Perceptions of the Initial Steps a Planning Principal Takes to Open a New *Plus One* Elementary School

Karen Lee Dubiel

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Carol S. Cash, Chair

Jodie L. Brinkmann

Bettibel C. Kreye

Magie L. Wilkerson

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one* elementary school. Too often, the focus is on the completion of the bricks and mortar of the facility instead of what takes place in the building once construction is complete (Lane, 2008). "Effective planning for the opening of a new school produces an environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn effectively and efficiently" (Lane, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the opening of a new *plus one* school requires a well-planned, detailed, organized approach for occupying the facility as the success or failure of the school opening process weighs heavily on the ability of the planning principal (Lane, 2008). New *plus one* schools are continuing to be built regularly within the United States to address student enrollment increases in existing schools with limited capacity, yet there is no set of instructions to guide a planning principal. With new school construction still needed to address increasing student enrollment in local school districts, the perceptions of the initial steps planning principals take to open a new *plus one* elementary school are valuable. This study involved interviewing four planning principals in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Interview questions sought the actions that planning principals take to start a new *plus one* elementary school. All four planning principals indicated that they had no playbook or guide, were self-directed and initiated support when needed, and exercised a high level of autonomy with decision making, specifically with staffing, developing a school vision, and determining the school mascot and school colors. Implications for practitioners were identified including the need for a guide or handbook, a structure of support, and training or professional development. The outcome of the study provided opportunities for future planning principals to identify the key responsibilities, experiences, and guidance recommended for opening new *plus one* elementary schools.

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General Audience Abstract

New *plus one* schools are continuing to be built regularly within the United States to address student enrollment increases in existing schools with limited capacity, yet there is no set of instructions to guide a planning principal. With new school construction still needed to address increasing student enrollment in local school districts, the perceptions of the initial steps planning principals take to open a new *plus one* elementary school are valuable. This qualitative study interviewed four planning principals from the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States that served as a planning principal within the past five years of a public K-5 elementary school, had at least three years of experience as a school administrator, and opened a new *plus one* school versus a rebuild. The interview questions sought the actions planning principals take to start new *plus one* elementary schools. All four planning principals indicated that they had no playbook or guide, were self-directed and initiated support when needed, and exercised a high level of autonomy with decision making, specifically with staffing, developing a school vision, and determining the school mascot and school colors. Implications for practitioners were identified including the need for a guide or handbook, a structure of support, and training or professional development. The outcome of the study provided opportunities for future planning principals to identify the key responsibilities, experiences, and guidance recommended for opening new *plus one* elementary schools. A suggestion for future research would be to expand the sample to secondary planning principals to compare and contrast responsibilities with elementary planning principals.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated in honor and memory of my Daddy, Dwight Clark Keatts. Not a day went by that he did not ask about my studies. His unwavering support throughout my life is why I have been able to achieve this ultimate goal. Daddy's servant leadership, quiet strength, humbleness, kindness, and perseverance shaped me into the person that I am today.

Daddy, thank you for always believing in me! I'm so proud to be your daughter. You will always be in my heart, and I will continue to find comfort in knowing that you are smiling down from above.

Acknowledgements

To my husband and best friend, Jeff, for your love and continuous support of me and my lifelong learning journey. Thank you for all you have done for our family to allow me time to write. It is because of you and the many sacrifices you made that I am finally at this finish line.

To our awesome children, Mollee and Will, for your love of learning, humor, and timely distractions with swim, soccer, and geometry.

To my mom, Peggy, for being the steadfast cheerleader. Thank you for always being proud of my accomplishments. Your prayers are unmatched.

To my dearest friend, Arianne, for your positivity, encouragement, and listening ear. Your strength is admirable.

To my assistant principals, Kim and Alison, for holding down the fort. Kim, you faithfully walked by my side before, during, and after opening a new school. Alison, you jumped right into the middle of a first school year with us. Thank you both for believing in me.

To my fellow cohort members, your dedication and grit is impressive. Mallory, thank you for being the catalyst of our group. Kristin, Kelsey, and Chris, thanks for the final push to finish.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

New *plus one* schools continue to be built regularly within the United States to address student enrollment increases in existing schools with limited capacity, yet there is no set of instructions to guide a planning principal. Lane (2008) compares the owner's manual of lawn equipment to the owner's manual of opening a new *plus one* school:

> A person can walk into a lawn equipment store and easily invest over $1500 in the purchase of a new riding lawn mower. With the lawn mower comes an eighty-five page owner's manual detailing how to operate and maintain the mower. On the other hand, a school system can invest millions of dollars in a school facility. When the principal takes control of the facility, the owner's manual is usually a handshake and a vote of confidence through the great words of all time, "Good Luck!" It is absolutely amazing that there are detailed instructions on starting a riding lawn mower, but no instructions are received on how to open the new school facility! (p. 1)

School overcrowding occurs when the designed school capacity is smaller than the school student enrollment (Lewis et al., 2000). When examining the condition of school buildings and the potential need for new school construction, student enrollment and overcrowding is important to consider (Lewis et al., 2000). In 1999, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) administered the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) and acquired information about the age, condition, and overcrowding of school facilities in 903 public schools within the United States (Lewis et al., 2000). The study reported that approximately a quarter of schools were overcrowded due to dramatic increases in student enrollment as an outcome of the baby boom, immigration, and migration (Lewis et al., 2000).

Two decades later, public school enrollment decreased nationwide during a global pandemic (Modan, 2023). Jacobson (2023) reported that new school enrollment data showed that the largest school districts in our nation have yet to recover from the pandemic. Furthermore, declining birth rates and the growing choices of other school options are pulling families away from traditional public schooling (Jacobson, 2023). However, the impact of student enrollment on new construction varies locally (Modan, 2023). There are local areas experiencing growth and increases in student enrollment. According to Jacobson (2023), enrollment in the Hillsborough school district in Florida grew 1.3% in 2023, and they plan to continue building *plus one* schools for the foreseeable future to accommodate this growth. Caulfield (2023) concurs that there are "still plenty of new schools being built" ("Build New, Make Do, or Adapt" section).

In this qualitative research study, planning principals of *plus one* newly constructed schools were interviewed. With new school construction still needed to address increasing student enrollment in local school districts, the perceptions of the initial steps planning principals take to open a new *plus one* school are valuable. Through interviews of previous planning principals, themes regarding the responsibilities, experiences, and guidance recommended to future planning principals of new *plus one* elementary schools emerged.

