

Professional Development of School Principals in the Rural Appalachian Region of Virginia

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of professional development of principals of schools in the rural Appalachian region of Virginia. The researcher interviewed 13 principals from public elementary, middle, and high schools regarding their professional development experiences. Principals were asked to describe their past and current professional development experiences, identify barriers to accessing professional development, and provide their opinion regarding the importance of professional development that focuses specifically on leading a school in rural Appalachia. Principals reported participation in many different types of professional development. Principals' responses were analyzed to determine the extent to which professional development was on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals. Results indicated principals' professional development experiences were seldom on-going, often job-embedded, and somewhat connected to school or district improvement goals. Principals reported the demands of the job, lack of professional development opportunities provided by their school district, lack of knowledge of professional development available outside their district, and being geographically isolated as barriers to their professional learning. The results led to identification of areas for further research. These areas include (a) the role and influence of school division leadership on principals' professional development (b) the importance and impact of incorporating networking and other opportunities for collaboration into the design of principals' professional development, (c) the impact of designing professional development that is on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals on initial learning and continued leadership behaviors of principals, (d) the issues relating to the use and non-use of distance technologies for principals' professional development, and (e) the efficacy of professional development designed for teachers in meeting the needs of principals or the ability of principals to translate the content of teachers professional development to knowledge and skills needed by instructional leaders. The researcher also suggested the need for additional research to compare and contrast the professional development experiences of this study's participants with other principals in rural Appalachia as well as principals from suburban and urban school districts.

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Melody, who is my model for selflessness, faithfulness, compassion, and determination.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While I take full responsibility for the shortcomings, the valuable parts of this work are the collective effort of many family members and colleagues. I first want to acknowledge my parents who have supported and encouraged me throughout my life and taught me to value learning. I acknowledge my son, Erick, for keeping me grounded in the most important things in life and for granting me time away from our time together to complete this work. Thank you to Theodore Creighton, my advisor and friend, who has mentored me through this journey and provided me countless opportunities to grow as an educator. Thank you to my committee members James Craig, Robert McCracken, and Wayne Tripp, for their wisdom and guidance in making this a rewarding professional endeavor. I must also recognize the principals who willingly and enthusiastically shared with me their professional development experiences and the Roanoke Ed.D cohort who welcomed me into their classes and shared with me their knowledge and expertise.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### **Setting of the Study**

There are over 157,000 principals in America's public schools [National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2011]. These principals face expanding responsibilities, state and federal accountability for student achievement, and calls for reform. Adding a powerful voice to the calls for school reform, President Barack Obama made educational innovation a central theme in his 2011 State of the Union address. Once viewed primarily as building managers, principals must now have expertise in instruction, academic content, data analysis, and public relations [Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007; Hallinger, 1992; Huber, 2008; Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), 2000; Levine, 2005; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2011; Peterson, 2002]. This expanded role is, in part, the result of state and federal laws establishing minimum requirements for student academic achievement. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires all children be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014 (20 U.S.C. § 6301). In response to the requirements of NCLB and the reform movement, Ravitch (2010) stated:

It is time, I think, for those who want to improve schools to focus on the essentials of education. We must make sure that our schools have a strong, coherent, explicit curriculum that is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, with plenty of opportunity for children to engage in activities and projects that make learning lively. We must ensure that students gain the knowledge they need to understand political debates, scientific phenomena, and the world they live in. We must be sure they are prepared for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship in a complex society. We must take care that our teachers are well educated, not just well trained (p.13).

Ravitch (2010) described quite the task for school leaders. The expanded role of the principal, coupled with accountability measures and reform initiatives, places a heavy burden on school leaders. Preparation programs for aspiring principals and professional development for existing principals must be designed to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable school leaders to meet these demands.

## Statement of the Problem

Pounder (2011) indicated that current state level policies, which promote high quality school leadership, have resulted in a “blurring of the lines between preparation, licensure, induction, and ongoing professional development” (p. 259). Accordingly, what follows identifies problems and issues related to both initial preparation and continuing professional development of school principals.

Over 500 university-based educational leadership programs prepare 16,000 graduates each year for school leadership roles (Baker, Orr, & Young, 2007). These principal preparation programs have been criticized as failing to adequately prepare principals for his/her role as a instructional leader [Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Levine, 2005; Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), 2006]. Levine criticized school leadership curricula as irrelevant, entrance and graduation standards as low, and faculty as weak. Dave Spence, president of the SREB, criticized university principal preparation programs as being unwilling to change at the necessary pace. Davis et al. indicated there is little evidence that the types of experiences provided in principal preparation programs enable principals to be more effective. Each of these authors, and others (Buskey & Topolka-Jorissen, 2010; Creighton, 2005; Farmer & Higham, 2007; Huber, 2008; IEL, 2000; Johnson, Shope, & Rouse, 2009; McKensie et al., 2008), have offered recommendations for the improvement of preparation programs.

One common recommendation to enhance the quality of instructional leadership in America’s schools is to improve recruitment efforts and raise preparation program entrance standards for aspiring principals (Farmer & Higham, 2007; IEL, 2000; Levine, 2005; McKensie et al., 2008; SREB, 2006). In order to support preparation programs in raising entrance standards, school districts should actively identify, encourage, and begin to develop school leaders from within the teaching staff. One could conclude that simply allowing aspiring principals to self-select will not lead to higher quality participants in preparation programs.

Another common recommendation to improve instructional leadership is to use field experiences to a greater extent (Davis et al., 2005; Huber, 2008; IEL, 2000; Levine, 2005; SREB, 2006). Creighton (2005) described a leadership practice field in which aspiring leaders can repeatedly practice in real, but risk-free environments, applying concepts studied in the

preparation program. Clinical experiences, internships, use of mentors, and leadership practice fields should be used more extensively to prepare aspiring principals for the wide range of responsibilities they will face (Creighton, Davis et al., Huber, IEL, Levine, SREB).

Other recommendations regarding principal preparation programs relate to specific areas of emphasis in programs. McKensie et al. (2008) proposed a model to develop leaders for social justice. Farmer and Higham (2007) made recommendations for a program focused on culturally responsive leadership. Buskey and Topolka-Jorissen (2010) described the process for developing a program that was “grounded in an ethics-driven vision of school leadership” (p. 112). Johnson, Shope, and Roush (2009) recommended a contextually based model to prepare leaders for schools in rural Appalachia. Even if implemented, changes in principal preparation programs will not address the professional development needs of the 157,000 (NCES, 2011) principals currently practicing in the U.S. Therefore, there is value in examining current professional development practices and the relationship of those practices to the development of principals’ skills.

In recognition of the critical role of principals in leading effective schools, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) recently announced the development of an advanced certification program for school leaders (Maxwell, 2009). The National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals as well as the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, support this program. The advanced certification program is being designed both as a professional development tool and to recognize the achievement of principals (Maxwell, 2009).

As a professional development tool, the NBPTS hopes “to create a consistently reliable process to develop, recognize and retain effective principals” (NBPTS, 2010, para. 2). The NBPTS has identified nine “skills, applications and dispositions” (para. 7) that form their “Core Propositions for Accomplished Educational Leaders” (para. 6). The nine are leadership, instruction, ethics, vision, learners and learning, equity, management, culture, and advocacy (Maxwell, 2009). These propositions form the basis for the assessments that will be used to assess principal performance. The program, like the teacher certification program, is designed for principals who already have several years experience (Maxwell). NBPTS’ initiative supports

the idea that principals must continue to develop their professional knowledge and skills throughout their careers.

In their report, *Leadership for student learning: Reinventing the principalship*, IEL (2000) described professional development as a needed support for principals but indicated that current professional development is generally weak. They suggested professional development be ongoing and focused on the improvement of student learning. Likewise, the SREB (2010) encouraged investment in high-quality professional development for principals, especially for principals in low performing schools. Nicholson, Harris-John, and Schimmel (2005) and Salazar (2007) made similar observations and described a need to document what professional development is actually taking place for principals, especially for rural principals (Salazar) and principals from Appalachian regions (Nicholson et al.). NCES databases provide only limited data on principals' professional development experiences (Rodriguez-Campos, Rinconez-Gomez, & Shen, 2005). If limited resources are to continue to be invested in professional development, there must be empirical evidence that can be used to guide developers in designing professional development for principals that will positively impact desired leadership behaviors.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to begin examining the nature of principals' professional development in the rural Appalachian region of Virginia. This study is a step towards examining the nature of principals' professional development generally and evaluating the impact of professional development on leadership behaviors and student achievement. Ultimately, gathering evidence of how professional development can be designed to achieve desired outcomes in terms of principals' leadership behaviors and student achievement is necessary and important. A gap in both scholarship and practice was revealed through the literature examined. A gap exists in the evaluation of professional development efforts generally (Guskey, 2000) and, specifically, in the evaluation of professional development of principals (Howley, Chadwick, & Howley, 2002; Leithwood & Levin, 2008; Nicholson et al., 2005). More specifically, there is a lack of information on the type of professional development in which principals engage (Nicholson et al., 2005) and what type is effective in supporting the development of desired leadership behaviors and/or positively influencing student achievement (Howley et al., Leithwood & Levin, Nicholson, et al., Salazar, 2007). The present study gathered information

that describes the nature of principals' professional development and can assist in designing future research in the area of professional development for principals.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms required definition: (a) *professional development*, (b) *on-going*, (c) *job-embedded*, (d) *connected to school improvement goals*, and (e) *place-based*.

*Professional development* was defined as any activity designed to enhance a principal's professional competence through the improvement of knowledge, skill, or disposition. The National Staff Development Council's (NSDC) definition of professional development is "a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement" (Hirsh, 2009, p. 12). NSDC's definition, and their full explanation that covers four pages, provides an ideal to which educators should strive. In contrast, the definition utilized for this study was selected in an effort to capture all activities in which principals engage regardless of the quality or effectiveness of those activities. Use of a broad definition was important in collecting the data necessary to achieve the purpose of examining the nature of principals' professional development.

The three characteristics, (a) *on-going*, (b) *job-embedded*, and (c) *connected to school improvement goals*, were used as indicators of professional development quality (Hirsh, 2009; IEL, 2000; Nicholson et al., 2005). *On-going* was defined as professional development activities that extend beyond a single event during the course of a school year. This could include activities such as multiple workshops on a single topic, multiple meetings of a book discussion group, a workshop combined with follow-up, multiple meetings with a mentor/mentee, or an action research project. *Job-embedded* was defined to mean that all or some portion of the activity occurs at the school site and/or is directly involved with the routine work of the principal. *Connected to school improvement goals* was defined to mean that the professional development activity was selected specifically to address explicit school improvement goals and/or was the result of analyzing needs related to teaching and learning within the principal's school.

