

# Transcending the contexts of a rural school in Texas and an urban school in California: A cross-case comparison of principal leadership for student success

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## **Abstract**

*This study examined elementary high needs schools in California and Texas where leaders strengthened learning within unique contexts but common goals of increasing rigor and support for low-income students. The purpose was to identify the practices that led to improved performance. The schools were purposefully selected as high needs schools whose principals had served for at least three years and engaged in the improvement process.*

*The researchers used the research protocol developed by the International School Leadership Development Network and High Needs Schools (Baran & Berry, 2014). This had interview protocols for the administrators, faculty, parents, and students. Data sources included interviews with administrators and faculty, on-site observations, and document analysis of campus reports.*

*Both settings demonstrated a commitment to student learning with leadership that ensured collaborative planning, progress monitoring, use of data, supporting students, staffing decisions, and sustained quality professional development. Specific actions varied, but core practices were similar suggesting that while context influences the specific actions, certain areas of focus transcend different contexts. This cross-case comparison affirmed that school improvement is a long-term commitment to achieving learning for all. Through targeted, meaningful professional development with follow-up and ethical principal leadership, positive learning goals were achieved. A sustained focus with emphasis on caring, support, and engagement of all stakeholders characterized leadership in both the rural and urban settings.*

**Keywords:** *Leadership for learning; high need schools; equity; excellence*

## **Introduction**

Increasing academic rigor and student support in schools is a national priority within the United States, particularly for high need schools that serve large populations of students from low-income families (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015; Klar & Brewer, 2013; Murakami, Garza & Merchant, 2010). In high need schools, many students from low-income families have not experienced the same opportunities to learn afforded to those students in schools serving more affluent families (Carter & Welner, 2013; Palardy, Rumberger & Butler, 2015). In many of these schools, increasing student achievement at the same rate as schools serving predominantly students from more affluent families presents a challenge (Crow, 2010). While some school campuses with large numbers of students from high poverty families have been able to lessen the gaps in achievement (Chenoweth, 2009; Day & Gurr, 2013; Murakami, Garza & Merchant, 2010), the achievement gap between students from low-income families and students from middle to high-income families remains a multi-faceted challenge in many high need schools (Crow, 2010; Diamond, 2012; Snyder & Dillows, 2015).

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework for this study drew upon the foundation of findings from scholars in international educational leadership research networks of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) who sought to identify characteristics and practices of principals of successful schools across international boundaries (Jacobson & Day, 2007) and the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) who focused on principal leadership in high need international contexts to discern practices and processes that fostered increased student learning and that promoted social justice leadership (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015). Educational leadership scholars in each of these networks identified the vital importance of consideration of context to specific leadership actions in school improvement (Klar & Brewer, 2013), while also affirming the vital role of principal leadership to the school improvement process (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). The conceptual framework served as a foundation for this study and a lens for data analyses in considering school improvement practices and processes. From the study of school leadership across international contexts of high need schools beginning in 2001 for scholars in the ISSPP (Jacobson & Day, 2007) and beginning in 2010 (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015) for scholars in ISLDN, consensus emerged that principal leadership matters in influencing school improvement. It is noteworthy to point out that some scholars were members of both networks, and each network was supported by the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA). ISLDN was a partnership of UCEA and the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society.

The principal fulfils a vital role in fostering a positive school culture where learning can flourish (Leithwood, 2010; Gurr, Drysdale, Clarke & Wildy, 2014). This positive school culture is further characterized as including specific actions to meet needs present in that context. Because school leadership is complex and includes multiple responsibilities (O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2013), a road-map for school improvement in every context is unrealistic. As Gurr et al. (2014) pointed out, "The cases described show how much context can determine the parameters of what a school leader can do" (p. 88). However, school leaders can benefit from considering influences on enhanced student learning across multiple contexts (Murakami, Garza & Merchant, 2010). An understanding of the macro and micro contexts is, however, essential in fostering understanding of key principal actions in school improvement in diverse, high need settings (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015). For the present study, a discussion of issues impacting the macro and micro levels follows.