Statement of the Problem

A new school facility is a multi-million-dollar investment for a school division, yet there are no manuals or instructions on how to actually open a new school building as a planning principal (Lane, 2008). New *plus one* schools, or additional schools built to offset overcrowding, typically open as a remedy to a growing population (Garraux, 2019). Too often, the focus is on the completion of the bricks and mortar of the facility instead of what takes place in the building once construction is complete (Lane, 2008). "Effective planning for the opening of a new school

produces an environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn effectively and efficiently" (Lane, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the opening of a new *plus one* school requires a well-planned, detailed, organized approach for occupying the facility as the success or failure of the school opening process weighs heavily on the ability of the planning principal (Lane, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one* elementary school. Preparing for and opening a new school is exciting, yet daunting at the same time (Korto & Thompson, 2019). "As a leader of a brand-new school, you are involved in every aspect of what the school day will look and feel like, and how it will be remembered" (Korto & Thompson, 2019, para. 1). The principal's ability to formulate and clearly articulate a shared vision focused on learning and set explicit goals creates the foundation for other important leadership strategies (Hallinger, 2011). As evidenced by research, principal effectiveness largely determines school success (Grissom et al., 2021b).

Daniëls et al. (2019) synthesized that effective school leaders focused on curriculum and instruction, effectively communicated and built internal and external relationships, shaped the school climate and culture, fostered trust and collaboration, helped define, implement, and sustain the school's vision and mission, gave frequent feedback to teachers, and invested in hiring and retaining qualified personnel. Findings by Lee and Louis (2019) indicated a significantly positive relationship between school culture constructs and school performance levels with a clear link between a strong culture and continuous school improvement. Although limited empirical studies exist regarding the role of a planning principal that is opening a new *plus one* school and bringing together a newly defined community, educational leadership

research can be leveraged to determine the similarities of what skilled principals do and how they contribute to student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021a).

Research Question

One research question guided the study and formed the foundation of the corresponding interview protocol. The main guiding research question was:

R1: What actions do planning principals take to start a new *plus one* elementary school?

Overview of the Study

With new school construction needed to address increasing student enrollment, the perceptions of the initial steps planning principals take to open a new *plus one* elementary school are valuable. It is possible that a school leader may have the opportunity to open a new *plus one* school to offset overcrowding. Through interviews of previous planning principals, the objective was to determine the responsibilities, experiences, and guidance recommended to future planning principals of new *plus one* elementary schools. This qualitative study involved interviews with planning principals within five years of building a new *plus one* elementary school versus a rebuild of an existing school and at least three years of school leadership experience within the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Interviews were video recorded, transcribed, and coded with findings represented in thematic categories.

Conceptual Framework

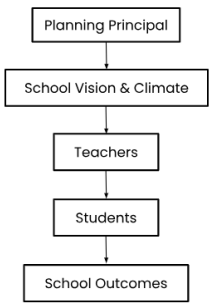
Researchers comprehensively acknowledge that school principals employ a measurable, indirect, and positive effect on student achievement and school outcomes (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Özdemir et al., 2020; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Since school leadership indirectly impacts student achievement, previous research studies discovered the school-level mediating effects of an articulated, shared school

vision, strong learning climate, strengthening teachers' competence and capacity, and collective teacher efficacy on student learning outcomes (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Day et al., 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Mombourquette, 2017; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). According to Smith et al. (2020), "Principals represent important cogs in promoting high levels of student achievement and improving schools" (p. 14). Principals are responsible for making school climate changes, developing and maintaining the instructional vision for the school, and initiating the foundation for student success (P. A. Smith et al., 2020). Educators need to keep school climate in the foreground of daily tasks in order to achieve student academic and social-emotional growth (T. Smith & Shouppe, 2018). This study aimed to discover the perceptions of the initial steps planning principals take to open a new *plus one* elementary school.

Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework for this qualitative study, specifically the potential impact of planning principals on positive school outcomes hypothesized through a review of literature. School principals initiate the foundation for student success by creating a school vision mediated through classroom teachers to students resulting in school outcomes (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Day et al., 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Mombourquette, 2017; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Planning Principal Impact on School Outcomes



Definitions of Terms

Overcrowding. Designed school capacity is smaller than the school student enrollment (Lewis et al., 2000).

***Plus One* School.** New *plus one* schools, or additional schools built to offset overcrowding, typically open as a remedy to a growing population (Garraux, 2019).

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this qualitative study or "factors in the study that cannot be controlled by the researcher," included the following (D. A. Miles, 2019, p. 4):

- The transparency or depth of the participants' responses could have been limited, impacting the overall data.
- Responses to interview questions might be impacted by their positive or negative experiences with the planning process.
- The researcher is a former planning principal and may exhibit biases toward responses and analysis based on personal experiences. This further underscores the importance of using a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis process.

The delimitations of this qualitative study or components "controlled by the researcher," included the following (D. A. Miles, 2019, p.7):

- The perceptions of four planning principals were included from a geographically constrained area of the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.
- The criterion for this study included: public elementary school principal serving students in grades K-5; at least three years of experience as a school administrator; planning principal within the past five years; and new *plus one* school versus a rebuild. This would delimit secondary schools, administrators with less than three years of experience,

planning principals prior to 2018, and principals of rebuilt schools. If needed, the search would have been expanded to secondary principals at the middle and high school levels.

Organization of the Study

This qualitative research study is compiled into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction of the study containing the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, overview of the study, conceptual framework, definitions of key terms, limitations and delimitations, and organization of the study. In Chapter 2, the literature related to the practices of school principals in relation to student and school outcomes is reviewed. The third chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology including the research design, site/sample collection, and procedures for data collection, data gathering, and data analysis. Chapter 3 also includes the instrument design, validity, and reliability. In Chapter 4, the results of the study are described. The fifth chapter presents findings and implications, recommendations for further research, and the researcher's reflections.

Chapter 2

A Review of the Literature

A new school facility is a multi-million-dollar investment for a school division, yet there are no manuals or instructions on how to actually open a new school building as a planning principal (Lane, 2008). New *plus one* schools, or additional schools built to offset overcrowding, typically open as a remedy to a growing population (Garraux, 2019). Too often, the focus is on the completion of the bricks and mortar of the facility instead of what takes place in the building once construction is complete (Lane, 2008). "Effective planning for the opening of a new school produces an environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn effectively and efficiently" (Lane, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the opening of a new *plus one* school requires a well-planned, detailed, organized approach for occupying the facility as the success or failure of the school opening process weighs heavily on the ability of the planning principal (Lane, 2008).

Preparing for and opening a new school is exciting, yet daunting at the same time (Korto & Thompson, 2019). "As a leader of a brand-new school, you are involved in every aspect of what the school day will look and feel like, and how it will be remembered" (Korto & Thompson, 2019, para. 1). The principal's ability to formulate and clearly articulate a shared vision focused on learning and set explicit goals creates the foundation for other important leadership strategies (Hallinger, 2011). As evidenced by research, principal effectiveness largely determines school success (Grissom et al., 2021b). Although limited empirical studies exist regarding the role of a planning principal that is opening a new *plus one* school and bringing together a newly defined community, educational leadership research can be leveraged to determine the similarities of what skilled principals do and how they contribute to student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021a). The purpose of this literature review was to explore the

significance of the role of a school principal including the key responsibilities outlined in the professional standards and the importance of effective school leadership. This literature review also examined the relationship between leadership and school climate. A purposeful focus on these interrelated topics set the foundation for determining how planning principals can successfully open new *plus one* elementary schools.

