most beneficial from district office leaders in order for principals to lead effectively and to strengthen instructional outcomes for students and their overall success of the high school they lead. Ultimately, the study was designed to provide valuable and practical insight into how district office leaders can better align systems of support to reduce stress of high school principals, increase leadership

effectiveness, and promote sustainable leadership within OKCPS, an urban high school setting. By utilizing surveys, reflective journal entries, and semi-structured interviews, the study was able to capture experiences and perceptions of high school principals and principal supervisors. These datasets allowed for a deeper understanding of barriers and gaps in systemic support.

In Chapter 4, six themes emerged through the data analysis: (1) Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership, (2) Increasing Workload and Role Expectations, (3) Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures, (4) Structural Capacity Constraints, (5) Relational Trust and Supervisor Support, and (6) Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability.

Chapter 5 interprets the reported findings from Chapter 4 to interpret their meaning, connecting the results to the study's theoretical framework and existing literature, and presenting limitations of the research and recommendations for OKCPS practice and possible future research. First is the summary of the results.

Summary of the Findings

The summary of the findings is organized by the three research questions for this qualitative multiple case study.

RQ 1: How do district leaders create and implement systems of support for high school principals as instructional leaders?

Findings for research question one indicated that district systems of support were present; however, they were often experienced by high school principals as compliance driven rather than instructionally supportive. Support given to high school principals was found to be inconsistent and varied by supervisor. Data emerging from principal interviews and reflective journaling identified that some principals perceived a gap in relevant high school leadership experience

among district office leaders and supervisors, which influenced the effectiveness and credibility of support provided. It was reported that most supervisors and current district office leaders have no teaching or leadership experience at the high school level. These findings were reflected across multiple themes, including Theme 3 (Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures), Theme 4 (Structural Capacity Constraints), Theme 5 (Relational Trust and Supervisor Support), and Theme 6 (Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability), highlighting that organizational systems, rather than instructional supports, primarily shape the principal experience.

RQ2: What are the most significant stressors that hinder principals from fulfilling their role as instructional leaders?

Key stressors identified in the study included increasing workload, district compliance requirements, limited staffing and resources including mental health, counseling, security and assistant principal staffing, and competing priorities established by the district. Systemic conditions such as expanding workload, compliance demands, and insufficient structural systems within the district were found driving principal stress. These conditions altogether restrict principals' ability to focus on instructional leadership. In addition, the tension between high accountability expectations from the district and limited site decision making authority contributes to principal feelings of being overwhelmed, burnout and frustration. These findings also align with Leiter and Maslach's (2003) framework, in the areas of workload and control, as participants in the study described having many responsibilities with limited authority and autonomy to make site-based decisions that impact their schools. Collectively, these conditions limit principals' ability to focus on instructional leadership. Research question two directly tied to all the created themes during coding, except for theme five.

RQ3: What types of support do urban high school principals need from district leaders to succeed?

To answer the third question on needed support, data were identified by principals and principal supervisors surrounding staffing and resources, clear communication, trust of supervisors and the relationship between principals and the principal supervisors, the need for increased autonomy in decision making and the need for instruction focused support. Across all datasets, principals emphasized the importance that support given is practical and timely, based on their specific site needs, aligned to their realities in their daily work, and support that enables them to prioritize their instructional leadership. All principals identified some relational support by supervisors or other district office leaders, the desire for increased autonomy and the need for additional staffing capacity as the most critical needs. The need for resources and increased staffing also aligns with Kaufman et al. (2021), who identified resource limitations as a key factor that influenced principal dissatisfaction. Instructional Leader Directors shared the desire to have more time to be visible in the buildings to have a stronger relation to the direct work of the principals. Themes related to the third research question were theme four, structural capacity constraints, theme five, relational trust and supervisor support, and theme six, autonomy within accountability and principal sustainability.

Across all three research questions, findings were consistently reflected through the six themes identified in Chapter 4 which include: (1) Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership, (2) Increasing Workload and Role Expectations, (3) Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures, (4) Structural Capacity Constraints, (5) Relational Trust and Supervisor Support, and (6) Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability. These themes provided an understanding of how district systems, leadership

expectations, and relational dynamics can influence the daily experiences of high school principals. Rather than functioning independently, the themes were interconnected and revealed patterns of organizational misalignment that shaped both principal stress and their ability to function as instructional leaders.

Table 5

Summary of Findings, Themes, and Implications

Research Question	Key Findings	Related Themes	Implications for Practice
RQ1: Systems of Support	Support systems are present but experienced as compliance-driven and inconsistent.	Themes 3, 4, 5, 6	Shift district focus from compliance to instructional support.
RQ2: Principal Stressors	Stress is systemic, driven by workload, compliance demands, and limited autonomy.	Themes 1, 2, 3, 4, 6	Redesign principal role and reduce structural overload.
RQ3: Needed Supports	Principals need staffing, trust, autonomy, and practical support.	Themes 4, 5, 6	Increase staffing, strengthen relationships, and expand autonomy.

Interpretation of Findings

While this study examined how district leaders create and implement systems of support, the findings demonstrate that these systems are most meaningfully understood through how they are enacted and experienced by principals in practice. The findings of this study are consistent with and extend prior research on principal burnout, instructional leadership, and district support systems. Consistent with DeMatthews et al. (2021) and Maslach and Leiter (2016), this study confirms that workload, lack of autonomy, and organizational demands are central contributors

to principal stress. However, this study extends existing literature by demonstrating that these factors are not experienced independently but rather are interconnected within district systems and structures that shape principals' daily work. Additionally, while prior research (Honig et al., 2010; Honig & Rainey, 2019) emphasizes the importance of district support for instructional leadership, the findings of this study reveal that support is often experienced as compliance-driven rather than instructionally focused, highlighting a gap between intended support and actual practice.