The fourth characteristic examined, *place-based*, refers to professional development that relates in some way to rural Appalachia and was included not as an indicator of quality but rather to examine the importance, as perceived by principals, of place or context. Consideration of place, some contend (Johnson et al., 2009; Morris, 2008), is central to school leadership.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to answer the following question:

What is the nature of professional development for principals of public schools in the rural Appalachian region of Virginia? To answer that question, the following, more specific, questions were considered:

1. What are the professional development activities in which practicing principals engage?
2. To what extent are those professional development activities (a) on-going, (b) job-embedded, and (c) connected to school improvement goals?
3. Do principals' receive or see value in professional development that is related specifically to being principal of a school in rural Appalachia as opposed to some other place?
4. What are the barriers to principals accessing professional development?

### **Limitations**

Limitations are those aspects of the study that cannot be controlled. The accuracy and completeness of the data provided by participants relied upon their memory of past professional development experiences. Although the participants were provided with the list of interview prompts one week prior to the interview, all responded to the prompts without referring to notes or other documentation. Some of the participants' responses indicated they were having difficulty remembering some details.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to those aspects of the study controlled by the researcher. The researcher delimited the study by focusing upon the geographic area of Virginia's rural Appalachian region and selecting principals with whom the researcher had a prior professional relationship.

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, 25 counties and eight cities comprise the Appalachian region of Virginia (2009). There are over 260 schools within these 33 school divisions [Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), 2011a]. The present study involved interviews of 13 principals from eight school divisions. The reported results are those of only these 13 principals. While the researcher's experiences in the region would suggest these principals' experiences are not atypical (and are not substantially different from the experiences of principals from small school divisions outside the Appalachian region), one cannot generalize findings beyond the participants.

Each principal had a prior relationship with the researcher that was related to professional development. The researcher is a technical assistance provider working through a university school of education unit funded by the VDOE to work with schools in the area of Virginia where the participants' schools were located. In this relationship, the principal, at some time prior to this study, had requested and received technical assistance for his or her school staff from the researcher's unit with the researcher as lead technical assistance provider. Selecting participants with a prior relationship with the researcher was intentional. This selection decision was based on the belief that the rapport already established would facilitate a comfortable, open interview environment. The researcher's experience in the study supported this belief.

### **Assumptions**

The present study was undertaken with the assumption that in order to ultimately answer questions related to the effective development of school principals, one must first understand the nature of current professional development of school principals. As a result, the present study was undertaken primarily in anticipation of its value in guiding future study.

### **Organization of the Study**

This report is divided into five chapters. Chapter I includes the setting of the study, a statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, definitions of terms used, research questions, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions. Chapter II includes a review of the literature related to (a) principals' leadership behaviors and impact on student achievement, (b) professional development, and (c) professional development of principals in rural Appalachia. In Chapter III, the methodology used including research design, participant

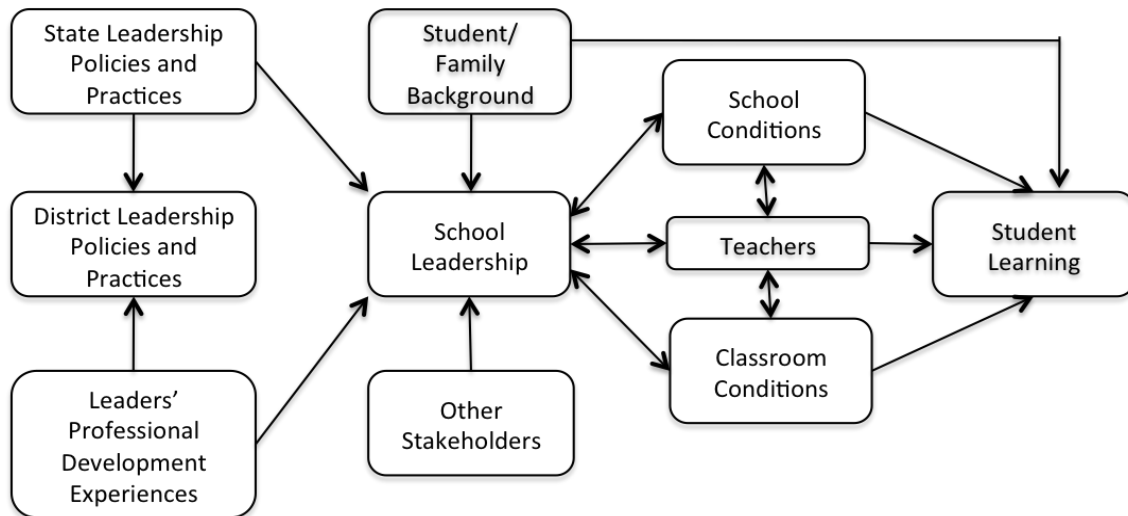
selection, data collection, and data analysis are described. The results of data analysis are presented in Chapter IV. Chapter V contains implications of the study and recommendations for further research.



## CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

While the purpose of this study was limited to examining the nature of principals' professional development, the study was conducted within the context of a conceptual framework (see *Figure 1*) that considers factors influencing the leadership behaviors of principals which in turn influence student learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). As a result, the literature review that follows includes literature that focuses on (a) principals' leadership behaviors and those behaviors' influences on student achievement, (b) professional development, and (c) professional development of principals in rural Appalachia, the context for this study.



*Figure 1.* Leadership influences on student learning (Luis et al., 2010).

### Principals' Impact on Student Achievement

Principals impact student achievement (Cotton, 2003; Davis et al, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Quinn, 2002; Waters, Marzano, & NcNulty, 2003). In their widely publicized meta-analysis examining the

relationship between leadership and student achievement, Waters et al. reported correlations of 21 leadership responsibilities with student achievement. The average correlation of  $r = .25$  demonstrated a small but significant indirect relationship between leadership and student achievement. Davis et al. found principals can influence student achievement in two primary ways: (a) through development of effective teachers, and (b) through effective organizational processes. Newman, King, and Youngs (2000) stated “we recognize the principal’s leadership as a critical force in the school’s capacity to educate students” (p. 264). In fact, among school related factors associated with student achievement, leadership is second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood et al.) While many have always considered principals to be a key to the successful operation of a school, the evidence of the relationship between principals’ behaviors and student achievement now available (Cotton, Davis et al., Hallinger & Heck, Leithwood et al., Quinn; Waters et al.) encourages further research to determine the nature of that relationship and what professional development practices would lead to desired behaviors.

There is a considerable agreement regarding the specific leadership skills necessary to foster enhanced student achievement, and these skills align with accepted standards for school leaders. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) developed and published their Standards for School Leaders in 1996 and updated the standards in 2008 as the Educational Leadership Policy Standards. [Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2008]. The six standards begin with “An education leader promotes the success of all students by” (CCSSO, p. 14) and address; (a) a vision of learning, (b) school culture focused upon student learning and staff growth, (c) organizational management, (d) collaboration, (e) ethics, and (f) working within the broader cultural context. The standards are further articulated through 31 functions that provide greater specificity to each standard. These leadership standards have been incorporated into many principal preparation programs (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2001; Pounder, 2011) but not without criticism (English, 2000). English condemned the standards as not being research-based or empirically supported and as being ambiguous. However, studies by Cotton (2003), Leithwood et al. (2004), and Waters et al. (2003) provide empirical support to the ISLLC Standards.

Cotton (2003) conducted a meta-analysis using 81 reports published since 1985 examining principals’ behaviors and student outcomes. She identified 25 “characteristics and behaviors” (p. 7) positively related to student achievement. Leithwood et al. (2004) identified

three sets of practices associated with student learning; (a) setting direction, (b) developing people, and (c) redesigning the organization. Within these three sets are 14 individual leadership practices. Waters et al. (2003) offered their set of 21 leadership responsibilities, identified through a meta-analysis using 69 studies, as a more comprehensive list of leadership behaviors than the 1996 ISLLC Standards. They expanded upon the 21 leadership responsibilities by describing leadership practices within each responsibility. Waters et al. pointed to the need for a specific leadership framework that could be used to guide the development of effective school leaders. Waters et al. proposed the combined responsibilities and practices as a framework for developing principals with the knowledge, tools and resources needed to be leaders who positively influence student learning. Due to their association with student achievement and their breadth, the leadership behaviors identified in these three reports form a good basis upon which to examine principals' leadership behaviors and plan for the preparation and continuing development of principals.

There is considerable similarity between the current ISLLC Standards (CCSSO, 2008), Cotton's (2003) principal behaviors, leadership practices identified by Leithwood et al. (2004), and the leadership responsibilities described by Waters et al. (2003). Table 1, Leadership Behaviors Matrix, shows the alignment of these three groups of leadership behaviors with the ISLLC Standards. Nearly every behavior, practice and responsibility identified corresponded with one of the six ISLLC Standards. For example, Standard 2 states, "An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (CCSSO, 2008, p. 14). Eight of the leadership behaviors identified by Cotton, five of the leadership responsibilities identified by Waters et al., and six practices identified by Leithwood et al. are consistent with this standard. There are similar results with Standards 1, 3, 4, and 6. There was discrepancy between the ISLLC Standards and the three studies in two areas: ethics and school climate.

ISLLC Standard 5 states "An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner" (CCSSO, 2008, p. 15). Cotton (2003) identified the behaviors of self-confidence, responsibility and perseverance, and role modeling. These behaviors align somewhat with Standard 5 when the Standard's functions are examined; however, neither Waters et al. (2003) nor Leithwood et al. (2004) identified a responsibility or

practice that would logically align with Standard 5. It should be noted the purpose of the ISLLC Standards is to guide policy development and not simply to align the standards with student outcomes. The purpose of the research in each of the three reports (Cotton, Leithwood et al., Waters et al.) was to examine the link between student outcomes and leadership behaviors.

Regarding school climate, both Cotton (2003) and Waters et al. (2003) identified several behaviors and responsibilities related to school climate. Cotton specifically listed providing a positive and supportive school climate and other behaviors such as recognizing student and teacher achievement and taking symbolic action through rituals and ceremonies. Waters et al. indicated effective leaders celebrate school accomplishments and recognize individual accomplishments. Additionally, Waters et al. found awareness of teachers' and staffs' personal lives to be important. The ISLLC Standards do not contain a reference to school climate.