Search Process

Electronic databases through the Virginia Tech University Library website were utilized to conduct a search of peer-reviewed articles predominantly within the past 10 years. Some publications prior to 2011 were included to capture the history of educational leadership and earlier theories. Specifically, Education Research Complete through EBCSOhost was the main database accessed. Initial keyword searches included *principals or school leaders or administrators*, *instructional leadership*, *school outcomes*, and *school improvement or change*. Since the initial keyword search of *planning principal* yielded zero results, search criteria were expanded to include *effective school leadership*, *leadership and management*, *elementary school or primary school or grade school, school climate or school culture or school environment,* and *roles or responsibilities or duties or jobs*. Some articles were obtained through a careful review of reference pages from selected relevant articles and recommendations from Mendeley based on the created article database. The combined search for literature yielded 62 articles that were carefully read and reviewed. Overall, 31 articles were used to construct this literature review.

The Significance of the Role of a School Principal

School leadership matters as an impetus for school success (Garza et al., 2014; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). The Professional Standards for Educational

Leaders synthesize the role of a school leader and "articulate the leadership that our schools need and students deserve" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 1).

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

In 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) revised the former Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leadership to meet the changing demands that school leaders faced and to guide their practices in a manner that would better educate diverse student populations in modern society. The educational leadership profession has significantly transformed with educators having a stronger understanding of how quality leadership positively contributes to student achievement (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). "An expanding base of knowledge from research and practice shows that educational leaders exert influence on student achievement by creating challenging but also caring and supportive conditions conducive to each student's learning" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 1). Educational leaders support and develop classroom teachers, create a positive school climate and working conditions, allocate resources effectively and efficiently, construct productive organizational systems, and engage in other meaningful tasks outside of the classroom that powerfully impacts what happens inside of the classroom (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). As shown in Table 1, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders include ten standards that reflect the interdependent values and qualities of leadership work that years of research and practice indicate are integral to student learning and success (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

Table 1

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

Standard #	Standard Title	Standard Statement
Standard 1	Mission, Vision, and Core Values	Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.
Standard 2	Ethics and Professional Norms	Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 3	Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 4	Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 5	Community of Care and Support for Students	Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.
Standard 6	Professional Capacity of School Personnel	Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 7	Professional Community for Teachers and Staff	Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 8	Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community	Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 9	Operations and Management	Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Standard 10	School Improvement	Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Note. Adapted from "Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015," by National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, pp. 9-18, (http://www.npbea.org).

Importance of Effective School Leadership

Principal effectiveness largely determines school success (Grissom et al., 2021b). Several studies over the past half-century sought to uncover if and how leaders impacted learning and ultimately student achievement in their schools (Grissom et al., 2021b; Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Heck & Hallinger, 2014). Researchers comprehensively acknowledge that school principals employ a measurable, indirect, and positive effect on student achievement and school outcomes (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Özdemir et al., 2020; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Efficacious leadership practices are meant to affect school processes, thus mediating the effects of principal leadership on student outcomes (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Consequently, as specified by Sebastian and Allensworth (2012), the duties and responsibilities of the principal most crucial for strengthening instructional practices and student learning were vague.

Until recently, few studies existed regarding how principals impacted school effectiveness (Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Since school leadership indirectly impacts student achievement, previous research studies discovered the school-level mediating effects of an articulated, shared school vision, strong learning climate, strengthening teachers' competence and capacity, and collective teacher efficacy on student learning outcomes (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Day et al., 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Mombourquette, 2017; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Through instructional leadership, school principals further enhance student outcomes by developing and strengthening collective teacher effectiveness (Heck & Hallinger, 2014). Bellibaş et al. (2021) concurred that the instructional quality of teachers may significantly mediate school leadership and student achievement outcomes. In other words, principals indirectly contribute to student learning

outcomes and school effectiveness through their influence on what happens in classrooms (Hallinger, 2003; Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Researchers have completed comprehensive literature reviews to identify the characteristics of effective school leadership (Daniëls et al., 2019; Hallinger, 2003, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Daniëls et al. (2019) reviewed 75 articles published between 1996-2017 to identify the key characteristics of effective school leadership. Over 2,000 abstracts were scanned from over 80 libraries and databases for inclusion criteria of focusing on effective school principal characteristics, recent publications within the previous 20 years, and peer-reviewed journals. Exclusion criteria included originating from developing countries, major contextual differences or specific contextual programs, and higher education. They synthesized that effective school leaders focused on curriculum and instruction, effectively communicated and built internal and external relationships, shaped the school climate and culture, fostered trust and collaboration, helped define, implement, and sustain the school's vision and mission, gave frequent feedback to teachers, and invested in hiring and retaining qualified personnel (Daniëls et al., 2019).

Daniëls et al.'s (2019) review followed the substantive findings of Hallinger and Heck's (1998) review of research on effective school leadership spanning from 1980-1995. Hallinger and Heck (1998) focused on 40 published articles, dissertations, and peer-reviewed papers in their quest to explore the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes. Inclusion criteria contained studies that explicitly examined the leadership beliefs and behaviors of school principals, measured the dependent variable of school performance, and were conducted internationally in several different countries. Hallinger and Heck (1998) concluded that researchers were moving towards focusing on the paths through which the indirect impact of

school leaders on student achievement were achieved. The paths through which principals influence student outcomes included "school goals, school structure and social networks, people, and organizational culture" (Hallinger & Heck, 1998, p. 187). Particularly, effective principals shaped the direction of the school through developing and shaping the vision, mission, and goals (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

With the evolution of educational leadership research and the emergence of newer conceptual models, Hallinger (2003) completed a broader review of the effectiveness of the school principal role. He referenced approximately 100 articles over 25 years from 1978-2003 highlighting the emergence of instructional leadership in the early 1980s with attention shifting to transformational leadership in the 1990s to counteract the policy-driven approaches from the previous decade. A mixed mode of educational leadership characteristics evolved prior to the turn of the century when instructional leadership returned to the forefront with a refocus on improving teaching and learning. Through his review of empirical studies, Hallinger (2003) demonstrated the effectiveness of the combination of instructional and transformational leadership, or integrated leadership, in empowering teachers as instructional leaders to improve school outcomes. Commonalities of effective principals in both models focused on developing a shared purpose, creating a climate and culture that held high expectations and focused on improving teaching and learning, increasing the capacity of the staff, and being present and modeling agreed upon school values. Differences were noted in the approaches with instructional leadership described as top-down, individual leadership and transformational leadership described as bottom-up, shared leadership. Results of this literature review concluded that effective school leaders understood and responded to the specific needs of their school context (Hallinger, 2003).

To further understand the influence of school leadership on student outcomes, Hallinger (2011) substantiated the progress made by researchers over the previous 40 years in identifying how school leadership contributed to school improvement and student learning. He believed that leadership was linked to student learning through the paths of vision and goals, people, and academic processes and structures. Specifically, key findings from this review of research acknowledged that setting clear goals and a learning-focused vision is the foundation for other important leadership strategies, the impact of the school leadership is mediated by the people and culture, leadership should focus on increasing the capacity for school improvement, and that leadership styles and strategies should match the school context. Although there is no one prescribed *best* leadership style for promoting learning in schools, the role of the principal is essential to developing leadership in others (Hallinger, 2011).