Findings of this study demonstrate that challenges experienced by high school principals are not the result of individual limitations, but rather the outcome of systemic organizational conditions within OKCPS. There was a consistent pattern of misalignment across all six themes between expectations of the district and the realities of the current principal roles. The misalignment is critical in understanding why principals experience high levels of stress, limited time for instructional leadership and concerns of sustainability with the principal at the high school level.

Chapter 4 presented the findings through themes and the interpretation of these findings reveals deeper organizational patterns that explain why principals experience challenges. The findings confirm the themes are not isolated and are interconnected driven by district systems and structures. This interpretation moves beyond what principals experience to why those experiences occur within the district systems of OKCPS.

Theme one focuses on competing priorities. Interpretation of the findings was district structures actively redefine the role of the high school principal. Instructional leadership is theoretically prioritized but structurally deprioritized by the emphasis given from the district on

tasks that do not seem to align to the needs of the individual high schools. The findings indicate a structural misalignment between district expectations and the operational realities of the high school principalship.

These findings demonstrate that district systems prioritize compliance and operational demands over instructional leadership. From a perspective of organizational theory, this reveals how leadership behavior reflects structural systems and expectations. At times, this redefines the actual role of the principal and their lived experiences.

Theme two is around the increasing workload that is placed on the principalship. There is role creep which isn't really designed. Burnout was found to be created by systemic conditions rather than individual principal limitations. The expansion of the principal role appears to continue to grow and is unregulated, resulting in unsustainable expectations.

The pattern shows the expansion of the principal role is happening without redistributing responsibilities. Burnout and stress emerge as a result of district systems rather than a principal's inability to manage the role.

Compliance structure was highlighted in theme three. As identified in theme three (Compliance- Driven Accountability Structures), the findings showed district accountability systems drive principal behavior and compliance to tasks has replaced time on instruction by both principals and principal supervisors. District compliance needs function as the organizational control mechanisms that change attention away from teaching and learning.

Accountability systems in the findings confirm to be functioning as organizational control through compliance driven tasks that take principals' time and attention which limit instructional leadership opportunities for the principal role.

Theme four focus is around capacity constraints. Expectations come with needed resources that are missing. Structural inequities are felt across schools. Schools have their own individual needs that principals and supervisors feel are not given the attention they deserve or need. There is a mismatch between expectations and available resources at the site level which creates systemic inefficiencies that limit the effectiveness of a principal.

Theme five is around relationships of trust between principals and district office leaders, including their director supervisors. Supervisors are the buffer within the organization between principals and the other district office leaders with district pressures. Trust equals access to support that is needed by principal and Instructional Leader Directors. The ILD's emerged as a crucial mediating factor and a go between district systems and the principal experiences. When communication and relational trust are strong, ILD's serve as a buffer for district pressures; however they can be inconsistent between the principal supervisors and district office leaders which contribute to additional stress and confusion of principals.

Finally, theme six is autonomy versus accountability. Emerged from this theme was classic organizational tension which can lead to burnout and turnover risks. Accountability without allowing decision making authority creates structurally an unsustainable leadership model.

Overall, the findings confirm that principal stress is not the result of isolated challenges. It was found to be a result of systemic organizational misalignment. These findings shift the focus from principal capacity to the need for structural and systemic redesign within the district office leadership practices. Recent research also supports this systems-level perspective. Harms et al. (2024) found that principal stress and coping patterns are directly connected to broader