#### ***Macro level***

In the study of high needs schools in the United States, the educational gaps in student performance between students from low-income families and those from more affluent families became clearly evident following the enactment of accountability ratings as part of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation affecting all states in the US. For the first time in many states, the legislation required that schools receive performance ratings based on the academic performance of all students. Students' performance results on standardized tests were disaggregated by sub-groups of ethnic group and income, and schools were held accountable for student results. Low performance in achieving Adequate Yearly Progress for students resulted in schools being designated as Program Improvement Schools. As part of the legislation, parents were provided permission to transfer children to other schools if a school was designated as a Program Improvement School. The school was also required to offer after school tutoring and to improve academic results or risk the danger of being closed (NCLB, 2001).

While the spotlight on the academic performance of all students influenced efforts of positive school reform such as partnerships with the school and community to foster greater academic achievement (Riley, 2013; Sanders, 2014), accountability for school districts and individual school campuses sometimes also resulted in an instructional focus on scripted lessons and instructional methods focused on improving students' test scores. These practices were criticized as ways of teaching to the test instead of promoting creativity, deeper thinking,

and application of knowledge (Apple, 2011; Brown, 2015; Welsh, Eastwood & D'Agostino, 2014). Within this same national macro context, increasingly policy makers called for the preparation of students to higher levels to prepare them for college and careers of the 21st century (Partnership for 21st Century Schools, 2002). While federal legislation provided additional funding for schools serving over 50% of the students from low income families, in many schools, systemic problems extended beyond limited resources as challenges contributing to large numbers of students in schools serving predominantly low-income families not performing at the same level as those in more affluent contexts. These systemic challenges included low expectations, lack of rigorous course content and course offerings, and ineffective instructional strategies (Fenwick, 2010; Noguera, 2013; Noguera & Wing, 2006).

New national legislation titled the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA) of 2015 continued the emphasis on strengthening the academic performance of all students in the United States (US Department of Education, 2015). Noguera (2015) pointed out that ESSA continues to ignore the vital role of school leaders working to understand the community context in which the school is located and engage the assistance of the wider community as partners in achieving school reform for students' increased academic performance. A deeper understanding of the importance of context to school reform is advocated (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010; William & Groom, 2015). Researchers (Lai, 2015; Medina, Martinez, Murakami, Mariels & Hernandez, 2014) have emphasized the need for additional studies of principal leadership in multiple contexts in order to increase understanding of important practices in influencing student learning and school improvement.

### *Micro level*

This study examined elementary schools in California and in Texas in high need contexts as educational leaders worked to strengthen a culture of learning within unique local contexts with a common goal of increasing rigor and support for students from low-income families. The purpose of the study was to identify the practices that led to improved performance in the two high need schools as well as to identify ways each school's unique context impacted performance. The schools were purposefully selected as schools whose principals had served in the role of principal at the school for at least three years and engaged in the school improvement process to achieve increased rigor and support for students. One school was identified as located in an urban setting in California serving 92% of students from low-income families, 52% of students who were English language learners, and 10% of students with disabilities, while the other school was located in a rural context in Texas serving 54% of students from low-income families, 15.7% who were English language learners and 10% students with disabilities. Although the differences in context between the two sites were clearly evident, the researchers sought to illuminate common leadership practices that influenced students' academic gains in each setting as well as how each school's unique context impacted student success.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative study used a case study approach (Yin, 2014), which is an appropriate method because it focused on the identification of a unique bounded system (Patton, 2015) of two successful elementary school campuses. The research was conducted in the fall of 2015. Purposeful sampling (Lichtman, 2014; Merriam, 2009) was used in the selection of two campuses meeting specific criteria for selection. The criteria included that the principal had served in this role at least three years at a campus that served over 50% of students from low-income families, and student academic performance had made recognized achievement gains. The researchers contacted one rural high need elementary school on the list of high performing school campuses in Texas and one urban high need elementary school district in California that had been designated as a Program Improvement School that was making strong improvement gains. Each school served over 50% of students from low-income families, and the principal had served at each school over three years.