Another literature review focused on the effects of transformational school leadership on student achievement (Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Sun and Leithwood (2012) reviewed 79 unpublished dissertations or theses from 1996 to 2008. Initially, 200 theses were scanned for inclusion criteria of reporting quantitative data, investigating the relationship between transformational school leadership and at least one student, teacher, or school outcome. Results of direct-effect design studies typically were unsuccessful in detecting significant effects of transformational school leadership on student outcomes, while studies that incorporated mediating variables often found that transformational school leadership indirectly had significant effects on student achievement. Creating a shared vision, achieving consensus of goals with staff, and intellectually stimulating and encouraging creativity and helping staff engage in their practices more effectively were the most frequent leadership practices examined in the 79 studies. Overall conclusions from this literature review indicated that building shared leadership

through collaborative decision-making and attending to individual staff needs and supporting professional development through coaching and mentoring were the most influential leadership practices for creating positive student learning outcomes (Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

Heck and Hallinger (2014) applied a quantitative, longitudinal design to another study focused on school improvement. They studied approximately 2,900 students cross-classified in fourth and fifth grade classrooms in 60 primary schools located in one western U.S. state to explore the paths of how leadership influences student learning at the school level and the classroom level (Heck & Hallinger, 2014). Key findings indicated that both teacher effectiveness and the school instructional environment were directly and positively related to student math achievement. Among school-level constructs, the school's instructional environment posited the highest impact on school growth reaffirming that the quality of the instructional environment fully mediated the leadership effects on learning. Heck and Hallinger (2014) noticed that successive teacher effectiveness through the grade levels mattered. Students who had consecutive teachers with effectiveness at one standard deviation above the grand mean experienced an increase of 0.43 standard deviations of math achievement compared to peers who had average successive teachers. Students attending schools with uniformly, higher-than-average teachers made more growth than their peers in schools with average teacher effectiveness. When teaching was more effective and there was less variation in overall teacher effectiveness within a school, improvement in student performance was superior. Access to a succession of effective teaching in a more congruous instructional environment with stronger instructional leadership appeared to create compounding learning benefits for students (Heck & Hallinger, 2014).

Another literature review focused on the impact of principal behaviors on student, staff, and school outcomes (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Liebowitz and Porter (2019) reviewed 51

studies that included a quantifiable principal behavior and outcomes at the student-, teacher-, and school-level. Initially, 253 studies were reviewed with the inclusion criteria of reporting qualitative data on principal behaviors (instructional management, internal relations, organizational management, administration, and external behaviors), were conducted in the United States or other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member country, and examined K-12 schooling. Positive moderate- to large-effects were noted across behaviors of leadership on student academic achievement, instructional practices, the well-being of teachers, and overall school organizational health. Liebowitz and Porter (2019) indicated that previous research may overstate the effects of principals' skill and time delegated to instructional leadership behaviors as this specific behavior was statistically indistinguishable from the other four. They asserted that instructional management must be partnered with other leadership behaviors to obtain the status of improving student outcomes. However, findings of the study implied that investing in school leader capacity is invaluable (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019).

Since school leadership continued to be recognized as an essential ingredient for improving schools and student learning with new research methods, The Wallace Foundation completed a review of research to study the links of leadership to student learning (Grissom et al., 2021a). Grissom et al. (2021a) fully coded 395 articles that met the inclusion criteria of being published since 2000, deriving student data from a K-12 school in the United States, and focusing on the principal as the main subject of research. After additional assessment and review, 219 studies were utilized to determine the magnitude of the effect of principals on gains in student achievement and identify the links between specific school principal skills and positive school and student outcomes. According to Grissom et al. (2021a), the "best evidence on

principal effects reaches a clear conclusion: students learn substantially more in both math and reading in schools with more effective principals" (p.43). In addition to substantial academic achievement, principal effectiveness also impacted student attendance, student discipline, teacher job attitudes, and teacher retention (Grissom et al., 2021a).

Aligned with the previous reviews of research outlined above in this literature review, Grissom et al. (2021b) identified four effective principal practices that were linked to successful outcomes for students. These practices included an instructional focus through a feedback-coaching cycle and data-driven instructional decisions, a robust school climate centered upon trust and continuous improvement, fostering collaboration with common planning and high-functioning professional learning communities, and strategic management of resources that support teaching and learning. A fifth principal practice, leading through an equity lens, emerged from this work emphasizing the importance of closing achievement gaps for historically marginalized groups (Grissom et al., 2021b). According to P. A. Smith et al. (2020), "Principals represent important cogs in promoting high levels of student achievement and improving schools" (p. 14). As diversity increases and the desire to equitably educate all learners intensifies, school principals emerge as crucial catalysts in creating the educational environment necessary to provide both successful teaching and learning (P. A. Smith et al., 2020).

Making sense of the numerous studies addressing the effectiveness of school leadership has been challenging over the years due to the volume and variance of topics, approaches to data collection, analysis methods, and quality (Grissom et al., 2021b). The evolution of research methods and synthesized reviews of literature noted above provide insight into what principals need to do to successfully create positive school outcomes. Principals are responsible for making school climate changes, developing and maintaining the instructional vision for the school, and

initiating the foundation for student success (P. A. Smith et al., 2020). The dynamics of the relationships between principals and teachers could be underestimated in existing school improvement research, but concur that school climate and culture must be a critical factor of any school improvement agenda (Louis & Murphy, 2017).

Leadership and School Climate

Several researchers sought to determine if school climate has an impact on school improvement and student achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Capp et al., 2022; Goddard et al., 2015; Lee & Louis, 2019; P. A. Smith et al., 2020; T. Smith & Shouppe, 2018; Versland & Erickson, 2017). Allen et al. (2015) purposefully studied elementary principals governing six schools in a southeast Texas suburban district. A convenience sample of 55 teacher participants completed the School Climate Inventory-Revised (SCI-R) to measure school climate and the State of Texas Assessment and Academic Readiness (STARR) assessment was utilized to measure student academic progress. A statistically significant positive relationship between the five characteristics of transformational leadership and the seven elements of school climate was found. Findings indicated that the principal's capacity to develop respect, exhibit power, and maintain a focus on the best interests of the group; the principal's aim of purpose, goal-focus, and ethical and moral behavior; the principal's confidence, optimism, excitement, and vision foresight; the principal's ability to problem solve and creatively think; and the principal's mentoring ability and recognition of other's strengths influenced teacher perception of the overall climate of the school.