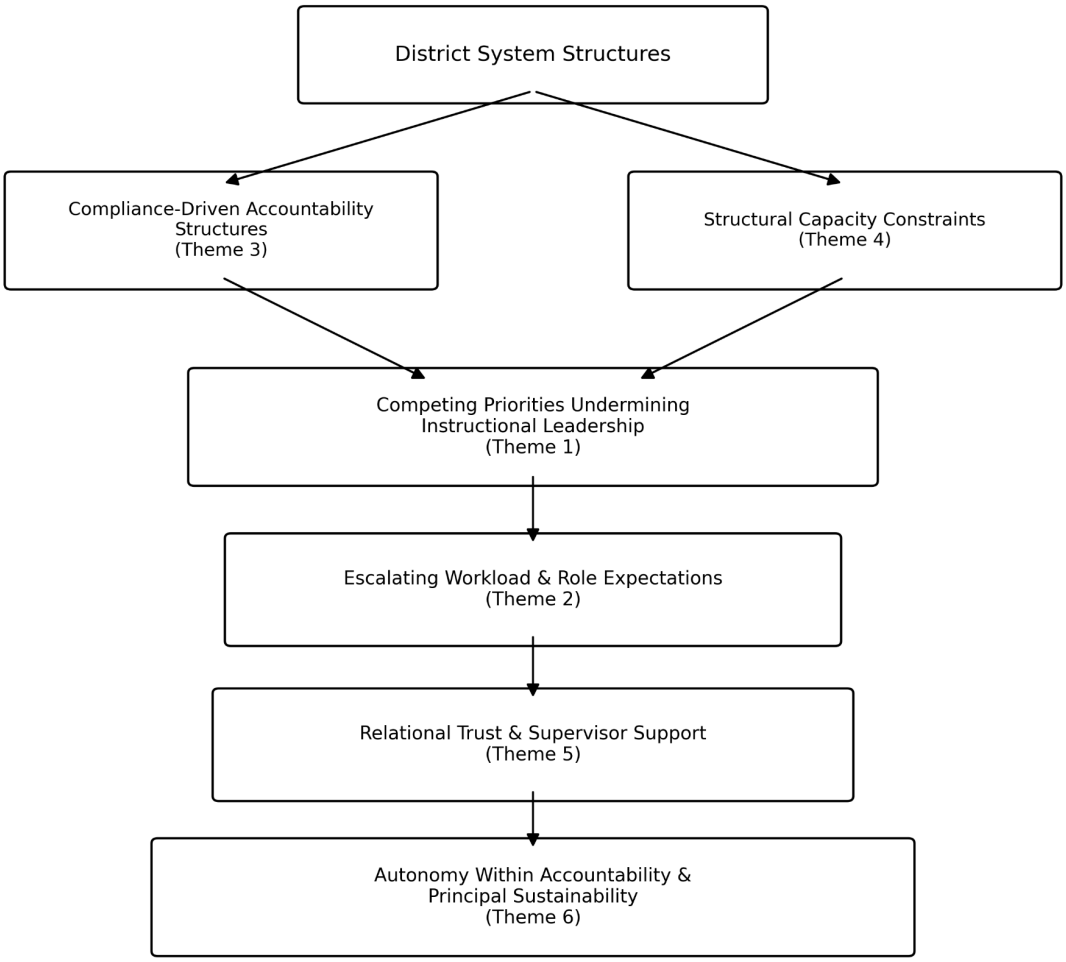
school outcomes, including teacher effectiveness and student learning. This reinforces the importance of addressing principal stress as an organizational issue, as it extends beyond the individual and impacts the entire school system.

A key insight from this study is that principal stress is not driven by a single factor, but rather by the interaction of multiple organizational conditions. The relationship between compliance demands, workload expectations, limited capacity, and constrained autonomy create a system in which principals are consistently required to respond to competing priorities. This interconnected system of pressures reinforces the finding that principal burnout is not an individual issue, but a structural outcome of how district systems are designed and implemented.

To further illustrate the relationships between the themes identified in this study, a conceptual model was developed to show how district system structures influence principal experience, workload, and sustainability. Figure 6 shows how all six themes relate conceptually and how district system structures influence principal workload, priorities, and ultimately the sustainability of a high school principal.

Figure 6

Conceptual Model of District System Influence on Principal Experience



This model demonstrates that the themes are not isolated findings but are interconnected conditions that collectively shape the principal experience within district systems. As shown in the above figure, compliance-driven accountability structures and capacity constraints create effects that increase workload demands and produce competing priorities. Principal supervisors and district leaders try to mediate the conditions, while also contributing to the tension between

autonomy and district accountability. Figure 6 demonstrates how district systems influence both principal effectiveness and long-term sustainability in the principal role.

Collectively examining the six themes, they reveal that principal stress is not caused by one factor, but rather by the connection of multiple organizational conditions. Compliance expectations, expanding workload, limited capacity, inconsistent support, and restricted autonomy work together to create a system where principals are continuously responding to competing demands. The interconnected structure reinforces the finding that principal burnout is not an individual issue, but a systemic outcome of how district leadership structures and expectations are designed.

The findings of this study can be further understood through Bolman and Deal's Four-Frame Model, which provides a comprehensive lens for examining organizational dynamics within district systems. From the structural frame, the findings demonstrate a clear misalignment between district expectations and the design of the principal role, particularly in relation to competing priorities, workload, and capacity constraints. From the human resources frame, the findings highlight the impact of misalignment between organizational demands and principal capacity, resulting in stress, burnout, and reduced effectiveness.

From a political frame perspective, the findings reveal underlying power dynamics within district systems, where decision-making authority is centralized while accountability is placed on principals, creating tension between autonomy and responsibility. Finally, from a symbolic frame perspective, the findings reflect how the expectations of the principal role as an instructional leader remain a central value within the organization, yet the daily experiences of principals challenge the sustainability of that role in practice. Together, these frames demonstrate that

principal stress and limitations in instructional leadership are not isolated issues but are the result of interconnected organizational conditions within district systems.

Existing Literature Comparison and Contribution

Findings of this qualitative multiple case study align with and extend existing literature found relating to principal stress, burnout, and organizational or district systems and leadership support for instructional leadership, and supervisor relationships. In Chapter 2, the literature review was outlined and organized around three primary areas: (a) challenges and barriers leading to principal burnout, (b) the role and influence of principal supervisors and district office leadership, and (c) district office systems of support for principals as instructional leaders. This section discusses how the findings relate to these areas and is organized by research question.

RQ1: Systems of Support

Findings from this case study show that district systems of support were present; however, OKCPS high school principals often experienced compliance driven support rather than authentic instructional support. As identified in Theme 3, findings showed that principals experience systems where priorities are centered around reporting, task completion and district initiatives rather than over instructional support. This aligns with Honig and Rainey (2019) and Honig et al. (2010) who pointed out the need for a shift from compliance focus work from district office leaders to the need for supporting principals in the area of instructional leadership. Additional tension between operational demands of the principal role and instructional leadership that is needed for student success aligned closely with Fullan (2016) and Fink and Resnick (2001), as they shared challenges faced by principals with balancing competing responsibilities. Literature suggests districts work towards the shift to instructional leadership,

the findings from this study show that principals still experience operational tasks and reporting conflict with instructional leadership roles.