The researchers for this study used the research protocol that was developed by the International School Leadership Development Network and High Needs Schools (Baran & Berry, 2014). This had interview protocols for the principal, faculty, other administrators, parents, and students. Data sources for this study included interviews with each principal, other administrators, and faculty as well as on-site observations and document analysis of campus reports. In California, the principal, assistant principal, and teachers were interviewed as part of this study, and in Texas, the superintendent, principal, director of curriculum, and parents were interviewed.

The research questions that guided this study were:

- What fosters the high performance in a high need school?
- How do leaders increase individual and organizational performance in high need schools?
- How do the schools' internal and external contexts impact the performance in high need schools?

The interviews were 60 minutes with an initial contact with the district superintendent or designee to gain permission for the study and to ask permission to interview the principal and faculty for data collection. One site visit on the campus was used to obtain documents to support the findings from the interviews. Archival data included curriculum plans, campus goals and plans, professional development schedules and agendas, student achievement benchmarks, and student data documents. Interviews and observations were conducted on campus with interviews audio-taped and transcribed. The data were coded to discern emergent themes in reference to the research questions. The process of coding was an iterative and recursive process of reading and re-reading the data to identify the predominant patterns (Saldona, 2016). The data from each school context were coded separately with the initial themes identified through open coding and further refined by axial coding using the constant comparative method of analysis (Lichtman, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After the data from each school context were coded separately, the researchers provided a cross-case comparison (Yin, 2014). An audit trail and member checks were used to ensure trustworthiness of the data (Merriam, 2009). The themes from the interviews were examined to understand the context of the organization as well as the practices that led to the high performance. Pseudonyms were used in naming each of the schools as well as the participants interviewed for the study.

## Findings

### ***Research question one: What fosters student learning in high needs schools?***

#### *Grant Elementary School*

Focus on literacy with targeted interventions. A consistent focus on literacy with targeted interventions was a primary theme that was identified from the research data as instrumental in fostering student learning at Grant Elementary, an urban school in southern California. The principal commented,

*When I arrived at the school three years ago, in grades four, five, and six, 75% of the students were three or more grade levels below in their reading ability. This was reflected on multiple measures including standardized testing results and the school's designation as a Program Improvement School. In 2016, there are three to four students in each classroom that are still below grade level, but not 75% of each classroom.*

She further explained that she designated time during the day for intensive interventions that were required, using the Response to Intervention (RTI) pyramid as a framework for intervention. RTI is an acronym describing a process for identification of student needs and determining and implementing appropriate interventions. She also ensured that the entire faculty became highly skilled in instructional strategies such as close reading. With 97% of the student body identified as Hispanic, and 52% identified as ESL,

the principal also emphasized, “All teachers are GLAD certified, and 15 of the 28 teachers are bilingual”. Guided Language Acquisition Design (GLAD) is an organization that provides professional development for teachers to strengthen knowledge and skills of effective ways to engage English language learners in academic improvement and in English acquisition. The series of professional development sessions leading to certification by a teacher included an emphasis on appreciation of cultural differences.

An additional structural change was to equip the school’s library with books to support the accelerated reading program in which students received recognition for reading books from the accelerated book list. The assistant principal shared that when she arrived a year prior, the library was essentially an empty room with some boxes of books on the floor. She and the principal literally “pushed shelves and put books on shelves” while also asking teachers to donate books. In addition, teachers received training in the accelerated reading program and implementation was school-wide.