Table 1

*Leadership Behaviors Matrix*

Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 (CCSSO, 2008)	Principals and student achievement: What the research says (Cotton, 2003)	Balanced Leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement (Waters et al., 2003)	How leadership influences student learning: Review of research (Leithwood et al., 2004)
<p>Standard 1 - An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.</p> <p>Functions:</p> <p>A. Collaboratively develop and implement a shared vision and mission</p> <p>B. Collect and use data to identify goals, assess organizational effectiveness, and promote organizational learning</p> <p>C. Create and implement plans to achieve goals</p> <p>D. Promote continuous and sustainable improvement</p> <p>E. Monitor and evaluate progress and revise plans</p>	Vision and goals focused on high levels of student learning	Culture - fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation	Setting Direction: Identify and articulate a vision, foster acceptance of group goals and create high performance expectations
	Establishes a norm of continuous improvement	Ideals/Beliefs - communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling	
	Focus - establishes clear goals & keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention	Develop and implement strategic and school improvement plans	
	Change Agent - is willing to and actively challenges the status quo		
Optimizer - inspires and leads new and challenging innovations			

(table continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<p>Standard 2 - An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.</p> <p>Functions:</p> <p>A. Nurture and sustain a culture of collaboration, trust, learning, and high expectations</p> <p>B. Create a comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent curricular program</p> <p>C. Create a personalized and motivating learning environment for students</p> <p>D. Supervise instruction</p> <p>E. Develop assessment and accountability systems to monitor student progress</p> <p>F. Develop the instructional and leadership capacity of staff</p> <p>G. Maximize time spent on quality instruction</p> <p>H. Promote the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning</p> <p>I. Monitor and evaluate the impact of the instructional program</p>	High expectations for student learning	Knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment - is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices.	Strengthening district and school culture
	Continually pursuing high levels of student learning		
	Protects instructional time	Curriculum, instruction and assessment - is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices	Providing instructional guidance
	Uses student achievement data to improve programs		
	Facilitates discussion of instructional issues	Discipline - protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus	Offer intellectual stimulation
	Provides staff development opportunities and activities		
	Observes classrooms frequently and provides feedback to teachers	Intellectual stimulation - ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture	Provide individualized support
	Monitors student progress and reports findings	Monitors/ evaluates - monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning	Provide appropriate models of best practices
			Monitor organizational performance

(table continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<p>Standard 3 - An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment</p> <p>Functions:</p> <p>A. Monitor and evaluate the management and operational systems</p> <p>B. Obtain, allocate, align, and efficiently utilize human, fiscal, and technological resources</p> <p>C. Promote and protect the welfare and safety of students and staff</p> <p>D. Develop the capacity for distributed leadership</p> <p>E. Ensure teacher and organizational time is focused to support quality instruction and student learning</p>	Safe and orderly school environment	Order - establishes a set of standard operating procedures and routines	Modifying organizational processes
	Supplies resources such as time and materials	Resources - provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs	
<p>Standard 4 - An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.</p> <p>Functions:</p> <p>A. Collect and analyze data and information pertinent to the educational environment</p> <p>B. Promote understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources</p> <p>C. Build and sustain positive relationships with families and caregivers</p> <p>D. Build and sustain productive relationships with community partners</p>	Shared leadership, decision making, and staff empowerment	Input - involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies	Building collaborative processes
	Collaboration	Communication - establishes strong lines of communication with teachers and among students	Empowering others to make significant contributions
	Visibility and accessibility		
	Emotional and interpersonal support	Visibility - has quality contact and interactions with teachers and students	
	Communication and interactions	Relationship - demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff	

(table continued)

Table 1 (continued)

<p>Standard 5 - An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.</p> <p>Functions:</p> <p>A. Ensure a system of accountability for every student's academic and social success</p> <p>B. Model principles of self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior</p> <p>C. Safeguard the values of democracy, equity, and diversity</p> <p>D. Consider and evaluate the potential moral and legal consequences of decision-making</p> <p>E. Promote social justice and ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling</p>	<p>Self-confidence, responsibility and perseverance</p>		
<p>Standard 6 - An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context</p> <p>Functions:</p> <p>A. Advocate for children, families, and caregivers</p> <p>B. Act to influence local, district, state, and national decisions affecting student learning</p> <p>C. Assess, analyze, and anticipate emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt leadership strategies</p>	<p>Parent and community outreach and involvement</p>	<p>Outreach - is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders</p>	<p>Promote effective communication</p>
		<p>Flexibility - adapts his or her leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent</p>	
		<p>Situational awareness - is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems</p>	

(table continued)



Table 1 (continued)

There is no ISLLC Standard corresponding with the behaviors, practices, and responsibilities in this section.	Recognizes student and teacher achievement	Affirmation - recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures	Create and sustain a competitive school
	Rituals, ceremonies and other symbolic actions	Contingent Rewards - recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments	
	Positive and supportive school climate		
	Supports teachers' risk taking		
	Respects teacher autonomy		

Recent research has continued to build upon knowledge of how and under what circumstances principals positively influence student achievement. For example, Betiello, Kalogrides, and Loeb (2009), using quantitative analyses of data from Miami-Dade County Public Schools, found that effective principals were more likely to both attract and retain more effective teachers. At the same time, more effective principals experienced higher turnover rates with less effective teachers than did less effective principals. In a second quantitative study using Miami-Dade County Public Schools' data, Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2009) found time spent on organization management activities was positively related to student achievement. Each of these studies supported the conclusions of Davis et al. (2005) that principals influence student achievement through the development of effective teachers and effective organizational processes.

## Professional Development

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) offered the following definition of professional development: “The term professional development means a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement” (Hirsh, 2009, p. 12). Guskey (2000) defined professional development as “those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students” (p. 16). Note each author emphasized the purpose of professional development as the improvement of student learning. Acknowledging this purpose, the question becomes, is there evidence professional development is leading to improved student learning?

Guskey and Yoon (2009) reported the difficulty of linking professional development and student learning. Despite spending \$20 billion annually on professional development (NCES, 2008), there is little research available to inform school leaders about the relationship between professional development and student learning (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007). While linking teachers’ professional development to student learning may be difficult, linking principals’ professional development to student learning is even more challenging (Nicholson et al., 2005). Leithwood and Levin (2008) stated “Arriving at a credible estimate of leadership development impacts, especially on students, is a very complex task. It [estimating leadership impact] is a cauldron of conceptual and methodological challenges” (p. 281). While policy makers and educators need to know if and how professional development can support principals in gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively lead schools and ultimately improve student achievement, that knowledge is not readily available.

Criticism has been directed at the sponsors and providers of professional development for the failure to adequately evaluate the impact of professional development activities on principal behavior and, indirectly, student achievement (Guskey, 2000; Howley et al., 2002; Leithwood & Levin, 2008; Nicholson et al., 2005). Guskey described three common mistakes in the evaluation of professional development. First, much evaluation is not really evaluation at all but rather documentation of occurrence and participation. This type of data does not provide information on the value or effectiveness of the activity. Second, evaluations often lack depth, seeking only an evaluation of participant satisfaction rather than gains in participant knowledge

or changes in their behavior. A third mistake identified related to the timing of evaluation. Guskey stated that just as reform efforts take time to implement, evaluation should be extended over a period of time lengthy enough for changes resulting from professional development to have occurred. Informative evaluation is critical as poor professional development may actually be more damaging than no professional development at all. Poorly designed professional development can lead to a cycle of non-implementation and low expectations for future professional development (Knight, 2007). Knight stated, “after attending several unsuccessful training sessions, teachers [and principals] often lose their enthusiasm for new interventions, and each additional ineffective session makes it more and more difficult for them to embrace new ideas” (p. 2). Knowing what constitutes effective professional development is important if we are to avoid this cycle of non-implementation. Informative evaluation data is necessary in order to begin developing evidence relative to the effects and effectiveness of professional development.

Nicholson et al. (2005) reported that professional development practices and evaluation have changed little since school reform became a major policy issue over 20 years ago. Nicholson et al. found much professional development continues to be traditional, workshop style led by an outside expert with little participant involvement. Evaluation of professional development tends to relate only to participant satisfaction with the topic, presenter skill, and presentation format rather than changes in participants’ behavior or impacts on student learning (Nicholson et al.). Likewise, Leithwood and Levin (2008) indicated that most evaluation of professional development is limited to participant satisfaction. Nicholson et al. did cite two studies (Acquarelli & Mumme, 1996; Killion, 2002) that linked professional development to changes in teacher behavior and subsequent increases in student achievement. These two studies notwithstanding, Nicholson et al. concluded there is not conclusive evidence of a link between professional development and student learning.

More recently, Wallace (2009) completed a study using structural equation modeling to examine the effect of professional development on teacher practice and on student achievement mediated by teacher practice. Wallace used two state (Beginning Teacher Preparation Survey) and four national (National Assessment of Educational Progress) data sets that included self-reports of teacher practices and professional development and student outcome measures in mathematics and reading. Professional development impact, professional development

frequency, and mentoring worth were also measured. Wallace found professional development had moderate ( $\delta = .12 - .17$ ) effects on teacher practice, and, when mediated by teacher practice, had “very small but occasionally significant effects” ( $\delta = .01 - .03$ ) on student achievement in reading and mathematics (p. 588).

In another recent study, Scher and O’Reilly (2009) used meta-analysis to examine the influence of professional development on teacher knowledge, teacher practice, and student achievement. Beginning with 145 studies related to professional development interventions for math and/or science teachers, Scher and O’Reilly identified 20 studies that met the criteria for inclusion in their analysis. While Scher and O’Reilly found some support for guidance currently offered by professional development experts on how to design and deliver professional development, they cautioned “that the current evidence base is thin” (p. 209). Based upon current guidance regarding professional development practices, Scher and O’Reilly chose to examine professional development relative to its duration, content vs. pedagogy focus, and program components. Duration was examined as either one academic year or multiple years. Professional development focus included content only, pedagogy only, or a combination of content and pedagogy. Program components included workshop only, workshop plus coaching, or workshop plus some additional component(s) other than coaching. Several significant findings were identified (Scher & O’Reilly). Among these findings were, for professional development that included a combined focus of content and pedagogy, students’ math and science achievement was impacted with effect sizes of .56 ( $p < .01$ ) and .41 ( $p < .01$ ) respectively. In the area of program components, for math achievement, a significant effect size of .42 ( $p < .001$ ) was found for the combination of workshop plus coaching in math. In studies focused on science, the combination of workshop plus another component produced an effect size of .32 ( $p < .01$ ). Another recent meta-analysis using different studies had similar results (Blank & de las Alas, 2009).