Johnston et al. (2016) support the findings as they emphasized that districts often have professional development and have support structures for supervision and instructions; however, the support effectiveness depends on the quality, timeliness and focus of the supports and professional development. Principals reported in this study that some district leaders and supervisors lacked experience with high schools which impact their perception of the effectiveness of district support systems provided by supervisors. This considers a gap between what district office leaders intend as support and what principals actually experience in their daily roles.

In this study, a critical factor is the role of the principal's supervisor and the importance they play in the success of support given to the principal. This aligned with Goldring et al. (2018) and Honig and Rainey (2019), who stated a key role is the principal supervisor for developing effective instructional leadership. This study highlighted various levels and types of support given by principal supervisors.

It was confirmed through this qualitative multiple case study that district systems of support are extremely important, but it extends the literature by showing that when district systems are heavily focused on compliance, they limit the ability of principals to function as instructional leaders and make decisions specific for their high school.

RQ 2: Principal Stressors

Existing research related to principal stressors firmly align with burnout and stress related to jobs. DeMatthews et al. (2021) states workload, lack of work autonomy, and organizational demands are connected to stress which is consistent with this case study. Likewise, Maslach and

Leiter (2016) identified workload and control as key indicators of burnout. Workload and possible burnout were both evident within the study.

Findings also support Mitani (2018) who emphasized pressures of accountability along with mandates that bring about principal stress. A major source of stress for principals is the operational compliance tasks and district accountability systems that require significant time and often take away from the time on instructional leadership activities.

Recent literature continues to emphasize the importance of examining principal stress and well-being as a growing area of concern in educational leadership. Tahir et al. (2025) highlight the need for continued research on principal mental health and organizational conditions, further supporting the importance of studies that examine systemic factors influencing leadership sustainability.

Stressors were found not to be isolated issues, instead they are interconnected and rooted in district systems and structures. These findings are further supported by DeMatthews et al. (2023), who found that principal burnout is intensified in urban districts due to systemic pressures, reinforcing that stress is produced by organizational conditions rather than individual limitations. By identifying, through the coding and data analysis process, the four key organizational tensions, compliance versus instruction, expectations versus capacity, support versus supervision, and accountability versus autonomy and sharing findings the study contributes to the literature and provides a framework to understand district systems and how they can influence principal effectiveness and the stress of the principal. The viewpoint of framing principal stress as a systemic issue, not just an individual principal challenge of the performing in the role, builds on existing research found through the literature provided as a part of the study.

RQ3: Needed Supports

Previously literature emphasized the importance of relationship, mentoring and focused target support systems being integral to the success of instructional leadership and the findings supported this idea. Honig (2008) and Honig et al. (2010), highlighted the importance of trusting relationships with supervisors and district office leaders, which was consistent with the findings shared with principals and principal supervisors. Essential components of effective support were timely communication, responsiveness to needs and trust between principals and supervisors. Principals shared the need for more timely, consistent support from the district, particularly responsive support that is grounded in the realities of their daily work which aligned with Huffman (2018), who found that mentoring and reflective dialogue improve principal effectiveness.

In this study, it was identified the need for increased autonomy for site decision making which aligned with DeMatthews et al. (2021), who stated stress and burnout is associated to the lack of decision making authority granted to leaders. Consistently in this study, examples were shared by participants of being held accountable for student and school outcomes without the authority to make site-based decisions which reinforces tension and challenges between principals and district office leadership.

To help manage the increase in the demands of the principal role, it was consistently shared the need for additional staffing, particularly in the areas of mental health, counseling and administration to help with increasing challenges. The need for increased staffing and resources aligns with Kaufman et al. (2021) where they shared a major factor influencing principal dissatisfaction is resource limitations.

The findings of the study and existing literature align with the emphasis of the need for support to be timely, relevant to their schools' specific needs, and practical. The study's findings highlighted compliance-driven support was not helpful and reinforced the desire and need for district office leadership and supervisors to align their support to their daily realities of the principalship and needed instructional leadership. While previous research examined principal burnout, instructional leadership, and district support separately, this study contributes to the literature by connecting these areas and demonstrating how they interconnect with district systems that shape principal experiences. Additionally, this study addresses a gap in the literature related to how district structures are experienced by principals in actual practice. There is a need for further research on how district leadership experience, at the high school level, influences the effectiveness of support provided to principals. This is an area that has limited attention in existing research and warrants further research.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field by providing a systems-level explanation of principal burnout and instructional leadership challenges. While prior research has examined principal workload, burnout, and district support as separate constructs, this study demonstrates how these factors are interconnected within district systems and organizational structures. Additionally, this study reframes district responsibility by showing that principal stress is not an individual issue, but a structural outcome produced by how district systems are designed, implemented, and experienced in practice. By centering the lived experiences of principals, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how district systems shape leadership effectiveness and sustainability.

Implications of the Study

This qualitative multiple case study has important implications within the findings for practice and future research around how leadership structures, systems of the district, and principal expectations influence the daily work of the high school principal role. The study found across all six themes, consistently the findings indicated principal stress and limitations of instructional leadership are not isolated challenges but are created by systemic organizational structures within the district. The implications of this study are presented across three levels: district-level systems, principal supervisor practices, and broader policy considerations.