Culture of care and respect. In addition to the clear focus on literacy, a sustained focus on fostering a culture of care and respect prevailed. The most often heard expression from teachers and administrators was, “We are a family”. Veteran teachers further explained, “We go to each other’s children’s birthday parties. We send a card if someone is sick”. Another teacher emphasized, “This is where I am needed. I love my peers. Caring is always displayed. We have a very caring environment – a family environment. Not many teachers say this at other schools”. Another teacher added, “The majority of teachers stay here until retirement”. The assistant principal added, “We know each other as leaders and as persons”. The leadership of the principal influences the culture. A teacher stressed,

*Sandy creates a risk-free environment. She respects us, and we respect each other. Our principal believes in the teachers and gives us freedom. She trusts that we will do our best. We meet in grade level teams. All are treated with dignity – parents, students, teachers, and administrators.*

Examples of caring were demonstrated by tangible projects to assist students. The assistant principal shared, “Sandy’s church prepares food boxes for the students during the summer. Our community liaison also got donations of back packs for the students”. The culture of care and respect was modeled by the principal who emphasized the need for appreciation and respect for all cultures. Her caring was evidenced again as she described her commitment not to allow graffiti to stay on the school wall for children to see when entering the building. When the building was defaced during an evening or weekend, the principal washed the walls before the students arrived for the school day. A tear came to her eyes as she described a day that the graffiti was so extensive that she was still washing the wall as some children arrived.

High expectations. A third emergent theme in response to the question of what fosters student learning in this high need school was high expectations. Teachers, the principal, and assistant principal all discussed high expectations for student learning as a characteristic of this school. As the principal stated, “Many of the teachers lived in this neighborhood as children, went away to college, and came back to teach in this school. They know, first hand, that children of poverty can achieve to high levels”. A new math teacher who had been hired this academic year stated, “My parents were poor. Even though I grew up in the rural south, I can identify with these students and parents. I know they can succeed, but literacy is a key”. Another teacher stressed,

*The parents want to help, but they don’t know how. Some of the parents are immigrants, and they think that their job is to teach the child how to behave, and the teacher’s job is to teach the subjects. We try to help them to see that promoting learning is each of our responsibilities.*

A teacher emphasized, “We really think about our students and how to help them to succeed. They are our priority”.

Recruitment and selection of faculty. Another theme identified in response to what is fostering increased student learning was that the new faculty have been recruited and hired based on their competencies and commitment to high expectations for all students. The assistant principal’s authentic commitment to both students and parents were evident in her words and actions. She stated, “I saw my parents struggle. I can relate. This drives me to fight for the parents. That was my mom and dad”. She stressed,

*I am here to serve. I never think I am above anyone. I always try to get input. My door is always open, and I can’t just sit behind my desk. I visit the classes and show support. I also make sure that Sandy and I are aligned.*

The principal added, “The faculty members are incredibly talented. They also all know phonetic instruction”. The principal and assistant principal visit classrooms to show support, and they participate in all on-campus professional development experiences. They create a risk-free environment that encourages teacher empowerment in planning and implementing lessons to strengthen student learning.

#### *Merlin Miles Elementary School*

Improve academic performance. At Merlin Miles Elementary School, a high need school in rural East Texas, the principal and superintendent discussed the importance of emphasizing a growth model that was individualized for all students. Their priority is to look for areas of improvement based on the needs of their students. The school personnel were very proud that the campus had passed all seven indices identified by the Texas Education Agency including postsecondary education goals for the district. This school district was one of the few that received that distinction. The principal emphasized,

*We keep the transition between grades effectively communicated. Third grade did not do so well this last year, so we shifted teachers. We have a strong math teacher who is now teaching fourth and fifth grade math. All our students feed into one school.*

The principal added that they placed teachers based on their teachers’ strengths. She stated,

*We have team teaching in first through sixth grade, the same as departments in the middle school, so having more than one teacher is not a big deal to the students when they get to middle school. We don’t have many self-contained classes. We have teachers teach subjects. So, we might have a teacher teach math and teach it to fourth and fifth grade. We have the teachers teach in their areas of strength. We are seeing a huge impact on that change. The teachers can dig deeper in the content.*