Guskey and Yoon (2009) reported findings from Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, and Shapley (2007) who began with a list of 1,343 studies to examine. Only nine of those studies met the criteria for providing credible evidence as defined by the U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse. Guskey and Yoon stated, “these findings paint a dismal picture of our knowledge about the relationship between professional development and

improvements in student learning” (p. 497). Despite the lack of research, Guskey and Yoon also pointed out “in the history of education, no improvement effort has ever succeeded in the absence of thoughtfully planned and well-implemented professional development” (p. 498).

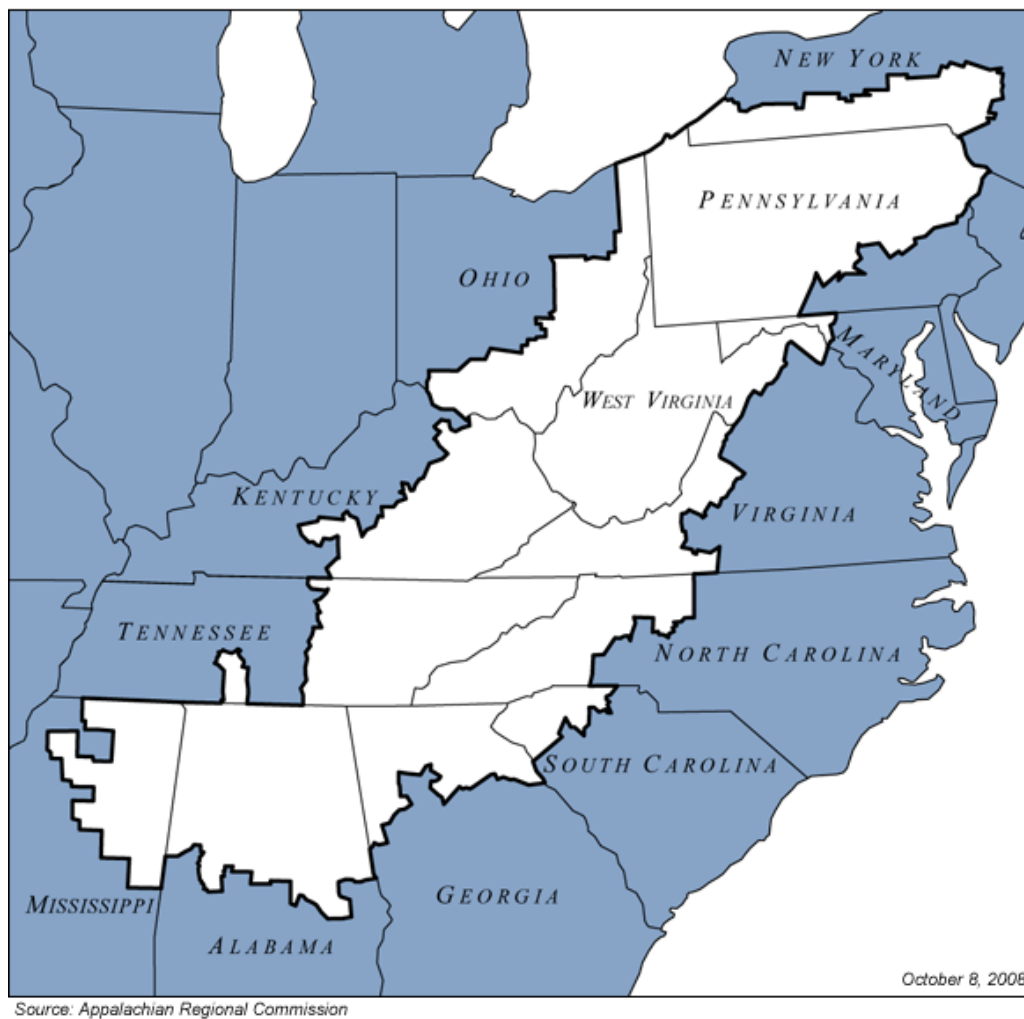
The evidence regarding the impact of professional development for teachers on student achievement is growing, and effective professional development practices are being identified, at least tentatively. While researchers have reported their findings regarding teachers’ professional development as related to student achievement (e.g. Blank & de la Alas, 2009; Scher & O’Reilly, 2009; Wallace, 2009), those results do not necessarily generalize to professional development for principals. Principals and teachers have different responsibilities and affect student achievement in different ways. Examination of professional development practices for principals and the relationship of those practices to principal behaviors and student achievement is needed.

### **Professional Development of Principals of Appalachia**

There appears to be little research on principals’ professional development at all, exclusive of any linkage to student achievement. Narrowing the focus to principals of schools in Appalachia reduces the knowledge base even more. Nicholson et al. (2005) reported that research on professional development is a young field and is almost exclusively focused upon teachers’ professional development. Knowledge of the quality of professional development and its effects on principals’ behaviors may be of greater importance in Appalachia or other rural, high-poverty areas. In a study of school principals in Texas, Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2009) found there was larger variation in the effectiveness of principals in high poverty schools compared with others and concluded principal ability was most important in those schools.

Geographically (see *Figure 2*), Appalachia is defined as those areas from southern New York to northern Mississippi that follow the ridges of the Appalachian Mountains (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010). In terms of educational attainment, Appalachia is improving, but continues to lag behind the nation. In fact the gap between Appalachia and the nation, in terms of percentage of adults who are college graduates, increased slightly during the 1990s (Haaga, 2004). In 2000, 24.4% of the U.S. population completed college compared with 17.6% of persons living in Appalachia (Haaga, 2004). Additionally, Appalachia’s poverty rate in 2000 was 109.9% of the national average (Haaga, 2004). These statistics are important when we

consider leadership development as principals and the students in their schools are influenced by their context (Louis et al., 2010).



*Figure 2.* The Appalachian region (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010).

Rodriquez-Campos et al. (2005) used data from the NCES to report on principals' professional development. They reported percentages of principals who had participated in various types of professional development activities. Percentages ranged from 97% for principals who had attended a workshop or conference in the previous 12 months to 38% for principals who had participated in mentoring, peer observation, or coaching. Rodriquez-Campos et al. indicated a positive trend in participation in professional development but concluded there was a need for “more innovative professional activities” (p. 318). The data from the database at

NCES is disaggregated by community type (although not specifically to Appalachia) but provides no detail regarding the content or duration of professional development activities nor data related to outcomes of professional development.

Nicholson et al. (2005) examined professional development for principals in the four-state region of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. Significant portions of each of these states fall within the region of Appalachia (Sokol, 2005), including all of West Virginia. Their study included a substantial literature review, a document review, and semi-structured interviews. The researchers examined professional development in relation to the following three constructs: “(a) the extent to which professional development activities focused on specific school improvement goals, (b) the extent to which they are job-embedded, and (c) the extent to which they feature cycles of evaluation and revision” (p. 2).

The section on the literature review began with the identification of multiple limitations in the examination of literature on professional development for principals (Nicholson et al., 2005). Nicholson et al. stated the frameworks used to explore educational leadership are unable to account for the complexities of schools and therefore researchers are limited in their ability to study causal relationships between principals’ professional development and student learning. They also noted the difficulty in finding research specifically on principals’ professional development apart from principal preparation more generally. Further, the researchers stated there is a “virtual absence of any scientifically based research linking professional development to changes in administrator behavior, school functioning, or student learning” (Nicholson et al., p. 3). Due to these limitations, the researchers examined literature on professional development in general, the principal’s influence on student achievement, principal preparation, and principal professional development trends. Nicholson et al. concluded that in order to exert a positive influence on student achievement, principals need both adequate preparation and professional development. The researchers also noted that a shift in professional development to a more principal-centered, school focused, and job-embedded model is supported by the literature.

Nicholson et al. (2005) provided a summary of professional development opportunities and practices for principals. The researchers conducted interviews with seven individuals deemed most knowledgeable about professional development for principals in their respective states. The interviewees included persons from state departments of education, principals’

associations, professional development centers, and state/local leadership academies. Nicholson et al. reported findings in five areas; (a) professional development policy, (b) professional development content, (c) professional development delivery, (d) professional development evaluation practices, and (e) professional development funding. Examining professional development practices across these five areas may provide a good model for future studies to follow.

A summary of Nicholson et al.'s (2005) findings indicated consensus among the interviewees that professional development for principals was critical for leading schools to meet the demands for increased student achievement. They found most states had similar requirements for the amount of professional development required of principals: 18 hours per year. Nicholson et al. also found the content of professional development was primarily driven by requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. Delivery of professional development was generally found to follow the traditional model of expert led, centralized, short term, workshops. Regarding evaluation of professional development, the researchers stated, "rarely, if ever, is there any follow-up to determine whether the activities have had any discernible effect on practice" (Nicholson et al., p. 30).

Nicholson et al. (2005) concluded their report with the statement that professional development for principals in this four-state region is consistent with national practices. They recommended a more thorough investigation of professional development practices noting the lack of empirical data on the effectiveness of professional development generally and, to an even greater extent, professional development for principals. The researchers recommended surveys of all principals in the four states noting the limitation of their study where conclusions were drawn from only seven interviews coupled with document and literature reviews.

There are numerous qualitative studies that have examined specific professional development events for principals (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Daresh, 2001; Eller, 2008; Houle, 2006; Howley et al., 2002). Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard, Eller, and Howley et al. focused upon principals and professional development events within the Appalachian region.

Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) conducted an exploratory case study of a school leadership program for principals, assistant principals, and teachers who both held credentials for and desired to become school administrators. The Principals Excellence Program (PEP) was a



joint effort of a rural school district in eastern Kentucky and the University of Kentucky. The program was funded through a U.S. Department of Education grant through the NCLB School Leadership Development Program in 2002. The primary goal of the program was to increase the leadership capacity of the school district in order to increase student learning. Two cohorts of 15 participants each completed the one-year program over the course of the two years reported upon by Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard.

Background information was reported by Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) regarding economic and cultural conditions within the community served by the school district and principal perceptions at the inception of the program. Depressed economic conditions and the lack of post-secondary education by most residents were viewed as factors contributing to poor academic achievement among current students. Additionally, principals within the district acknowledged their lack of skill in leadership to improve student learning. The school district's stated goal for the program was to "transform administrative practice from school management to leadership for learning [through the enhancement of] knowledge and skills of current and prospective principals" (p. 7).

Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) provided a description of the various professional development activities in which the participants engaged during the program including workshops, job-embedded action-research projects, mentoring, professional reading, and reflections. Activities were completed through a mix of individual work and group work with other participants and mentor principals. Participants were released from their usual job responsibilities one day each week to complete activities. Formal program activities alternated on a weekly basis between whole-cohort workshop style activities and field-based work with mentor principals. Activities were driven by a curriculum based upon four themes within the ISLLC Standards; "vision for success, focus on teaching and learning, involvement of all stakeholders, and demonstration of ethical behavior" (p. 7). Data were collected at various times throughout the program's implementation from program participants, mentor principals, division-level administrators, and PEP instructors through the use of surveys, interviews, and observations. The evidence accumulated focused primarily upon the perceptions of persons surveyed. Specific data collection instruments are not presented or described in detail, but some specific questions asked of participants are included in the findings section. Data analysis

consisted primarily of interpretation of participant perceptions based on their responses to prompts or participants' reflections on professional development activities.

Findings were reported in three sections: "(a) preparing school leaders to promote learning success for all students, (b) engaging participants in authentic practice with mentor principals, and (c) addressing high-stakes accountability issues" (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005, p. 5). Throughout the findings section, the authors relied on participant and program observer comments to make points in support of achievement of program goals. In the first section, they reported comments on the participants' broadened perspectives, increased awareness of social justice issues, increased awareness of the need for division-wide collaboration, and greater skill development as a result of participation in PEP. The authors concluded "participants and observers alike perceive that the leadership development activities are changing administrative practice in the district" (p. 11). The authors do not describe how the perceptions of changed practice are documented leaving one to assume program participants self-reported these data.

The second section Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) reported upon, engaging participants in authentic practice with mentor principals, focused on the participants' field experiences. Each participant completed a collaborative action research project in their mentor principal's school. The purpose of the field experiences was to "stimulate the theory-to-practice linkage" (p. 11). Participants commented that these activities provided valuable opportunities to engage in real life, educational problem solving and develop collegial relationships. The researchers concluded that the action research project provided a focus for the mentor-mentee working relationship and gave all an opportunity to work as teams, problem solve, and use professional literature as part of the problem solving process.

In the third findings section, Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) detailed evidence that the PEP program prepared leaders to address high-stakes accountability issues. Participants' comments identified the study of social justice issues, focus on instructional leadership, observation of teaching in multiple settings, and the use of positive attitudes to influence teachers as critical ways the PEP program helped prepare participants to address accountability issues.

When they evaluated the PEP program as a professional development model, Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard (2005) identified the theory-to-practice linkage as the key component.

The linkage was supported by a combination of field-based and workshop-based experiences with both aspiring and practicing principals. According to Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard, using the combination of experiences resulted in action oriented, collaborative professional development in authentic settings.

The stated goal of the PEP was to increase leadership skill in order to increase student learning (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005). Results reported by the researchers contained descriptions of the positive perceptions participants and observers held for the program. The researchers concluded, “principals and teachers are demonstrating greater confidence, competence, and comfort in their roles as instructional leaders, and student academic performance is improving” (p. 16). Browne-Ferrigno and Maynard cautioned they could not yet conclude student performance gains are connected to the PEP.

Eller (2008) completed a qualitative program evaluation of an academy for newly appointed administrators primarily from Southwest Virginia. Participants in the Recently Appointed Administrators’ Program, sponsored by the Western Virginia Public Education Consortium in collaboration with Virginia Tech, attended four multi-day sessions in which they received instruction on current leadership topics, interacted with other participants, and discussed reading material. Participants also had a mentor principal with whom they worked outside the four sessions. Eller’s evaluation was based on data from “a questionnaire, focus group sessions, program session agendas, training materials, participant session feedback forms, and participant writing samples” (para. 11). Data analysis began with the sorting of data into three categories; (a) knowledge, (b) skills, and (c) applications. The data were further classified as meeting needs related to (a) socialization, (b) role clarification, or (c) technical skill. Analysis also focused upon the relationship between planned, delivered, and applied curricula. Eller (2009) stated “this examination enabled the researchers to study what participants reported they were able to actually use from their experiences back at their school sites” (para. 12).

Based on the evidence collected, Eller (2008) offered multiple recommendations for future programs to support new principals. Recommendations included (a) introducing content that will assist participants in development of interpersonal skills and understanding the need for balance in their professional and personal lives, (b) scheduling time for informal networking among participants, (c) designing participant feedback forms to collect data to determine how

academy learning impacts participants' behavior in their job. Eller stated "It is crucial to ask participants information related to their ability to use and apply program content" (para. 23).

Howley et al. (2002) conducted a study to determine what approaches to professional development principals participating in an academy for early-career principals in rural Appalachian Ohio, perceived as most valuable. The researchers were motivated to explore this topic as a result of their review of literature on professional development for rural principals. They found "little research has been conducted to explore the nature, quality, and outcomes of professional development offered to school administrators, especially those who work in rural schools" (p. 2). Howley et al. argued the needs of rural, early-career principals were unique as these principals tended to be less educated, more isolated, and expected to fulfill more roles than urban or suburban principals. The academy was designed to assist new principals in completing a state required portfolio with content based on the ISLLC Standards. The academy was a collaborative effort between a university and a consortium of schools. Nineteen principals were organized into four groups at different sites led by a mentor principal. Each group selected issues of interest and approaches to examine those issues in addition to working on their portfolios. Each group met a minimum of eight days over the two years of the academy. In their findings, Howley et al. (2002) described how principals valued professional development related to their daily responsibilities and viewed the mentor-led study groups as an effective approach.

In each of the studies referenced above (i.e., Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Eller, 2008; Howley et al., 2002), the researchers provided descriptions and evaluation of professional development for principals. They relied primarily upon participant feedback, surveys, and artifact examination to assess the effectiveness and/or strengths and weaknesses of the approaches to professional development of principals. Other studies (e.g., Daresh, 2001; Houle, 2006) used similar methods and with similar results. None of these studies have evaluated professional development approaches or the achievement of professional development goals through the examination of principal behaviors.

### **Summary**

Empirical studies link the leadership behaviors of principals to student achievement (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). These identified behaviors align

with the ISLLC Standards (CCSSO, 2008) that are embedded in most university educational leadership preparation programs (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2001; Pounder, 2011).

A large amount of money is spent on professional development in education (NCES, 2008) with little evaluation of the impact of professional development on educators' behavior and even less knowledge of the indirect effects on student outcomes (Gusky, 2000; Howley et al., 2002; Leithwood & Levin, 2008; Nicholson et al., 2005; Yoon et al., 2007). While there is some agreement on the desirability of professional development that is job-embedded, on-going, and focused on specific school goals (Hirsh, 2009; IEL, 2000; Nicholson et al.; NSDC, 2001) most studies of professional development have examined teacher's professional development (Acquarelli & Mumme, 1996; Blank & de las Alas, 2009; Killion, 2002; Scher & O'Reilly, 2009; Wallace, 2009) rather than principal's. Nicholson et al. identified a need to document what professional development is actually taking place for principals. Nicholson et al. included information of a general nature for three of the four states studied, however, details regarding the content, activity type(s), and duration were not included. Likewise, NCES data documenting professional development activity is limited (Rodriquez-Campos et al., 2005). Much of the research related to professional development for principals, especially in rural Appalachia, is evaluation of specific academy-type programs and provides only anecdotal or self-reported evidence of impact on leadership behavior (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Eller, 2008; Howley et al., 2002). Based on a review of the literature, one could conclude that, with desired leadership behaviors identified and little empirical knowledge of the effectiveness of principals' professional development on the development of those behaviors, there is a need for study in this area.

## CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of professional development for principals of public schools in the rural Appalachian region of Virginia. A qualitative research design is well suited to the study of persons' lived experiences (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and was therefore selected for the present study.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research design is distinguished in large part from quantitative designs because of its use of purposeful sampling of small samples (Patton, 2002). The small sample of the present study ( $N = 13$ ) allowed for depth of study (Patton) of the phenomenon of interest; principals' professional development experiences. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) described the qualitative tradition of phenomenology as the study of "reality as it appears to individuals" (p. 491) and view the researcher as being "intimately connected with the phenomena being studied" (p. 495). Interviews of current principals were conducted to study the principals' professional development realities, and, as a former public school principal and current professional developer in the Appalachian region of Virginia, the researcher in the present study is unquestionably connected with the phenomenon being studied. Conducting phenomenological studies usually involves a series of in-depth interviews including (a) a historical perspective, (b) current experiences, and (c) reflective dialogue (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The present study did not involve the depth of interview typical of phenomenological studies generally, however, the pre-study, professional relationships between researcher and participants and single interviews that included each of the three topics typical of the three-interview series align this study with a typical phenomenological study design.

### **Selection of Participants**

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Principal of a public school in a rural Appalachian area of Virginia.

2. Willing to participate in an individual or group interview lasting no longer than two hours regarding their professional development experiences.
3. Willing to sign an informed consent (see Appendix A) indicating they would answer questions honestly, allow the interview to be recorded, and allow the use of non-identifying direct quotes.

Potential participants were identified based on a prior professional relationship with the researcher. Having had previous, positive, professional experiences with the researcher would aide in establishing rapport for a comfortable and open interview environment. Letters (see Appendix B) were sent to 18 principals inviting their participation. Four potential participants did not respond to the initial letter or a follow-up. One potential participant responded she was no longer a building principal. Thirteen principals from eight different school divisions agreed to participate. Clearly this sample is not without bias, and accordingly there will be no attempt to generalize findings.

Participating principals had between 10 and 40 plus years of experience in education. They had been in administrative positions between four and twenty years, and in their current assignments between one and seven years. Nine of thirteen considered themselves natives of Appalachia and seven were principals in what they considered their home communities. Three participants were high school principals, two were middle school principals, five were principals of elementary schools, and three were principals of combined elementary/middle schools. Participants' school's student populations ranged from 132 to 2,291. Participants' school division's student populations ranged from 2,507 to 7,414 (see Table 3 in Appendix C for complete demographic information).

### **Data Collection**

The primary purpose of this study was to gather information on the nature of professional development experiences of some principals of schools in Virginia's rural Appalachian region. Interviews were the primary data collection method used. Interviews allow us to gain the perspective of others without direct observation of their experiences (Patton, 2002). Interviews also allow for the immediate clarification of questions and follow-up to responses thereby improving the quality of data collected.