District Level Implications

Findings from Theme 3, Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures, suggest that district systems unintentionally prioritize compliance and operational demands over instructional leadership. This indicates a need for district leaders to examine how reporting requirements, timelines, and initiatives impact principals' ability to focus on teaching and learning. Themes 1 and 2, Competing Priorities and Increasing Workload, findings highlighted that the principal role has grown significantly without corresponding adjustments in responsibilities or support given to schools. This indicates that districts should reconsider the design of the principalship role to ensure expectations are aligned with time, capacity, and the instructional priorities of schools along with reevaluating staffing needs to assist the principalship.

District leaders should begin by conducting an audit of principal responsibilities and district initiatives to identify areas where tasks can be reduced, streamlined, or reassigned. This includes evaluating reporting requirements, compliance expectations, and meeting structures that may be contributing to workload overload.

Supervisor Level Implications

Additional findings from Theme 5, Relational Trust and Supervisor Support, highlight that principal supervisors play a critical role in shaping principal experience. Districts should prioritize the development of principal supervisors as instructional leaders and coaches who provide timely, relevant, and consistent support. Structural Capacity Constraints, Theme 4, findings indicate that staffing limitations and resource gaps significantly impact principals' ability to meet expectations by the district. Districts must re-evaluate staffing structures, and roles of high staff, and provide additional support to reduce operational burdens for principals.

Principal supervisors should prioritize consistent, job-embedded coaching focused on instructional leadership, including regular school visits, real-time problem solving, and structured opportunities for reflective dialogue with principals.

Policy Level Implications

Findings from Themes 3 and 6 suggest that accountability systems create unintended challenges when expectations are not aligned with decision-making authority. Principals are held responsible for outcomes yet often lack the authority to make decisions necessary to have influence for their school's outcomes. This indicates a need for the district to consider accountability with autonomy for site-based decision making. Additionally, findings from Theme 6, Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability, indicated that increasing site-based decision-making authority improves both principal effectiveness and sustainability in the role. District systems that allow principals greater flexibility in responding to the unique needs of their schools reduce frustration and improve outcomes.

District leaders should consider revising policies to increase site-based decision-making authority, allowing principals greater flexibility to respond to the unique needs of their schools while maintaining accountability expectations.

Recommendations

Several recommendations based on the findings of this study are provided for district office leaders, principal supervisors and for future research. The findings and themes identified in Chapter 4 are the base for the recommendations.

Themes 1 and 2 specifically indicate that the current expectations and stress placed on the role of the high school principal are not sustainable and require intentional redesign. It is recommended district leaders conduct a comprehensive review of principal responsibilities to identify tasks that can be reduced, reassigned, or eliminated.

The second recommendation is for district leaders to consider reducing compliance related tasks and streamline reporting requirements. Theme 3 findings highlighted compliance demands limit principals' ability to focus on instructional leadership. District leaders could also review tasks for duplications or assign them to another role within the district or schools.

The principal supervisor role should be examined and possibly redesigned to prioritize time for coaching, mentoring, and instructional support. Findings from Theme 5 indicated that principals need responsive, consistent, relationship based support from their direct supervisor.

District leaders should review staffing and support services in the areas of assistant principals, counseling and mental health services. Findings from Theme 4 highlighted a lack of capacity directly impacting the principals' ability to effectively do their daily job.

Site-based decision making authority should be evaluated by district office leaders to align with accountability expectations. Theme 6 findings indicated limited autonomy contributed to the stress of the principal role along with the concern of sustainability of the high school

principalship. Greater authority for principals to make site-based decisions has potential to improve the effectiveness and job satisfaction of principals.

It is suggested that principal supervisors and district office leaders increase visibility in schools to better understand the daily realities of the high school principal role. Theme 5 findings indicate that stronger relationships with direct engagement improve effectiveness of support. Additionally, communication that is clear and consistent should be a priority across the district to reduce confusion. Principals shared experiences of navigating multiple channels to gain understanding and clarity on district decisions and expectations.

This research study highlights a few areas to consider for further research. There is a need for additional studies that examine how district systems influence principal effectiveness across multiple urban and suburban districts. A study focused on several districts would give a broader understanding of how patterns exist across different school district settings. Secondly, further research could be conducted on the role of principal supervisors, particularly how their experience at the high school level impacts the effectiveness of the support they provide to principals. Lastly, additional research could be explored on how district systems and structures redesign efforts can reduce principal workload and still have accountability for the outcomes of success for the high schools. Understanding and finding easy to balance the demands of the principalship is critical to improving principal sustainability.

In addition to extending this study across multiple districts, future research should examine how district leadership experience, particularly at the high school level, influences the effectiveness of support provided to principals. Further research is also needed to explore how district systems can be intentionally redesigned to balance accountability with autonomy while

maintaining instructional focus. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining how changes in district structures impact principal sustainability over time would provide valuable insight into long-term organizational effectiveness.

Future research should also examine how district systems influence principal retention over time through longitudinal studies that track leadership sustainability across multiple years. Additionally, quantitative studies that test the relationships identified in this study could provide further validation of the themes and organizational tensions identified. Comparative studies across multiple districts would also provide insight into whether these patterns are consistent across different organizational contexts or specific to urban school systems.