The importance of not losing skills over the summer was addressed by sending home summer packets. Incentives for students to complete the work in the packets were identified. The principal shared,

*This was not easy work in the packets, but it paces the students. Tying it to an incentive helps. There is so much summer regression in skills that this helps. We make it worth their while. Our lower SES and ESL parents want the prize for their children. It is usually a skating party or a visit to the Planetarium. They want their children to be able to go.*

Another area that fostered learning was the professional development for the teachers. The principal shared, “I love training days. I love instructional leadership. That is the best part of being a principal. I still love to learn. I love to be in the classrooms”. The professional development was targeted to the needs of the students.

**Research question two: How do principals and other school leaders enhance individual and organizational performance in high needs schools?**

*Grant Elementary School*

Authentic, ethical leadership. Individual and organizational performance was fostered through authentic, ethical leadership of the principal and school leaders at Grant Elementary School. The principal and other school leaders consistently modeled and communicated a vision of high expectations, cultural competency, and commitment to learning. The commitment to learning was clearly evident when the assistant principal asked one of the researchers to address the students in a 6th grade classroom and let them know that she and the principal and the students' math teacher were all working toward achieving their doctoral degrees. She said that she had just been reminding students to set high goals, plan to attend college, and work hard every day, and she wanted them to hear that she was also working toward these three objectives.

Alignment of staffing decisions with academic goals with sustained professional development. When the principal was first assigned to this school, there was no consistency in the use of any training. She provided opportunities for targeted professional development with follow-up and collaborative planning. The principal commented,

*Rarely is any staff meeting devoted to anything other than instruction. Two times a month, we also have a shortened day on Wednesday from 1:15 to 3:15 for team planning. When Common Core standards were introduced, we had teams trained at the district for three days. Then, as a grade level, we focused on improving literacy as our goal.*

The principal related, "In my first year on this campus, we supported six days for campus planning with our teams. Then, we had training emphasizing close reading". The assistant principal added that the teachers have common core planning times. The district trainings have also been worthwhile and meaningful. This year, the faculty is focusing on depth and complexity toward the goal of increasing student skills in understanding the language of the disciplines. Sustaining a targeted focus for professional development with follow-through has influenced an increase in student achievement.

*Merlin Miles Elementary School*

Use of quality data to improve instruction. The principal and central office personnel as well as teachers focused on individual students at Merlin Miles Elementary School. The principal shared ways they monitored each child,

*We have a system of red, yellow, and green because it is easy to see. The red means the student is below level, the yellow means the student is bordering mastery, and the green means the student is on track. This is based on the student's ability. Maroon (the color of the school) is for those students who are advanced.*

The principal also shared the importance of understanding mastery of concepts and skills. She stated,

*We do benchmarks after Christmas, and we do mastery testing every nine weeks. There are a lot of red and yellow in the beginning of the year. At the end of the year, we compare our color codes. Some are a surprise. Sometimes, we see a yellow go to red, and sometimes, we see a yellow go to the advanced level. The data help. The color codes provide a quick visual.*

The teachers and administrators are able to quickly see the data, and this leads to ownership and collaboration for improvement. These data were based on mastery tests. The teachers then work with each other to design intervention strategies for individual students. This colored coded sheet is checked every nine weeks. This keeps the focus on the individual growth for all students.

Another component of the principal's leadership is keeping the focus on student performance at all of the meetings. She stated,

*We talk about individual students, the student's strengths and their weaknesses. First and second grade teachers work together, second and third grade teachers work together, then kindergarten and first grade teachers. We put all their brainstormed ideas on anchor charts. They tell what they are going to use to help the students. We do this every nine weeks, and then there are plans for each child.*

The principal shared that everyone takes tests seriously, but that it is most important to show individual student growth for each student. She shared that they celebrate the growth of students.