Nine prompts (see Appendix D) were used to guide the standardized, open-ended interviews. Two of the prompts gathered background data regarding participants' principal preparation program and work experience in education. Two prompts asked for participants' opinions; one regarding effective professional development, and the other on the necessity for professional development to have a focus on place. Five prompts were designed to gather data regarding participants' experiences with their own professional development. The prompts were sent to the participants one week prior to the interview. While the nine prompts were generally used in the same order with each participant, participants were allowed, in their responses, to deviate from the specific prompt without redirection by the interviewer. The interviewer also asked follow-up questions where appropriate to follow an unanticipated line of inquiry or to ask participants to clarify or expand on a response. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Nine interviews involving 13 participants were conducted. Six of the interviews were conducted with individual principals. Two interviews were conducted with two principals from the same school division together. One interview was conducted with three principals from the same school division. Regardless of the number of principals participating in each interview, all principals were asked and did respond to each prompt individually. It is unclear whether there was any substantial difference between multi-participant interviews and single participant interviews. At times, participants interviewed together would build upon each other's responses or echo the responses of others. It cannot be known whether or not the same or different information would have been shared if all interviews had been completed in the same manner. All interviews were conducted at school sites convenient to participants, and all but one were conducted during the school day. One was conducted prior to the beginning of the school year. Few interruptions occurred during the interviews. Two brief and two extended (participants left the room for several minutes) interruptions occurred. Interviews took place over a three-month period from August to October, 2010 and lasted between 26 and 62 minutes.

Demographic data on participants' schools were obtained from the Virginia Department of Education's School Report Card (VDOE, 2010). These data included the grade level range of each participant's school, the school's student population, and the total school division student population.



## Data Analysis

Patton (2002) described content analysis as referring “to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (p. 453). Patton further contrasted inductive analysis, finding patterns in data, with deductive analysis, examining data within an existing framework. The content analysis process used in this study included both inductive and deductive analysis.

Verbatim interview transcripts were read in their entirety looking for material that was relevant to the research question and for initial patterns across interviews. This initial analysis uncovered patterns fitting into existing frameworks for classifying professional development, i.e. purpose, type, duration, job-embeddedness, connection to school improvement planning, evaluation, audience, topic, and barriers to access. Additional patterns emerged that reflected participants’ unique experiences such as the level of school division leadership support for professional development, the general availability of professional development opportunities for principals, and participants’ needs and attitudes toward professional development.

Relevant segments of text from all transcripts were identified, coded, and grouped separately for each of the interview prompts. The standardized, open-ended interview process helped to facilitate this analysis as participants’ responses were generally in the same order and easy to compare (Patton, 2002). Segments of text identified were labeled with the participant number to allow for comparison across questions. Codes were grouped into categories to summarize responses for each prompt. The summaries depicted areas of similarity and contrast among and between participants.

## CHAPTER IV PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to describe the nature of professional development experiences for principals of schools in the rural Appalachia region of Virginia. In doing so, participants' professional development experiences were analyzed to determine to what extent those experiences were on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals; all indicators of high quality professional development (Hirsh, 2009; IEL, 2000; Nicholson et al., 2005). Participants were also asked to address whether their professional development was or should be place-based. Additionally, barriers to engaging in professional development were identified. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, principals' attitudes towards and perceptions regarding professional development were also revealed.

During interviews, participating principals were asked to describe (a) what they do generally to develop themselves professionally, (b) their most recent professional development experience, (c) other professional development experiences during the past year, (d) their most meaningful professional development experience, and (e) barriers to accessing professional development. Table 2 shows the 20 different types of professional development activities described by the principals and which principals participated in which types.

The activities listed in Table 2 do not represent principals' experiences over a set timeframe. (Answers to interview prompts that focused on participants' most recent experiences and experiences within the past year did allow for comparisons across a set timeframe.) One principal indicated their attendance at a national conference had occurred five years prior. Another principal indicated she had not engaged in any professional development outside of her building for the entire previous year. In contrast, some activities had occurred during the month of the participant's interview and many of the activities had occurred within the past year.

Table 2

*Participants' Engagement in Professional Development by Type*

Type of Professional Development/ Participant #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Sum by type
National conference							x					x	x	3
State conference	x			x			x	x		x			x	6
Regional conference					x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	8
Regional workshop			x				x		x	x	x	x	x	7
Local workshop	x	x	x		x			x	x	x				7
Academy			x				x				x			3
Reading articles	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x			10
Reading books	x	x	x			x	x					x		6
Book study group	x	x	x	x			x	x				x		7
Read online articles				x				x		x				3
Attend webinars									x	x				2
Online modules					x						x			2
Multimedia (offline)				x										1
Principals' meetings		x				x		x		x	x			5
Informal networking	x		x			x	x		x	x		x		7
Participate in teachers' pd	x	x	x	x		x	x	x					x	8
Lead teachers' pd								x			x		x	3
Mentoring							x	x						2
For credit courses	x			x										2
Visiting classrooms	x							x						2
Total number of types of pd by participant	9	6	8	6	4	6	11	11	6	8	9	4	6	

## **General Description of Professional Development Experiences**

The principals interviewed described a wide range of professional development experiences in which they engaged. Principals described traditional professional development types such as conferences and workshops. They described professional development types that utilize digital technology such as online articles and modules, webinars, and offline multimedia. Principals described participation in professional development intended primarily for their teachers as professional development for themselves. Activities that are generally not, by intention or tradition, considered professional development for principals, but were nonetheless described as professional development by the interviewees included visiting classrooms, informal networking, mentoring others, leading teachers' professional development, and attending principal's meetings.

Principals' experiences with different types of professional development varied. On average, principals identified seven different types of professional development in which they had engaged. The range was from a low of four types identified by two principals to a high of 11, also identified by two principals. Seven of the types were identified by more than half of the principals indicating these types were widely used, while three or fewer principals mentioned ten of the twenty types indicating infrequent use. Reading articles was the most frequently described professional development activity mentioned by 10 principals. Participation in teachers' professional development and attending regional conferences were described by eight principals each. Four of the ten least mentioned types were technology related; none being mentioned by more than three principals.

Among the 20 types of professional development activities described by principals, four are traditional, one-time events that typically are not on-going, job-embedded, specifically connected to school improvement goals unless by chance, nor place-based. These include national, state, and regional conferences and regional workshops. Eight of thirteen principals participated in regional conferences making regional conferences the second most frequently mentioned professional development type. Regional workshops and state conferences were mentioned seven and six times respectively.

When describing their last professional development experience, only four participating principals described an activity that included all three indicators of quality (on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals). For two of those four principals, they were participating in professional development designed for their teachers, not for principals.

The following three sections address research question number two, which asked to what extent are principals' professional development experiences (a) on-going, (b) job-embedded, and (c) connected to school improvement goals.

### **On-going Professional Development**

For the purposes of this study, on-going was defined as professional development activities that extend beyond a single event during the course of a school year. Eight principals described participation in on-going professional development; however on-going professional development occurred infrequently for all but one of those principals. Three principals described a study group comprised of all their division's principals to learn about professional learning communities. They met "for many weeks" and described the study group as a powerful learning experience, but this event had occurred several years prior. Two other principals from another division described an initiative to implement a school wide positive behavior support program in their schools that occurred more than four years ago. That initiative included professional development with a cohort of schools throughout their region spanning multiple years.

There was one principal for whom on-going professional development was the norm. She described book study groups led by the superintendent, a regional leadership academy that met multiple times, mentoring of aspiring principals, and a regional workshop that included follow-up with a teacher leader team in her school. This principal exhibited a very positive attitude towards professional learning and indicated a high level of support from her division. She stated "If I think it's really something that I need and would benefit from, I don't let much get in the way...[my school division] values professional development so there is money there for me to make some choices" (participant 7, personal communication, September 16, 2010).

### **Job-embedded Professional Development**

Professional development that is job-embedded occurs at the school site or is directly related to the routine work of the principal. Most professional development described by the principals was job-embedded, and every principal described some professional development that was job-embedded. When asked to describe the last professional development activity in which they had engaged, eight of the principals described job-embedded professional development. The majority of these professional development activities focused on the instructional leadership responsibilities of the principal. These included a book study with teachers on brain-based learning, hands-on training for conducting classroom walkthroughs, a workshop on leading professional learning for the principal and teacher leader team, training with teacher leaders on differentiation of instruction, off-site training on implementation of standards-based assessment with follow-up at the school site, and training in preparation for the use of mathematics specialists in the principal's elementary school.

In general, many of the professional development activities described by principals occurred at the school site. These included reading articles, attending webinars, completing online modules, using multimedia, participating in or leading teachers' professional development, mentoring, and visiting classrooms. Others occurred within the division, if not at the principal's school, including local workshops, principal's meetings, and informal networking.

### **Professional Development Connected to School Improvement Goals**

In order for activities to be considered as connecting to school improvement goals the activities must have been selected specifically to address explicit school improvement goals or have been the result of analyzing needs related to teaching and learning. Many of the activities described by principals were not connected to school improvement goals, but in describing their last professional development experience (for which the most data were collected), eight of the thirteen principals indicated the professional development was either directly connected to the school improvement goals, somewhat connected to their school improvement goals, or connected to a division-level goal. The principal who participated with a teacher leader team in a workshop and follow-up related to leading professional learning in her building said the following when asked why she chose that professional development experience:

We looked last year at evaluation of our goals for last year and we, of course, took input from all of our staff and then looked at our goals for this coming year and creating committees, if you will, we call them teams, essential teams, that would be needed to meet our goals. We realized that we really needed a professional development team (participant 7, personal communication, September 16, 2010).

One principal chose to attend and personally pay for an eight-day school leadership academy at a major northeastern university due to the division's emphasis on the topic. She stated:

Why did I pick that academy? Because they were focusing on 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and that's my main reason. [My superintendent] had said we really want to focus on this 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, and to tell you the truth, I thought I knew what that was about, but I wanted some additional understanding so that's why I chose that academy (participant 3, personal communication, August 2, 2010).

### **Place-based Professional Development**

Research question number three asked if principals received or saw value in professional development related specifically to being principal of a school in rural Appalachia. Eight of the principals stated that professional development related specifically to place was important. They spoke of the need for principals to understand whatever place the school inhabits, not just schools in rural Appalachia. They indicated a need for principals to understand cultural beliefs, technology issues, bias in the media, and local politics. One principal stated, "every school even in a small county like ours is unique in their culture...[but] all of us are sensitive if we get the impression someone is looking down on us" (participant 13, personal communication, October 18, 2010). One principal who agreed learning about place was important was unsure how to approach that learning. She stated "How would I do that? I'm not real sure. The way we do things, our language is different, our idioms, so on, you know, there are so many things we do differently, our food, what we value in terms of just cultural items. But how do you teach that?" (participant 11, personal communication, September 20, 2010).