Conclusion

This qualitative multiple case study examined how district leaders support high school principals as instructional leaders within the Oklahoma City Public Schools, while identifying the primary stressors that impact their ability to effectively lead. Findings from the study revealed that principal stress and limitations on time for instructional leadership are not the result of shortcomings of the high school principal but are embedded in systemic organizational structures and systems.

Across all three research questions, this study discovered that district systems of support are present but often experienced as compliance driven and inconsistent. Significant stress is felt by the high school principals due to workload, competing district priorities, and restricted decision making autonomy. Principals identified the need for timely and practical, relational support that aligned to their daily work and specific needs.

This study confirms that challenges in instructional leadership and principal burnout are the result of interconnected systems of the district and not isolated factors. Organizational tensions were identified and provided a beginning of understanding how district structures tie to the principal experience at their schools.

Finally, this qualitative study highlights needs for district leaders to intentionally review and possibly redesign district systems, structures and supports to align with the expectations of the principal role. Without the intentional review and redesign, the high school principalship risks becoming unsustainable in this urban school setting.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Progression From NVivo Codes to Categories and Final Themes

The table below provides a detailed representation of the progression from initial NVivo codes to categories, identified organizational tensions, and the final themes developed through the thematic analysis process.

Table A

Progression From NVivo Codes to Categories and Final Themes

NVivo Codes	Code Categories	Organizational Tension Identified	Final Theme
Instructional Leadership vs. Managerial Demands	Instructional Leadership vs. Managerial Demands	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 1: Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership
Managerial Task Overload	Principal Workload and Role Complexity	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 1
District Mandates	District Mandates and Compliance Pressure	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 1
Compliance Over Outcomes	District Mandates and Compliance Pressure	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 1
Competing Demands	Principal Workload and Role Complexity	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 1
Volume of Responsibilities and Overwhelmed	Principal Workload and Role Complexity	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 2: Increasing Workload and Role Expectations
Tasks Not in Job Description	Principal Workload and Role Complexity	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 2

After-Hours Work	Principal Workload and Role Complexity	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 2
Duplication of Tasks	Principal Workload and Role Complexity	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 2
Reporting Requirements	District Mandates and Compliance Pressure	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 3: Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures
Accreditation Tasks	District Mandates and Compliance Pressure	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 3
Short Timelines	District Mandates and Compliance Pressure	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 3
Shifting Priorities	District Mandates and Compliance Pressure	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 3
District Initiatives	District Mandates and Compliance Pressure	Compliance vs. Instruction	Theme 3
Staffing Shortages	Staffing and Capacity Constraints	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 4: Structural Capacity Constraints
Administrator Ratios	Staffing and Capacity Constraints	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 4
Mental Health Services	Staffing and Capacity Constraints	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 4
Counseling Support	Staffing and Capacity Constraints	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 4
Resource Constraints	Staffing and Capacity Constraints	Expectations vs. Capacity	Theme 4
Coaching	Principal Supervisor Relationship	Support vs. Supervision	Theme 5: Relational Trust and Supervisor Support
Mentoring	Principal Supervisor Relationship	Support vs. Supervision	Theme 5

Trust	Principal Supervisor Relationship	Support vs. Supervision	Theme 5
Communication	Principal Supervisor Relationship	Support vs. Supervision	Theme 5
Responsiveness of Support	Principal Supervisor Relationship	Support vs. Supervision	Theme 5
Site-Based Decision Making	Autonomy and Decision-Making Authority	Accountability vs. Autonomy	Theme 6: Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability
Flexibility in Decision Making	Autonomy and Decision-Making Authority	Accountability vs. Autonomy	Theme 6
Approval Barriers	Autonomy and Decision-Making Authority	Accountability vs. Autonomy	Theme 6
Accountability Without Authority	Autonomy and Decision-Making Authority	Accountability vs. Autonomy	Theme 6
Principal Burnout	Principal Well-Being and Sustainability	Accountability vs. Autonomy	Theme 6
Emotional Exhaustion	Principal Well-Being and Sustainability	Accountability vs. Autonomy	Theme 6
Retention Concerns	Principal Well-Being and Sustainability	Accountability vs. Autonomy	Theme 6

Note. NVivo codes were grouped into categories based on conceptual similarity. These categories revealed four organizational tensions: compliance vs. instruction, expectations vs. capacity, support vs. supervision, and accountability vs. autonomy. These tensions informed the development of six overarching themes.

Appendix B

Triangulation Matrix Across Data Sources

The table below presents the triangulation of data across the four sources used in this study: district leader surveys, principal surveys, reflective journals, and principal interviews. The matrix identifies patterns of convergence and divergence across data sources and provides a summary interpretation of findings aligned to each theme.

Table B

Triangulation Matrix

Theme	RQ Alignment	District Leader Surveys	Principal Surveys	Reflective Journals	Principal Interviews	Convergence Pattern	Interpretation
Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership	RQ1, RQ2	Leaders emphasized multiple initiatives and expectations.	Principals reported time spent on compliance tasks.	Difficulty balancing instructional and operational responsibilities.	Competing demands interfere with instructional focus.	Strong convergence	Organizational demands shift focus away from instructional leadership.
Increasing Workload and Role Expectations	RQ2	Leaders acknowledged expanding expectations.	Principals reported increased workload and responsibilities	Extended work hours and ongoing demands.	Role described as overwhelming and difficult to prioritize.	Strong convergence	Workload expansion contributes to principal stress.
Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures	RQ1, RQ2	Emphasis on accountability systems and reporting.	Frequent reporting requirements and expectations.	Misalignment between district expectations and site needs.	Constant reporting and shifting priorities.	Convergence with role differences	Compliance structures influence principal behavior and priorities.
Structural Capacity Constraints	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Acknowledged staffing and resource limitations.	Reported insufficient staffing and resources.	Staffing shortages and lack of support.	Limited personnel to meet expectations.	Strong convergence	Resource gaps limit leadership effectiveness.