***Research question three: How do internal and external school contexts impact individual and organizational performance in high needs schools?***

*Grant Elementary School*

Internal school contexts. At Grant Elementary School, that eight of the 28 teachers grew up in the community and were committed to the predominantly Latino immigrant community was a positive force influencing teachers' commitment to this community to increase learning for students. Nine of the teachers were fluent in Spanish which was very positive in working with the parents.

The internal analysis of testing data and recognition of the immense problem of 75% of the students performing below grade level in 5th and 6th grades of at least 3 grade levels heightened the selection of a targeted focus on literacy and the passion to improve students' reading achievement.

*Merlin Miles Elementary School*

Internal contexts. At Merlin Miles Elementary School, many of the teachers grew up in the community, and they care about the progress of the students. The internal analysis of testing data and recognition of the high performance in most subjects and grade levels supported the teachers' and administrator's commitment to all children. This performance was attributed to increasing teacher quality. The teachers engaged in many hours of joint time planning for instruction to support growth. Additionally, the teachers were part of the curriculum development process and worked hard to ensure alignment. Further, the teachers worked hard to develop high quality lessons to support the concepts and skills identified for each grade level. The principal shared that "there is an expectation that teachers will do whatever it takes to make sure that their students succeed". Several training opportunities were provided. There is a preference for the training to be conducted in-house with some teachers getting specific instructional strategy training and then training other teachers.

Another internal context was the use of planning time. The principal works with all the teachers during their planning time. Additionally, the district changed the academic calendar to make sure that professional days for teachers were built into the schedule, and extra days were set at the end of the school year for enrichment for students with extra time for skill development. The superintendent stressed, "Our professional development is based on data. We look at what is needed and send the teachers for training. All our in-service in professional development sessions include teams planning for content and then sharing with the principal".

*Grant Elementary School*

External contexts. Grant Elementary School was located in a high-poverty area of the district where tagging from gangs was a persistent problem. The principal of four years at this school was committed to removing tagging whenever it occurred so that students entered a building that was clean and free of tags. The urban community in southern California was characterized by fast food restaurants and small shops in a row. In this school, 92% of the students received free and reduced-cost lunches at the school which was classified as a Title I funded school.

The school included 658 students with 52% of the students classified as English learners and 10% identified as students with disabilities. The community included long-term residences, and some members of the faculty had attended this elementary school. Eight of the teachers had worked as teachers on the campus for over ten years.

The campus had four principals within five years prior to the arrival of the current principal while eight of the 28 teachers had been long-term faculty members at the school. The low reading scores of students contributed to the school's rating as a Program Improvement School under the state's accountability measures. The principal had served as a principal for 24 years with previous experience at the elementary and middle school levels as well as experience as a central office administrator before assuming the principalship at this school three years ago. The principal commented that she loved the impact and close association with the students and teachers as a campus principal and chose to return to the campus level from central office as a curriculum specialist.

External challenges of accountability testing also influenced the focus on student achievement. The external designation as a Program Improvement School created an outside pressure to increase student learning. That the external challenges of the area were evident through gang activities such as tagging of the school influenced the need for disaster preparedness training. That local business leaders recognized the needs of this community contributed to cooperation with campus projects to assist the students, such as a coat drive and canned food drive. That many students had not been exposed to literature at home or had not traveled to areas which were not uncommon to more affluent students, challenged educators to plan ways to make connections to students' learning. For example, although many students lived less than one hour from the ocean, they had never seen the ocean. They also were within an hour from a major snow skiing area, but many had never seen snow firsthand. As a teacher commented, "My job is to make connections for the students, to make what they are reading meaningful". That 52% of the students were second language learners and were from low-income families further influenced students' knowledge of English and life experiences.