As a result of this study, insufficient evidence of a direct impact of transformational leadership on reading or math student achievement was reported. No significant relationship between school climate dimensions and student achievement in reading or math were indicated

suggesting that teacher's perceptions of the campus climate doesn't influence student achievement. However, teachers often provide more effective instruction to students when they feel connected to their colleagues and students and have higher job satisfaction (Allen et al., 2015). Effective principals understand that one of the most important factors in student success is the classroom teacher (Allen et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2003; Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

Lee and Louis (2019) analyzed data received from 3,983 teachers from 133 schools in a random sample of nine states within the United States to determine the links between a strong school culture and continuous school improvement. Schools strongly equipped with the school culture constructs of academic press, trust and respect, student support, optimism, and professional learning community showed higher degrees of school performance. Findings indicated a significantly positive relationship between school culture constructs and school performance levels with a clear link between a strong culture and continuous school improvement. According to Lee and Louis (2019), "School culture as it is experienced by adult professionals is largely ignored in today's policy conversations in spite of the accumulating evidence from multiple studies and countries that it is associated with student learning" (p. 92). While a focus on leaders, teachers, and curriculum is legitimate, an emphasis on strong school culture is a missing link. Policy conversations should shift to understanding that a strong school culture is pertinent for sustainable school improvement (Lee & Louis, 2019).

In a study of 43 elementary and middle schools in Georgia, findings from T. Smith and Shouppe (2018) indicate that school climate significantly affects achievement in both reading and math. Improving school climate should be a focus at the state, local, school, and community levels. Since the impact of school climate on student outcomes is statistically significant, the

development of a school climate that is conducive to student learning is critical. The principalship is a critical role in a school, thus indicating the need for this person to transform teaching and learning and positively impact school climate for all students through creating and sustaining a school vision, embodying the lead learner role, empowering teacher leaders, using data to inform decision-making, and supervising classroom teaching and learning. Educators need to keep school climate in the foreground of daily tasks in order to achieve student academic and social-emotional growth (T. Smith & Shouppe, 2018).

Throughout several studies, a theme that emerged was the preeminence of the principal's influence on school culture (Capp et al., 2022; Goddard et al., 2015; P. A. Smith et al., 2020; Versland & Erickson, 2017). Findings in a study of four schools in Southern California indicated the importance of including all school staff members in developing the climate (Capp et al., 2022). The principal is the key player in developing the school climate and ensuring that the school mission is important and shared. All staff members are integral components of creating a school climate that fosters the development and achievement of students and, ultimately, the quality of the school culture and climate begins with the staff (Capp et al., 2022).

P. A. Smith et al. (2020) studied 2,033 teachers in 112 elementary schools within two southern and midwestern states in the United States and confirmed that schools with positive climates also include principals that are skillfully influential in supporting collegial leadership, teacher professionalism, high academic standards, and institutional vulnerability. A principal's power of persuasion affects the overall school climate. Teachers concentrate on instruction and focus on student achievement in schools where principals utilize their influence to protect the staff from intrusive external factors. Confidence, authenticity, and approachability are traits that add credibility to the principal furthering their influence and enhancing their ability to promote a

positive school climate. Influential principals who create and model the desired positive behaviors of school stakeholders increase the plausibility that others within the school community will follow their lead. Savvy principals understand that positive interactions among students, staff, and administration are vital to establishing positive school climates. Principals that consistently deliver persuasive, efficacious, and inspiring messages influence motivation and produce opportunities to impact the self-efficacy and accomplishment of others. Principals as critical facilitators who hone both their abilities to foster positive organizational climates and influence stakeholders emerge as paramount catalysts for accomplishing school success (P. A. Smith et al., 2020).

Versland and Erickson (2017) sought to understand how the principal's beliefs and efficacious actions led to high levels of student achievement. Findings from their study at a middle school in Montana indicate significant consensus that the intentional actions and self-efficacy beliefs of the principal influenced the development of collective efficacy within the school. Maintaining a steadfast focus on instruction to improve student learning outcomes and creating teacher leaders to attain the mission and goals of the school produced collective efficacy. Leading by example to accomplish personal educational goals, participating alongside teachers in site-based professional development, embracing responsibilities outside the scope of the regular principal job description, and preserving the school's mission inspired staff. The principal's faithful commitment to instruction not only promoted the success of instructional initiatives to bolster student achievement, but created collaboration, advanced teacher leadership, and expanded teacher efficacy and collective efficacy within the school. According to Versland and Erickson (2017), school leaders should look for opportunities to create collaborative efforts

to positively impact relationships among the stakeholders and the overall school culture versus just focusing on instructional initiatives that increase student achievement.

Goddard et al. (2015) also reiterated the impact of a school principal on instruction and school climate. A study of 93 elementary schools in midwestern state within the United States focused on determining the linkages among school leadership, teacher collaboration, collective efficacy, and student academic progress. The principal's instructional leadership strongly predicted the degree of teacher collaboration to improve instruction. In fact, principals that provided strong instructional guidance and frequently monitored instructional practices correlated with high levels of collective and collaborative work among teachers to enhance instruction. Principal leadership is necessary to develop collaboration among teachers, thus working towards improving outcomes for students. Strong instructional leadership and continuous collaborative work among teachers focused on teaching and learning are prerequisites for school improvement (Goddard et al., 2015).

According to Goddard et al. (2015), "Principals' instructional leadership is a significant positive predictor of collective efficacy beliefs through its influence on teachers' collaborative work" (p. 525). A significant predictor of student achievement differences among schools is perceived collective efficacy. Stronger collective efficacy breeds greater student achievement levels regardless of student background characteristics or prior student achievement levels. Both principals' instructional leadership and collaboration among teachers for instructional improvement are key indirect predictors in student academic achievement outcome differences among schools. Collective efficacy is strengthened by the leader's work towards instructional improvement through their support of teachers' collaborative practices. Teachers' collaborative efforts paired with their collective efficacy beliefs positively impact student achievement.

Principals should provide frequent and intentional collaboration focused on instructional improvement with a structured time for professional learning and opportunities for teachers to observe each other. School leaders have immense potential to impact the collective belief and instructional practices of classroom teachers (Goddard et al., 2015).

Summary of Research

In conclusion, research has shown that the effectiveness and quality of a school leader is a large determinant of student achievement indicating that principal effectiveness largely determines school success (Grissom et al., 2021b). Although limited studies exist regarding the role of a planning principal that is opening a new *plus one* school and bringing together a newly defined community, educational leadership research can be leveraged to determine the similarities of what skilled principals do and how they contribute to student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021a). A synthesis of research indicates that developing, implementing, and sustaining the school's vision and mission and building and fostering a productive school culture and climate are linked to successful outcomes for students (Capp et al., 2022; Daniëls et al., 2019; Grissom et al., 2021a; Hallinger, 2003, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; P. A. Smith et al., 2020; Sun & Leithwood, 2012; T. Smith & Shouppe, 2018).

"Effective planning for the opening of a new school produces an environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn effectively and efficiently" (Lane, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the opening of a new *plus one* school requires a well-planned, detailed, organized approach for occupying the facility as the success or failure of the school opening process weighs heavily on the ability of the planning principal (Lane, 2008). This literature review explored the significance of the role of a school principal and the importance of effective school leadership. The relationship between leadership and school climate was also examined. A purposeful focus on

these interrelated topics set the foundation for determining how planning principals can successfully open new *plus one* elementary schools.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Planning principals' perceptions of the initial steps taken to open a new *plus one* elementary school were sought. This qualitative study included planning principals from Mid-Atlantic states. CITI certification, a required training for research with human subjects, was completed and documented (see Appendix A).