Few principals have received place-based professional development. None of the professional development described by principals related specifically to leading a school in rural

Appalachia. Five of the principals, however, identified training related to issues of poverty as place-based professional development and appeared to equate poverty with life in rural Appalachia. Each of these five principals described training they had received based on the work of Ruby Payne, educator and author of several books related to the education of students from poverty.

### **Barriers to Accessing Professional Development**

The final research question asked what barriers principals faced in accessing professional development. Principals had many common responses regarding what factors limited their access to professional development. Ten of the principals indicated the demands of the job limited the time they could devote to their own professional development. One principal stated “You hate to be out of the building because when you come back, you know, 20 phone messages and twice that in emails maybe or more, or somebody has called from central office and they’re wanting something done that should have been done two weeks ago” (participant 6, personal communication, September 13, 2010). Another principal, when asked what professional development she had engaged in the previous year responded, “I am sad, but I know last year I did not, and it was just for the fact that I could not get out of the building” (participant 5, personal communication, September 13, 2010).

Five principals indicated long distances to travel for professional development was a limiting factor. The rural Appalachian region of Virginia is as much as seven to ten hours travel time from Virginia’s population centers where most statewide events are held. One principal stated “If I have to travel six hours one way, that’s going to be difficult for me to justify no matter what the topic is” (participant 12, personal communication, September 28, 2010).

Two additional factors limited access to professional development. One is not having any professional development offered by their school division and the second is not knowing what is offered outside the division. Several principals indicated a desire for professional development initiated by central office administrators. “In terms of actual professional development it’s not happening...I want them to give me some opportunities...I know some of my peers in other divisions, their superintendents are asking them to do book studies and then once a month they meet and they talk” (participant 6, personal communication, September 13,



2010). One principal described contrasting professional development opportunities having worked in two neighboring school divisions. The two divisions were very similar demographically, but one offered many professional development opportunities, and the other offered almost none. When asked to what she attributed the difference, she stated “The vision of the powers that be” (participant 1, personal communication, August 2, 2010).

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

If we accept that principals' leadership is second only to classroom instruction as a school factor impacting student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004), there is value in knowing how those leadership behaviors can be developed. A recent issue of *Educational Administration Quarterly* (University Council for Educational Administration, 2011) was devoted entirely to examining educational leadership preparation programs. In addition to examining principal preparation programs, there is a need for greater information on the professional development of current principals (Howley et al., 2002; Leithwood & Levin, 2008; Nicholson et al., 2005). In the present study, data were gathered and analyzed in order to describe the nature of principals' professional development experiences. The information gathered from Virginia principals in rural Appalachian schools can be used to help guide future practical and scholarly work.

The principals participating in the present study want professional development, and they view school division leadership as one key to their getting professional development. That professional educators value learning is not surprising. However, the desire for professional learning can be suppressed by the demands of the principal's job unless continual professional learning is encouraged, supported, and initiated by school division leadership. For the school divisions represented in this study, principals looked toward the superintendent for encouragement and support. Several principals viewed the principal's meetings, typically led by the superintendent, as an opportunity for professional learning. The number of central office administrative staff in these school divisions is typically small with most individuals having multiple areas of responsibility. None of the 33 school divisions in Virginia's Appalachian region have a staff member who has professional development as their primary responsibility (VDOE, 2011b).

The principals who participated in the present study want to network with other principals and learn collaboratively. The desire to network and learn collaboratively is consistent with the findings of others (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Eller, 2008; Howley et al., 2002). Principals are often isolated in their job, especially in small schools in rural areas. Of the

13 principals interviewed, only five had assistant principals. Three of these were in high schools, one was in a middle school with nearly 1400 students and the other was in a 700-student elementary school. Ten of thirteen principals indicated informal networking and/or principals' meetings as a valued form of professional development. Several principals described the act of getting together with other principals for meals and conversation about their schools and problems they shared as some of their best professional development. When asked to describe the most meaningful, effective professional development in which they had engaged, five principals shared about events that had collaboration with other principals as a key component. The collaborative learning described by the participating principals was planned and intentional professional development. Much of the networking described was informal, unplanned, and not necessarily intended as professional development.

Most principals interviewed had, at some time, experienced good professional development, but much of their professional development would not meet the definition of high quality professional development: professional development which is on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals (Hirsh, 2009; IEL, 2000; Nicholson et al., 2005). Less than a third (four) of the principals described their last professional development experience as having all three components, and for two of those, the professional development was directed at teachers, not principals. Much of the professional development would be better characterized as information gathering events. Principals attended conferences where they would go to multiple sessions lasting one to two hours on a variety of only loosely connected topics. Principals frequently read articles from their professional journals on whatever topics the editors had chosen to include and described, as one principal stated, the "90-minute shot in the dark" (participant 9, personal communication, September 20, 2010) local workshop where they would listen to presenters on various topics. Several principals spoke of taking advantage of whatever education related conference was available regardless of the conference's relationship to their own specific learning needs.

Common sense would suggest digital technologies would provide professional development opportunities for principals in geographically isolated areas such as rural Appalachia. The results of this study were that professional development opportunities utilizing technology were seldom accessed by the principals interviewed. Seven of thirteen principals described no use of distance technology for professional development, and the six others

described only minimal use. One principal indicated he didn't use distance technology because he wanted to learn while interacting with others. Learning is a social activity for many, and current technologies can facilitate interaction, but principals have to know about and have access to such technologies in order to take advantage of those capabilities.

Principals interviewed indicated they often participated with their teachers in professional development designed for the teachers. Principals' participation in teachers' professional development can be important for several reasons, but these professional development experiences are typically inadequate in addressing the principal's needs related to the topic. A principal's presence at a professional development event designed to enhance teachers' effectiveness sends the message to teachers that the principal values the professional development. The principal's attendance also gives him or her first hand knowledge of what the teachers have received and therefore what he or she can expect of the teachers and what follow-up to the professional development is necessary. Each of these is an important reason for principals to participate in teachers' professional development. While they enhance the instructional leadership capabilities of the principal, the principal needs more. The principal needs to know what to look for when they visit classrooms and how to respond to what they observe. Principals need to know the indicators that new teaching strategies are being implemented with fidelity. Principals need to know when teachers need modeling of strategies, re-teaching of new strategies, and coaching on the use of new strategies. Principals need to know the best ways to monitor and support implementation of new strategies. Knowledge of this type is typically not made a part of the teachers' professional development.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Further Research**

The value in this study relates to its implications for future study. Information gained from the participants' interviews identified several areas where research questions can be addressed incorporating methodologies that will allow for generalizations to the Appalachia region or to principals in general. These areas include (a) the role and influence of school division leadership on principals' professional development (b) the importance and impact of incorporating networking and other opportunities for collaboration into the design of principals' professional development, (c) the impact of designing professional development that is on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals on initial learning and continued

leadership behaviors of principals, (d) the issues relating to the use and non-use of distance technologies for principals' professional development, and (e) the efficacy of professional development designed for teachers in meeting the needs of principals or the ability of principals to translate the content of teachers professional development to knowledge and skills needed by instructional leaders. The following section addresses each of these areas as well as additional considerations suggested from the present study.

Participating principals credited superintendents for initiating and supporting principals' professional learning and were critical when that initiation and support was lacking. Establishing a culture of professional learning should happen at the school division level (Fullan, 2006). While creating this culture of learning at the division level is important for both teachers' and principals' learning, one could argue it is more important for principals. Especially in small, rural schools, principals are often without peers in their daily work. Even in large schools, there are often no more than two or three administrators in a building. The role of the superintendent or their surrogate in planning, facilitating, and supporting the professional development of principals should be considered when planning research on principals' professional development and is a worthy topic in itself.

Principals repeatedly mentioned the value of spending time formally and informally with other school leaders. The desire to learn collaboratively is consistent with the professional learning community (PLC) model (DeFour & Eaker, 1998) and communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The PLC and communities of practice are examples of high quality professional development that is on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals. Regarding collaboration, DeFour and Eaker stated collective inquiry in the PLC is "the engine of improvement, growth, and renewal" (p. 25). Future research should examine if the incorporation of networking, both formal and informal, as a form of collaboration is associated with positive changes in principals' leadership behaviors.

Principals interviewed for the present study seldom experienced professional development that was on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals. Of these three characteristics, principals described engaging in professional development that was job-embedded more so than on-going or connected to school improvement goals. Engaging in job-embedded professional development may be the result of principals' unwillingness or

inability to leave their buildings more than the result of intentionally selecting professional development that is job-embedded. Each of these characteristics in combination is recommended for professional development to be of high quality (Hirsh, 2009; IEL, 2000; Nicholson et al., 2005). Principals and division leaders can engage in processes that identify professional learning needs based on school improvement goals and include plans for evaluating and sustaining high quality professional development efforts (Killion & Roy, 2009; Monger & von Frank, 2010; Reeves, 2011). Future studies should examine the impact of professional development that is of high quality compared with professional development that is not ongoing, job-embedded, or connected to school improvement goals on principals learning and leadership behaviors.

Distance technology provides opportunities, otherwise difficult to access, for principals of schools in geographically isolated areas. The principals participating in this study seldom mentioned the use of technology for professional development. One principal who did speak of technology noted that he would miss the interaction with other participants. Technology currently available provides opportunities for interaction through videoconferencing and other synchronous and asynchronous online systems. Researchers have found online professional development for teachers effective in terms of participant satisfaction, ability to interact and collaborate, and application of learning to teachers' classrooms (Holmes, Signer, & MacLeod, 2010; Marrero, Woodruff, & Schuster, 2010). One could anticipate similar results with professional development designed specifically for principals. It would be interesting to examine what factors influence principals' use or non-use of distance technology for their professional learning.

Principals often engage in professional development designed for teachers. The principal's job includes providing leadership in the development of a vision of learning, establishment of a school culture focused upon student learning and staff growth, organizational management, facilitating collaboration, ensuring ethical professional behavior, and working within the broader cultural context (CCSSO, 2008). These are not behaviors typically addressed in professional development designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of teachers, nor should they be. Just as teacher professional development should relate directly to the content and pedagogy of their assignment (Scher & O'Reilly, 2009), one might suggest principals' professional development should be directly related to and embedded in their leadership

responsibilities. An important question to be addressed is, are principals able to translate learning from professional development designed for teachers to the role of principal? A related question is what must be added to professional development designed for teachers in order for that professional development to meet the needs of principals?