#### *Merlin Miles Elementary School*

External contexts. Merlin Miles Elementary is in Merlin Miles ISD, a rural district in a high poverty area in North East Texas. The principal for over twenty years has supported the school in a variety of ways including writing and receiving grants to support the needs of the school. This rural community was characterized by few stores being left open. Most of the main street store fronts were boarded over. The percentage of students receiving free and reduced-cost lunches at the school was 54%, and the school was classified as a Title I funded school. The school included 274 students in grades Prekindergarten through sixth grade with 15.7% identified as English language learners and 10% identified as students with disabilities. The principal had taught many of the students' parents and grandparents. There was one secretary and a part time nurse. Additionally, the campus shared a custodian with the middle school.

The external pressure from the state level for the school's accountability rating sent the message that performance on state tests was important. Texas periodically changes the levels of performance required for passing as well as continued growth. This external pressure was seen as a fallacy by the administration. It was mentioned that one year with a large gain made, it was almost impossible to see similar gains the following year.

Another external context was the level of family and community engagement. The administrators and teachers embraced parents, family, and community members at the school. They embraced volunteerism and participation in the classrooms. Teachers communicated with parents frequently to discuss children's needs. Every Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting has student performances which increased the parent

involvement. The principal shared, “We have lots of volunteers. We have over 200 volunteer hours a year. Some of that could be the same person with several different sessions”. She also related that she tells parents they are wanted in the classrooms. She stated,

*Parents are our best asset. One of them can help many children. We have a 10-15 minutes reading time, or they can help with math facts, go over tests, or go over some basic skills. We have those who volunteer and even had one get her teaching degree. Parents are invited to eat lunch. We want the parents to feel welcome.*

The principal said, “We have a very blessed community that supports our school. We have a summer mobile library so that students can check out books. This was purchased with a grant”. The principal shared that she had written and received many grants to help their school.

### **Discussion**

The unique internal and external contexts influenced positive actions for overcoming challenges and for building assets. From considering these two high need schools in highly diverse contexts, the importance of a commitment to student learning with leadership that emphasized and ensured collaborative planning, monitoring of progress, study of data, provision of student supports, attention to staffing decisions, and sustained quality professional development characterized practices and processes in both settings. In both settings, the commitment to student learning was a targeted focus although based on data analysis, the exact goals varied in each school. In one school, the goal was to respond to the most evident need of literacy while in the other school, a personalized goal for each student characterized actions. However, the commitment to student learning was evident in both settings. The principal’s leadership contributed to the school improvement process in both settings and influenced the culture of the school as a place where individuals wanted to be. In the urban setting, teachers and administrators discussed the culture of care and emphasized that the school was a good place to work and a place where teachers felt rewarded in making a difference in students’ lives while experiencing care as in a family. In the rural school, parents provided over 200 hours of volunteer time and in both schools, teachers chose to remain as teachers in the school over many years. Clearly, a positive school culture existed in both settings. Sustained professional development also characterized both settings with much of the training provided by teachers in the school. Analysis of data and targeted interventions also characterized the work in both settings.

In the urban school, a targeted focus with sustained staff development, analysis of learning needs, and collaborative planning coupled with strong shared beliefs of high expectations and respect for all students were discussed frequently. Principal leadership that was characterized by modeling of high expectations, supporting a culture of care, fostering collaborative planning and a risk free environment while also hiring individuals with strong competencies and shared beliefs were common elements that mattered in improving student achievement. In the rural school, two primary themes were identified of improving academic performance and using of quality data to improve instruction; yet, included in these two themes were many components that the urban school educators also discussed. The difference in the two schools frequently was in the level of emphasis. It is important to note that these two schools differed in their progress in meeting identified goals. Parent involvement remained a strong goal in the urban setting and had already been attained in the rural school. Literacy goals were just being met in the urban school, and literacy goals had already been achieved in the rural school. The specific targeted actions varied based on needs. The core practices and processes were similar in these two highly diverse contexts suggesting that while context influences the specific actions, and there are no universal sets of strategies to meet the needs in high need schools, certain areas of focus transcend different contexts.