This chapter describes the methodology utilized to administer this study. The research design is presented, including the sample selection, instrument design, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques. An explanation of the procedures used to ensure validity and reliability and a summary are also included in this chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one* elementary school. Preparing for and opening a new school is exciting, yet daunting at the same time (Korto & Thompson, 2019). "As a leader of a brand-new school, you are involved in every aspect of what the school day will look and feel like, and how it will be remembered" (Korto & Thompson, 2019, para. 1). The principal's ability to formulate and clearly articulate a shared vision focused on learning and set explicit goals creates the foundation for other important leadership strategies (Hallinger, 2011). As evidenced by a research, principal effectiveness largely determines school success (Grissom et al., 2021b).

Daniëls et al. (2019) synthesized that effective school leaders focused on curriculum and instruction, effectively communicated and built internal and external relationships, shaped the school climate and culture, fostered trust and collaboration, helped define, implement, and sustain the school's vision and mission, gave frequent feedback to teachers, and invested in

hiring and retaining qualified personnel. Findings by Lee and Louis (2019) indicated a significantly positive relationship between school culture constructs and school performance levels with a clear link between a strong culture and continuous school improvement. Although limited empirical studies exist regarding the role of a planning principal that is opening a new *plus one* school and bringing together a newly defined community, educational leadership research can be leveraged to determine the similarities of what skilled principals do and how they contribute to student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021a).

Research Design – Methodology and Justification

To explore the perceptions of the planning principal's initial role in opening a new *plus one* elementary school, a qualitative research design was employed. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research is "based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (p. 23). Aligned with current practice in education research, this study is classified as a qualitative research study without classification of a particular type or genre of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Miles et al. (2020) asserted that a major feature of qualitative data is that it focuses on "naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings" giving us a strong interpretation of real life (p. 7). Furthermore, qualitative data grounded in lived experiences are "fundamentally well suited to locating the meaning people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives for connecting these meanings to the social world around them" (Miles et al., 2020, p. 8). Miles et al. (2020) also noted that qualitative research is powerful for exploring novel ideas. Therefore, a qualitative approach was appropriate for this particular study.

Research Question

One research question guided the study and formed the foundation of the corresponding interview protocol. The main guiding research question was:

R1: What actions do planning principals take to start a new *plus one* elementary school?

In Table 1, the driving research question is located in the left column with the corresponding interview questions aligned in the right column. Ten interview questions correspond to Research Question 1.

Table 2

Alignment of Research Question to Corresponding Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
R1: What actions do planning principals take to start a new *plus one* school?	1. Tell me about your planning year; what key responsibilities/priorities stand out? 2. Tell me how you established a school vision. 3. How did you develop a school climate? 4. What role did you have with instructional leadership as a planning principal? 5. With the many responsibilities that you had, how did you feel during different parts of your planning timeline? 6. Tell me about the guidance/direction that you had from central office personnel during your planning year. 7. Tell me which responsibilities were completely autonomous. Which ones were not? 8. If you could go back and start your planning year over again, what is one thing/process you would do differently? 9. Did your planning year/process of opening a new *plus one* school go as you envisioned? Tell me about what you were not prepared for? 10. What were the three most important things that you did that you would want to share with a future planning principal?

Site/Sample Selection

This study was conducted in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Criterion-based selection paired with a purposeful sampling method was used to select planning principals that opened new *plus one* elementary schools. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016),

criterion-based selection includes determining the sample characteristics that are critical to the study and finding respondents that meet those specific criteria. “The criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further asserted that “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 96). The criterion for this study included: public elementary school principal serving students in grades K-5; at least three years of experience as a school administrator; planning principal within the past five years; and new *plus one* school versus a rebuild.

Although there is no concrete answer to the number of interviews a qualitative researcher should complete, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended “an adequate number of participants” to answer the question posed in the purpose statement at the onset of the study (p. 101). Patton (2015) suggested identifying a sample size “based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study and stakeholder interests” (p. 314). For this study, a sample size of five to twenty was sought with the referenced criterion. By interviewing planning principals from states within the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, themes of the perceptions of the initial steps taken to open a new *plus one* elementary school emerged.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to seeking IRB approval, the researcher satisfied the training requirements for completing social-behavioral research with human subjects as certified by CITI (see Appendix A). After successful completion of the prospectus examination, an IRB application was submitted and approved (See Appendix B). Once approved, the researcher constructed the sample by searching state education department websites for states within the Mid-Atlantic

region of the United States. If a search for construction cost data was not available on the website to identify newly constructed *plus one* elementary schools within the past five years, a Google search for media information about new schools was employed. Once 14 elementary schools meeting the initial criterion were identified, a deeper look into individual school websites was completed to determine if the planning principal was still attached to that specific school. Planning principals meeting the search criterion were emailed a Virginia Tech Research Study Information Sheet (see Appendix C) including an overview of the researcher's dissertation purpose and details, a confidentiality statement, and contact information for the researcher and university using the Principal Recruitment Email Script (see Appendix D). Four out of 14 planning principals acknowledged the recruitment email resulting in a 29% response rate.

Research involved virtual semi-structured interviews with a mixture of less and more structured questions used flexibly with planning principals of new *plus one* elementary schools to allow the researcher to respond organically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). If needed, the search would have been expanded to secondary principals at the middle and high school levels. Patton (2015) suggested that the researcher may "add to the sample as fieldwork unfolds" or may "change the sample if information emerges that indicates the value of a change" as the design should be "flexible and emergent" (p. 314). Study participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the initial steps needed to open a new *plus one* elementary school.

Data Gathering Procedures

Online interviews were conducted synchronously through the researcher's Virginia Tech Zoom account, a password-protected and secured computer mediated computer (CMC) tool (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlighted the strengths of a CMC tool stating that verbal, synchronous interviews that contain a video component mimic face-to-face

interviews, are helpful with building rapport, prevent the researcher from being constrained by geography, and contain a transcription component. Video recordings also allowed the researcher to review footage to further explore nonverbal cues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Weaknesses of CMC tools include access to technology, unexpected technology issues with the platform, and the potential of confidentiality being compromised over the Internet (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interviews were conducted from February through March 2024 during a time that was convenient for each interviewee. During the scheduled 45-minute interview time, the researcher requested verbal permission to record the Zoom session and asked approximately 10 open-ended questions. After each interview, the edited Zoom transcript was sent to the participant to review for accuracy. Completing member checks of respondent validation ensured credibility or internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Instrument Design

The researcher designed an interview instrument guide (see Appendix E) containing open-ended questions to capture the perceptions of the initial steps planning principals take to open a new *plus* one elementary school. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), asking good questions is the key to "getting good data from interviewing" (p. 117). Patton (2015) stated that "in qualitative inquiry, 'good' questions should, at a minimum, be open-ended, neutral, singular, and clear" (p. 446). There are six types of questions that people can be asked: experience and behavior questions aimed to elicit responses about observable experiences, actions, or activities; opinion and values questions aimed at understanding people's interpretive processes; feeling questions aimed at eliciting emotions about their experiences; knowledge questions aimed at determining what factual information the respondent knows about the topic; sensory questions aimed at eliciting what the respondent has experienced through the five senses; and

background/demographic questions to provide information that allows the interviewer to gather how respondents categorize themselves (Patton, 2015). Keeping these types of questions in mind "can be particularly helpful in planning an interview, designing the inquiry strategy, focusing on priorities for inquiry, and ordering the questions in some sequence" (Patton, 2015, p. 445). A combination of these types of questions was used to develop the interview guide.