This study resulted in the collection of data on the nature of professional development for 13 principals of schools in the rural Appalachian region of Virginia. This study did not determine what, if any, learning occurred as a result of the professional development or what, if any, impact that learning had on the leadership behaviors of principals. Ultimately, these are the two more important questions, and the results of the present study are only a preliminary step towards answering those questions. Important next steps include establishing and implementing processes to effectively evaluate the achievement of specific learning outcomes from professional development and evaluation of the impact of that learning on the leadership behaviors of principals. Also important is using appropriate methodologies to sample the population of principals and collect data so that findings produced might be generalized beyond the sample. Development of a common conceptual framework related to the professional development of principals would also aid in the comparison of findings across studies. Desimone (2009) proposed a conceptual framework as a basis for impact studies involving teachers' professional development. Desimone's framework included five core features of professional development: (a) content focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration, and (e) collective participation. Combining the five core features of professional development from Desimone's framework with the leadership influences framework proposed by Louis et al. (2010) may provide a model for studies examining the impact of principals' professional development.

Participants in this study were 13 principals from eight school divisions in the rural Appalachian region of Virginia. There would be value in comparing and contrasting the nature of their professional development experiences with other principals. Examining the experiences of another group of principals from similar schools incorporating appropriate sampling and data collection methodologies would aid in addressing the generalizability of any results. Examining experiences of principals from suburban and urban school districts and larger districts would also provide valuable data helping to describe the more general nature of principals' professional development and would allow for comparisons with rural Appalachia.

As noted in the limitations described in CHAPTER I, use of the interview to collect data relied upon participants' memory of past events and memory lapses could negatively impact the completeness and accuracy of data. When asked to provide information on the last professional development activity in which they had engaged, principals were able to provide detailed information. When asked to describe other activities over the past year, the level of detail in principals' responses dropped substantially. Greater levels of accuracy and detail could be obtained if participants were provided with a tool, such as an online form, to record data related their professional development experiences as they occur or at least on a periodic basis. Using an online form, however, would require a greater commitment of time and effort from participants than is required from an interview. Interviews would most likely also be necessary to follow-up upon and clarify information provided in a form.

Professional development, for this study, was defined as any activity designed to enhance a principal's professional competence through the improvement of knowledge, skill, or disposition. The definition was purposely broad in order to capture principals' perceptions of whatever they believed to be their own professional development. The interview prompts used, as well as impromptu remarks made during the interview, encouraged participants to think of their development broadly and to not limit their thinking to traditional professional development activities. Even with such prompting, several principals asked whether certain non-traditional events should be included in their responses. In contrast, data were included that described activities where principals just happened to learn something, but were not, by intention, professional learning activities. In order to collect evidence on professional development for the purposes of informing others regarding the nature of professional development and, ultimately, methods of effective professional development, a recommendation would be that the definition of professional development be restricted to those activities that were designed intentionally for professional learning. Those activities that are intentionally designed for professional learning are the ones over which designers can exert control. In planning future research the notion of intentionality as it relates to professional learning should be explored in order to clearly define the phenomenon to be studied.

Principal leadership is important. A principal's leadership has a substantial influence on the retention of quality teachers and the turnover of ineffective teachers (Betielle et al., 2009) thereby positively influencing classroom instruction. Specific leadership behaviors that are



positively associated students have been identified and described in detail (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003). Tools are available to assess those leadership behaviors in principals (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2009; Porter, Murphy, Goldring & Elliot, 2010). Principals should continue to develop their leadership abilities across their careers. Knowing what types of professional development experiences are most effective in leading to the acquisition and enhancement of key leadership skills is critical.

This study was a first step towards what should be a more in-depth look at professional development for principals. The interview data collected in this study provide information regarding (a) the types of professional development in which principals engaged, (b) the extent to which professional development was on-going, job-embedded, and connected to school improvement goals, (c) the role of place in professional development, and (d) barriers to principals' access to professional development. Reflection on the research process and data collected describing the nature of principals' professional development in the present study offer suggestions for framing and conducting future research that employs methodologies to produce higher quality data regarding the professional development practices needed to enhance the leadership skills of principals.

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*APPENDIX A*  
INFORMED CONSENT

**VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Informed Consent for Participants  
in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

Title of Project: Professional Development of School Leaders in Virginia's Rural Appalachia Region

Investigator(s): Theodore Creighton and Brad Bizzell

**I. Purpose of this Research/Project**

The purpose of this study is to examine and document the professional development activities in which some school principals in the rural Appalachia region of Virginia engage and the extent to which those activities are (a) on-going, (b) job-embedded, (c) connected to school improvement goals, and (d) place-based.

**II. Procedures**

Data will be collected through interview questions in a focus group format<sup>1</sup>. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Notes will be taken of relevant participant behavior during the interview.

Following is a list of prompts that may be used to gather information necessary to answer the research questions.

1. Tell me a little about yourself. (how long you have been in education, in administration, in your current position, your connections to your school's community)
2. Briefly describe your principal preparation program and how well prepared you felt for your first administrative position. Did anything in your preparation program focus specifically on leading a school in rural Appalachia or any other distinct place? If so, what?
3. What things do you currently do to develop yourself professionally?
4. Describe the last professional development activity in which you were involved. (how/why selected, where conducted, by whom, audience, topic, duration, learning outcomes, evaluation, follow-up)

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews were actually conducted as standardized, open-ended interviews in a combination of individual and group settings rather than employing the focus group method.

5. Describe other professional development activities in which you participated during the past year. (including non-traditional professional development activities such as professional learning communities, mentoring, coaching, book study, etc.)
6. Did any of these professional development activities explicitly focus upon rural Appalachia or relate to the importance of "place" in any other way?
7. Is it important for your professional development to focus on "place". If so, how?
8. What factors limit your access to professional development?

After the interview, the researcher will type a transcript of the interview. You will be invited to read the transcript and make comments or corrections.

### **III. Risks**

There are no more than minimal risks involved. You may experience some anxiety simply as the result of being interviewed and recorded. You may experience some anxiety that your responses will be shared with others. You will be assured of confidentiality through 1) the use of pseudonyms for the participants and the school, 2) limiting access to transcripts to only the two researchers.

### **IV. Benefits**

Gaining a greater understanding of principals' professional development activities will inform planning for both principal preparation and in-service professional development

### **V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Every effort will be made to hide your identity in any written work resulting from this study. False names will be used to identify you in any written materials. The researcher will try to minimize the possibility of identifying other people you may mention. Fake names will be used in any printed materials. Furthermore, no mention of the actual name of the school will be made.

Within the transcripts, you will be identified by a number.

Electronic files from the digital recordings of the interview will be stored in a locked file box at the researcher's home. The two researchers are the only people who will have access to the recordings. Copies of the transcripts may be viewed only by the researchers.

It is possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study's collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

### **VI. Compensation**

There will be no money given to you for participating in this study.

## VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free stop participating in this study at any time. You may feel free to not answer any questions. If there are circumstances which arise and it is determined that you should not continue as a subject, your interview will end.

## VIII. Subject's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

- I agree to answer questions honestly. Initial \_\_\_\_\_
- I agree to allow the researcher to record the interview. Initial \_\_\_\_\_
- I agree to allow the researcher to use a non-identifying direct quote. Initial \_\_\_\_\_

## X. Subject's Permission

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Subject signature

Theodore B. Creighton

540-231-4546

Principal Investigator/Faculty Advisor

[tcreigh@vt.edu](mailto:tcreigh@vt.edu)

Brad Bizzell

540-231-0810

Co-Investigator

[bbizzell@vt.edu](mailto:bbizzell@vt.edu)

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board

Office of Research Compliance

2000 Kraft Dr., Suite 2000 (0497)

Blacksburg, VA 24061

540-231-4991

**[NOTE: Subjects must be given a complete copy (or duplicate original) of the signed Informed Consent.]**

*APPENDIX B*  
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

This letter is to invite your participation in a research project I am conducting in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Tech. The project is titled *Professional Development of School Leaders in Virginia's Rural Appalachia Region*.

I am asking you to participate in a focus group interview with a group of three to six principals from your school division. As a former principal, I know that your time is valuable and limited. The interview would take no more than two hours and will be done at a place and time convenient to all participating principals.

The purpose of the project is to examine and document the professional development activities in which some school principals in the rural Appalachia region of Virginia engage and the extent to which those activities are (a) on-going, (b) job-embedded, (c) connected to school improvement goals, and (d) place-based. I believe that both principal preparation and professional development can be improved by increasing our knowledge and understanding of what is currently taking place.

If you are willing to participate in this project or have any questions, please contact me by email, [bbizzell@vt.edu](mailto:bbizzell@vt.edu), or telephone, 1-800-848-2714. I hope you will consider participating.

Sincerely,

Brad E. Bizzell

*APPENDIX C*  
 PARTICIPANTS' SCHOOL'S/PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 3

*Participants' School's/Participants' Demographics*

#	School Grade Level Range	School Population	School Division Population	Years in education	Years in administration/ current position	Native of community/ Appalachia
1	9 - 12	2291	7408	25+	20/4	No/no
2	6 - 8	1380	7408	30	8/3	No/no
3	PK - 5	361	7408	15	4/1	Yes/yes
4	6 - 8	337	4369	14	7/4	Yes/yes
5	PK - 5	716	4369	18	8/4	No/no
6	9 - 12	370	4369	13	8/5	Yes/yes
7	PK - 5	586	7414	30+	13/3	No/no
8	9 - 12	419	6655	20	7/6	No/yes
9	PK - 5	132	3333	27	6/4	Yes/yes
10	PK - 7	419	3333	30	8/7	Yes/yes
11	PK - 5	212	6628	40+	17/7	Yes/yes
12	K - 7	527	2507	10	8/7	No/yes
13	PK - 8	565	2521	27	9/3	Yes/yes

*APPENDIX D*  
INTERVIEW PROMPTS

1. Tell me a little about yourselves (name, how long you have been in education, in administration, in your current position, your connections to your school's community).
2. Briefly describe your principal preparation program and how well prepared you felt for your first administrative position. Did anything in your preparation program focus specifically on leading a school in rural Appalachia or any other distinct place? If so, what?
3. What things do you currently do to develop yourself professionally?
4. Describe the last professional development activity in which you were involved. (how/why selected, where conducted, by whom, audience, topic, duration, learning outcomes, evaluation, follow-up)
5. Describe other professional development activities in which you participated during the past year. (may need to prompt by asking specific questions about non-traditional professional development activities such as professional learning communities, mentoring, coaching, book study, etc. if these types of activities are not discussed)
6. Over the course of your career in administration, describe the most meaningful, effective professional development in which you have engaged.
7. Did any of these professional development activities explicitly focus upon rural Appalachia or relate to the importance of "place" in any other way?
8. Is it important for your professional development to focus on "place". If so, how?
9. What factors limit your access to professional development?