Relational Trust and Supervisor Support	RQ1, RQ3	Emphasis on support structures.	Mixed perceptions of support.	Importance of communication and trust.	Need for guidance and thought partnership.	Partial convergence	Relational support varies and impacts effectiveness.
Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Emphasis on accountability expectations.	Limited decision-making authority reported.	Lack of voice in decisions.	Approval barriers and limited autonomy.	Strong convergence	Limited autonomy contributes to stress and sustainability concerns.

Note. Data were triangulated across four sources to identify patterns of convergence, partial convergence, and divergence. Themes were considered strongly supported when evidence was present across three or more data sources.

Appendix C

Evidence Supporting Themes Across Data Sources

The following tables present supporting evidence for each theme identified in this study. Evidence is drawn from district leader surveys, principal surveys, reflective journals, and principal interviews to demonstrate triangulation across data sources.

Table C1

Evidence Supporting Theme 1: Competing Priorities Undermining Instructional Leadership

Data Source	Evidence	Example Quote / Reference
District Leader Surveys	Multiple initiatives and expectations placed on principals.	Leaders emphasized reporting and initiative demands.
Principal Surveys	Time spent on compliance tasks rather than instruction.	Majority reported limited instructional leadership time.
Reflective Journals	Difficulty balancing operational and instructional responsibilities.	"Spinning our wheels ..."
Principal Interviews	Competing demands interfere with instructional focus.	"Most of the day is spent responding to district requests ..."

Table C2

Evidence Supporting Theme 2: Increasing Workload and Role Expectations

Data Source	Evidence	Example Quote
Principal Surveys	Increased workload and responsibilities.	Majority reported feeling overwhelmed.
Reflective Journals	Extended work hours and competing demands.	Descriptions of ongoing workload pressure.
Principal Interviews	Role expansion and difficulty prioritizing.	"I did not even know where to begin ..."
Cross-Source Pattern	Consistent overload across all data sources.	Strong convergence across sources.

Table C3

Evidence Supporting Theme 3: Compliance-Driven Accountability Structures

Data Source	Evidence	Example Quote
District Leader Surveys	Emphasis on accountability systems.	Reporting expectations emphasized.
Principal Surveys	Frequent reporting requirements.	High frequency of compliance tasks.
Reflective Journals	Misalignment between district expectations and site needs.	"Undoing and redoing work ..."
Principal Interviews	Constant reporting and shifting priorities.	"Constant requests for reports ..."

Table C4

Evidence Supporting Theme 4: Structural Capacity Constraints

Data Source	Evidence	Example Quote
Principal Surveys	Insufficient staffing and resources.	Reported lack of adequate personnel.
Reflective Journals	Staffing shortages and lack of support.	"Schools are not the same ... needs not understood."
Principal Interviews	Lack of personnel to meet expectations.	"We do not have enough people ..."
Cross-Source Pattern	Strong agreement across sources.	Consistent staffing concerns.

Table C5

Evidence Supporting Theme 5: Relational Trust and Supervisor Support

Data Source	Evidence	Example Quote
Principal Surveys	Mixed perceptions of support.	Variation in responses.
Reflective Journals	Importance of communication and trust.	"Supported by my supervisor ..."
Principal Interviews	Need for guidance and thought partnership.	"Having someone to call ..."
Cross-Source Pattern	Partial convergence.	Support varies across experiences.

Table C6

Evidence Supporting Theme 6: Autonomy Within Accountability and Principal Sustainability

Data Source	Evidence	Example Quote
Principal Surveys	Limited decision-making authority.	Accountability without autonomy reported.
Reflective Journals	Lack of voice in decision-making.	"Not at the table ..."
Principal Interviews	Approval barriers and limited authority.	"Have to go through multiple people ..."
Cross-Source Pattern	Strong convergence.	Consistent autonomy concerns.

Appendix D

Principal Survey Questions and Metrics

Purpose of the Principal Survey: To identify which urban high school principals are experiencing significant overload and how district office leaders are (or are not) supporting them. The results will help determine a pool of potential interviewees for the qualitative case study.

Survey Format:

- **Total Questions**: 25
- **Types**: Likert-scale, multiple choice, open-ended
- **Focus Areas**: indicators of work overload, district office leadership support and resources

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Principal Survey Questions

Section A: Demographic and Role Context

1. Name:
2. OKCPS High School:
3. How many years have you served as a high school principal?
    - 0–3 years
    - 4–7 years
    - 8–15 years

- 16+ years

4. How many years have you served at your current high school as principal?
    - 0–3 years
    - 4–7 years
    - 8–15 years
    - 16+ years
5. How many students are currently enrolled in your school?
    - Under 500
    - 501–1000
    - 1001–1500
    - 1501+
6. How many assistant principals are assigned to your campus?
    - 0
    - 1
    - 2
    - 3+
7. How would you describe the socioeconomic makeup of your school community?
    - Predominantly low-income
    - Mixed-income
    - Predominantly middle/high-income
8. How often do you interact directly with your immediate supervisor?
    - Daily
    - Weekly

- Monthly
- Rarely
- Never

9. How often do you interact directly with district office leaders (not including your immediate supervisor)?
    - Daily
    - Weekly
    - Monthly
    - Rarely
    - Never

Section B: Principal Overload Indicators (Likert scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

6. My workload has increased significantly over the past 2 to 3 years.
7. I often work nights and weekends to complete basic administrative duties.
8. I feel I am expected to "do more with less."
9. My role frequently requires me to manage tasks outside of my job description.
10. I experience burnout or exhaustion related to my responsibilities as a principal.