Pilot interviews were recommended for practicing questions to learn which questions needed revision or rewording and ensuring that the questions being asked were clear to the interviewee (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to initiating interviews, the interview guide was piloted with colleagues in a Virginia Tech Cohort that had completed training in qualitive research. Feedback was utilized to make revisions.

Instrument Validation and Reliability

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that "ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner" (p. 237). Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that internal validity is the extent to which findings are credible in regards to the actual collected data. There are several strategies that can be employed to strengthen internal validity including triangulation, respondent validation or member checks, sufficient engagement in collecting data, researcher's reflexivity, and peer review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, reliability is conceptualized as "consistent and dependable" rather than replication intending for "outsiders to concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense" versus "demanding that outsiders get the same results" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 251). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also addressed external validity or "transferability" through "the use of rich, thick description" and providing "maximum variation" with sample selection allowing for a broader application of the study (pp. 256-257).

To establish validity and reliability, these strategies were practiced during this study: a) triangulating research with semi-structured interviews, a literature review of previous research, and a reflexive journal documented throughout data collection and analysis; b) employing member checks or respondent validation by sending interview transcriptions to the interviewees to seek their feedback on preliminary findings; c) seeking a sample size to allow for saturation of the data and sufficient time spent with collecting data; d) documenting a reflexive journal to address assumptions and biases encouraging objectivity; and e) peer review of raw data by two peer doctoral candidates who were trained in qualitative research methods and a principal colleague to provide feedback regarding emergent findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Validity was also strengthened through the use of detailed descriptions when documenting data analysis and findings in the final two chapters.

Data Treatment and Management

Data from each interview was recorded using the researcher's Virginia Tech Zoom account to capture the dialogue via video and through transcription. The transcript of each interview was transferred to a Google Doc and carefully reviewed and edited. Files were labeled with the pseudonyms Principal 1 (P1), Principal 2 (P2), etc. protecting the identities of the school leaders from the researcher to maintain anonymity.

Data was saved electronically in multiple locations including in a file on the researcher's password-protected laptop, USB drive, and Virginia Tech Google Drive. Data were stored in two-column Google Docs and Google Doc tables to allow the researcher to use multiple methods to code, sort, and analyze. Throughout the data collection and analysis procedures, careful precautions were taken and confidentiality protocol was followed to protect the anonymity of

each participant. No identifying information was recorded on any data documents except for one spreadsheet that remained in a separate secured folder.

Data Analysis Technique

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) indicated that "qualitative data analysis is all about identifying themes, categories, patterns, or answers to your research questions" (p. 216). Data analysis initiated during data collection throughout early Spring of 2024 as "collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 195). Patton (2015) stated that "identifying patterns, themes, and categories involves using both creative and critical faculties in making carefully considered judgments about what is meaningful and substantively significant in the data" (p. 572). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) synthesized that categories should be "responsive to the purpose of the research" and answer research questions specifically, "exhaustive" placing all important data into a category, "mutually exclusive" with each piece of data fitting into only one category, "sensitizing" or specific in capturing the exact meaning of their phenomenon, and "conceptually congruent" with the same level of abstraction to characterize categories" (pp. 212-213).

Once all interviews were completed, an additional thorough analysis occurred in Spring 2024. Transcribed interviews were documented in two columns with coding notes made in the margin. Emerging themes were color coded to aid in the development of overarching thematic categories. All codes were transferred to tables to synthesize the data and identify commonalities and the frequency of themes. Since there is no test to determine significance of themes as a qualitative analyst, the researcher first relied on their own understandings and judgment followed by the responses of the participants and the responses and reactions of peer reviewers (Patton,

2015). According to Patton (2015), when the researcher, participants, and reviewers agree, "one has consensual validation of the substantive significance of the finding" (p. 573).

Methodology Summary

Throughout this chapter, the methodology utilized to capture the perceptions of the initial steps planning principals take to open a new *plus one* elementary school was outlined in detail. All efforts were made to complete this study in an ethical manner to produce valid and reliable results that contribute to the field. The researcher followed the protocol instructed by the Institutional Review Board of Virginia Tech and practiced triangulating the data, field-testing the interview guide, using member checks for respondent validation, accessing peer reviewers, and seeking data saturation through sample selection. Confidentiality was at the forefront of the data collection and analysis with protecting the privacy of participants. Data were coded and analyzed to produce patterns, themes, and categories to express findings to the research questions. Chapter 4 will present the analysis of the data of this study.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this study was to identify the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one* elementary school. Interviews were conducted with four planning principals from the United States in the Mid-Atlantic region. Planning principals were selected based on the following criterion: public elementary school principal serving students in grades K-5; at least three years of experience as a school administrator; planning principal within the past five years; and new *plus one* school versus a rebuild. The planning principal participants in this study lead in elementary schools in suburban or urban locations, range from 22-36 total years of experience in education, had previous experience of 4-9 years as a building principal prior to their planning year, and had a planning timeline of 7-12 months to prepare and open a *plus one* elementary school.

Research Question

The research is based on one comprehensive research question:

R1: What actions do planning principals take to start a new *plus one* elementary school?

Codes

During the analysis process, codes were assigned for confidentiality. Files were labeled with the pseudonyms Principal 1 (P1), Principal 2 (P2), etc. protecting the identities of the school leaders from the researcher to maintain anonymity. A “P” designates the four elementary planning principals.

Research Question 1

What actions do planning principals take to start a new *plus one* school? When asked about the actions that planning principals take to start a new *plus one* school, participants reflected on their firsthand experiences and beliefs within the profession.

Interview Question 1

Tell me about your planning year; what key responsibilities/priorities stand out? All four participants mentioned building design, ordering or managing of furniture and instructional supplies within the identified budget, school logistics such as determining the school colors and mascot, and staffing as key responsibilities/priorities that stood out during their planning year. However, the specific experiences of each participant varied.

Building Design. All four participants noted that the building design, including the interior color scheme, was predetermined, and they were unable to provide any input on the building's design prior to or during school construction. P1 stated, "I had nothing to do with the design of the building" (*ll*61-63). P2 shared, "The design of the facility was already done" (*ll*73-74), and "I just needed to roll my vision into what was kind of already created for me" (*ll*76-78). P3, similar to P1 and P2, stated, "The style of the building was already determined" (*ll*94-95). P4 concurred, "I did not have any input on the design of the facility" (*ll*31-33).