Conceptually, in this study, we explored the intersection of school context and principal leadership on the improvement of student learning. We drew from two important perspectives: 1) the importance of context

in influencing specific actions of principals (Klar & Brewer, 2013) and 2) the importance of principal leadership on the school improvement process (Louis et al., 2010). The findings of this study suggested that while context matters in the school improvement process, context is not the determiner of results. The influences on school improvement can transcend the context through purposeful actions to meet identified needs. For this to occur, the principal is in a pivotal position to influence positive change (Fullan, 2014). From the cross-case comparison of the influences that promoted enhanced student learning, in both settings, a sustained focus on meeting identified needs was present. This study supported as Fullan and Quinn (2016) stressed that targeted interventions require a laser focus to achieve results. In addition, caring was demonstrated repeatedly in the provision of supports to realize the strong belief in the importance of meeting each child's needs. Leadership was characterized by a sustained focus on meeting needs, on demonstrating caring, on providing support for high expectations, and in providing opportunities for faculty, students, and community engagement. The school improvement process to promote increased student learning was not an overnight process. A sustained focus on meeting the identified needs was vitally important as DuFour and Fullan (2013) maintained. In both the rural and the urban context, the principals were steadfast in maintaining a clear focus on the identified goals. An ethic of care was a vital characteristic of school leadership as Beck (1994), Starratt (2004) and Seashore Louis, Murphy, and Smylie (2016) have emphasized. Caring was evidenced through communication of high expectations and respect for each individual as well as through the supports for student success that were provided from implementing summer learning activities to monitoring student performance. Support for faculty development was provided by ongoing professional development that drew upon the strengths of the faculty in presenting and in providing follow-through. As Moore, Kochan, Kraska, and Reames (2011) stressed, the principal's involvement in the ongoing professional development was highly important. Parent and community involvement mattered in the school improvement process as Green (2015) and Ishimaru (2013) maintained as well as creating structures to facilitate collaborative planning and outreach to the wider community. This engagement contributed to the school improvement process of increased student learning (see Table 1).

Table 1: Both the rural and urban contexts sustained focus in

<b>Caring through:</b>	<b>Support through:</b>	<b>Engagement through:</b>
Actions and words	Staffing decisions	Collaborative planning
High expectations	Sustained professional development	Progress monitoring
Cultural respect	Interventions	Use of data

While the specific areas of focus varied, based on the individual school's needs within the micro context, both rural and urban settings were influenced by the accountability issues of the macro context as well as changes in curriculum and instruction that were needed to prepare students more fully for a global society. An emphasis on rigor with interventions and support to ensure student success was present in both settings.

### **Implications**

Recognizing the importance of these elements in multiple settings has implications for principal preparation programs and school improvement efforts. In short, a commitment to student learning with leadership that emphasizes and ensures collaborative planning, monitoring of progress, study of data, provision of student supports, attention to staffing decisions, and sustained quality professional development all contributed to increased student achievement in both settings. These school leaders understood that while they might not be

able to eliminate poverty or address all of the needs present in the community, they could influence student learning by practices and processes targeted toward helping each student to meet goals of increased learning within a culture of care and mutual respect.

These schools' contexts provided both challenges to address and assets to build upon. It is important to recognize the challenges and plan ways to overcome them, but it is equally important for leaders to build upon assets of the faculty, community, and students in fostering school improvement for increased student learning. Through a sustained focus on academic goals within a positive environment characterized by high expectations, mutual respect, and cultural appreciation, learning needs can be attained as this case study demonstrated. This cross-case comparison affirmed again that school improvement is not a one-time process but a long-term commitment to achieving learning goals for all. Through targeted, meaningful professional development with follow-up and ethical principal leadership, positive learning goals can be achieved.

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