Section C: Perceived District Office Support (Likert scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

11. District leaders understand the demands placed on principals.
12. I feel comfortable reaching out to district office leaders for support.
13. I receive timely communication and updates from the district.
14. District policies and initiatives are designed with principal workload in mind.
15. I have access to mentorship or peer support through district initiatives.

Section D: Resource Allocation and Decision-Making (Likert scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

16. I have input in decisions that impact my campus.
17. District leaders consult principals before implementing new programs or initiatives.
18. My campus is adequately resourced to meet district and state mandates.
19. I receive sufficient support from my direct supervisor.
20. My professional development needs are considered in district planning.

Section E: Open-Ended (Short answer)

21. What are the most pressing challenges you face in your role?
22. What does effective support from district leaders look like to you?
23. How could district leaders reduce the burden placed on urban principals?
24. In what ways has the district helped you grow as a leader?
25. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

Metrics for Principal Interview Selection

Target Interview Candidates:

- Scores of 4–5 (“Agree”/“Strongly Agree”) on overload indicators (Q6–Q10)
- Scores of 1–2 (“Strongly Disagree”/“Disagree”) on support-related items (Q11–Q15)
- Comments in Q21–25 indicating high stress, burnout, or specific calls for more support

Ideal Interview Candidate Profile:

- Principals who demonstrate high overload and low perceived district support
- At least 2+ years in role to ensure reflective experience
- Currently working in a school with 60%+ low-income population (as proxy for urban context)

Appendix E

District Office Leader Survey

Purpose of the District Office Leader Survey: To gather district office leaders' perspectives on how they understand, perceive, and respond to principal workload and burnout—helping you identify key themes and interview candidates.

Survey Format:

- **Total Questions**: 25
- **Types**: Likert-scale, multiple choice, open-ended
- **Focus Areas**: indicators of work overload for principals, district office leadership support and resources

Section A: Demographics & Role Context

1. What is your current role in the district?
   (Open-ended)

2. How many years have you served in a district leadership position?

   - 0–3 years
   - 4–7 years
   - 8–15 years
   - 16+ years

3. How many years have you served in your current district leadership position?

   - 0–3 years
   - 4–7 years
   - 8–15 years
   - 16+ years

4. Approximately how many high school campuses do you support directly or indirectly?
   (Open-ended)

5. How frequently do you interact with high school principals in your role?

   - Daily

- Weekly
- Monthly
- Rarely

6. Have you ever served as a school principal?

    - Yes
    - No

Section B: Perceptions of Principal Workload (Likert scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

6. I believe urban high school principals are experiencing high levels of overload.
7. Principals are asked to manage responsibilities beyond their core leadership duties.
8. The current demands placed on principals are not sustainable long-term.
9. Principal burnout is a growing concern in our district.
10. I am aware of the specific challenges facing principals at high-needs campuses.

Section C: Support Practices (Likert scale:Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

11. District leadership provides effective support systems for high school principals.
12. Our district includes principal voice in decision-making processes.
13. We proactively check in with principals to monitor their well-being.
14. Our office regularly evaluates how our directives impact campus workload.
15. There are systems in place to reduce or redistribute principal workload when needed.

Section D: Professional Learning and Resources (Likert scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree)

16. We provide meaningful professional learning tailored to principals' leadership needs.
17. Principals have access to coaching or mentoring through our office.
18. Our district fosters collaboration among principals to share burdens and ideas.
19. Resources (personnel, budget, time) are equitably distributed to support overloaded campuses.
20. We intentionally address principal retention and job satisfaction in our planning.

Section E: Open-Ended Reflection

21. What do you believe are the biggest contributors to principal overload in your district?
22. How does your role directly or indirectly support high school principals?
23. In what ways do you assess whether principals feel supported?
24. What improvements do you think could be made to better support OKCPS urban high school principals?
25. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience or philosophy on supporting high school principals?

Appendix F

Principal Interview Questions

Principal Interview Questions

- Can you describe a recent situation where you felt overwhelmed by your responsibilities as a principal?
- In your experience, how do district office leaders either alleviate or add to your workload?
- What types of support from the district would make the biggest difference in your day-to-day responsibilities?
- How has your relationship with district leadership evolved over time?
- If you had the chance to redesign the way district leaders support principals, what changes would you suggest?

Appendix G

Principal Journal Reflection Prompt

Before our interview, please take 10–15 minutes to reflect on a time this year when you felt particularly supported—or unsupported—by district leadership. Describe the situation, your emotional and professional response, and how it influenced your leadership practice.

Appendix H

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: August 28, 2025 **IRB#:** 18821

Principal Investigator: Tracy P Skinner

Approval Date: 08/28/2025

Exempt Category: Category 2

Study Title: DISTRICT OFFICE LEADERS SUPPORTING OVERLOADED URBAN HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Eric Pennello, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board