Budget, Finance, and Purchasing. All four participants noted that their budget was predetermined based on student enrollment projections. P3 stated that she had "two budgets" to manage as a site-based school during her planning year, a new construction budget for furniture and non-consumables and their regular budget for staffing and consumable materials (*l*162). Inaccurate enrollment projections and late decision making with student waivers negatively impacted P3's budget, forcing difficult staffing decisions during her planning year.

P1 mentioned having to order all the furniture and technology for the building and stated, "I visited several schools that were new schools that looked similar to my school to make a decision about the furniture we would get. I also went to the showrooms and met with people" (*ll*82-86). P3 also mentioned the responsibility of ordering and purchasing furniture and "all of the things needed to go into a school" (*ll*26-27).

P2 had a dissimilar experience with the furniture order and shared that this process was predetermined and completed before she was hired. She shared that "there really was no way to individualize because of who was in charge of those types of aspects of the school division" during that time (*ll*46-49). P2 further elaborated, "It was very much that everyone basically got the same thing" (*ll*49-50). Similar to P1 and P3, P2 budgeted, ordered, and purchased curricular and instructional materials. To complete this task, P2 stated, "I went to the [division] curriculum specialists and asked for baseline things that we feel like every school should at least have. I leaned on them" (*ll*126-129).

P4 also had a unique experience with ordering furniture and instructional materials and shared that these items were purchased by central office prior to her start date. She stated, "Furniture and all of my instructional materials were ordered for me. I did not have to choose countertop colors or cabinet doors or office furniture. All of that was already decided" (*ll*77-79, 81-84). However, P4 was able to provide input with the library furniture. She further elaborated, "The one decision I was able to make was the fabric of the library furniture" (*ll*79-81). Although little to no input was provided with ordering furniture and instructional resources, P4 managed and scheduled the "acquisition of materials" (*ll*28-29).

School Mascot & School Colors. All four participants described their process for determining their school mascot and school colors. P1 selected the school mascot based on a

unique request from a family member of the school's namesake. P1 shared, "My plan was to go to the different schools feeding into us to have the kids vote, but the person that the school was named after, his [family member] wanted it to be [something special to him]" (*ll*67-71). P2, P3, and P4 followed the original plan set by P1 and had their students vote on the school mascot. P1 and P4 determined the school colors aligned with the interior colors of the building, while P2 and P3 had students get involved with selecting the school colors. P3 detailed her process:

> The kids voted for the mascot, and the kids voted for the school colors. I went to visit the three feeder schools and let the kids vote during that time. I think I gave them four options of a mascot and a list of colors. I did want the colors to stay with the scheme of the school, so I tweaked it a little bit. (*ll*109-117)

Staffing. P1, P2, and P3 detailed their staffing procedures and highlighted their hiring process as a large component of their planning responsibilities. P4 also shared highlights of planning responsibilities regarding staffing. P2 identified her key priority as people and shared, "That's where I put most of my energy, thinking about everything from where the people will go to who the people will be and what my interviews and things like that would be" (*ll*58-64). The first hire for all four participants was the bookkeeper, in the fall for P1 and P3, in January for P2, and in February for P4. P1 and P3 began staffing classroom teachers in the fall outside of their school division, while P2 and P4 began staffing in late winter during the internal transfer process. P1, P2, and P3 specified that they received the internal transfer list 1-2 weeks prior to their colleagues. P1 utilized recruitment trips with human resources for staffing new teachers and highlighted the importance of using the internal transfer process to hire "qualified diversity" stating that "all schools need diversity regardless of the student population" (*ll*118-199, 121).

All four participants mentioned working with human resources to determine any staffing caps for specific schools within their school divisions. P4 mentioned taking a percentage of assigned staff from receiving schools. P1, P2, and P3 brought a limited number of staff members from their previous schools. P3 reflected:

> I was limited to the amount of staff I could take from my previous building which actually is probably a good thing because I didn't want to recreate that over here. I did want some key players that I knew I could look at and know if we were okay, that could give me some feedback, people that I trusted. (*ll*138-146)

P1 took no more than two teachers from other schools to avoid depleting their staff. P2 collaborated with the overcrowded feeder schools to take a "certain percentage" to prevent a significant surplus (*l*80). After determining the number of positions to take from each feeder school, P2 collaborated with the feeder principal to determine which staff wanted to go and "identify some really key people that would really hurt the culture of those schools if they left" (*ll*89-91).

Before developing interview questions for each position, P2 reflected on focusing on her goals for the staff and culture of the school. She developed interview questions that "stretched" beyond typical questioning and were more "behavioral based" to get to the "core" of people (*ll*108, 110-111). P2 articulated, "It was a different type of candidate coming to this school versus your typical year where you would fill vacancies" (*ll*113-116). P1 and P3 also reiterated the importance of creating quality interview questions and procedures to maximize the staffing process. P3 stated, "I made all of the interview questions for all of the different positions" (*ll*119-120). She further asserted, "That's part of the planning process. You had to get all of those questions kind of the way you wanted them" (*ll*123-126). P1 supplemented the staffing process

by observing candidates in their classrooms during instruction. P2 included a writing assignment to supplement in-person interviews. P4 completed the entire staffing process virtually. She mentioned that it helped that "people were comfortable with a virtual platform" due to the recent pandemic (*ll*67-68).

P3 reiterated the importance of accurate student enrollment projections with staffing. During her planning year, she had to "overstaff" or release staff members three times, in the spring, summer, and fall. P3 shared, "It was a rough fall. It was a rough opening. It was traumatizing for everybody. I had never overstaffed in my entire administration career, and I had to do a big, huge one in a new building" (*ll*88-92). She further detailed how "heartbreaking" it was to release staff as "they all wanted to be [at the new school], that was the reason they came" (*ll*76-78).

Table 3

Key Responsibilities/Priorities During the Planning Year

Key Responsibilities/Priorities	P1	P2	P3	P4
Lack of Input in Building Design	X	X	X	X
Predetermined Budget	X	X	X	X
Ordering and Purchasing School Furniture	X		X	
Ordering and Purchasing Instructional Materials	X	X	X	
Selecting School Mascot	X	X	X	X
Selecting School Colors	X	X	X	X
Staffing Outside of the School Division	X		X	
Staffing with the Internal Transfer Process	X	X	X	X
Development of Interview Questions	X	X	X	X

Additional topics emerged in response to Interview Question 1 that will be addressed later in this chapter: high levels of autonomy and self-directedness were highlighted as requirements with planning responsibilities due to a lack of direction or playbook; and collaborative practices, such as meeting with previous planning principals, visiting similar school

build sites, visiting feeder schools to obtain student voice, and relying on division level curriculum specialists were utilized.

Interview Question 2

Tell me how you established a school vision. Two out of four participants (P1 and P4) discussed leveraging previous experiences and expertise. All four participants mentioned utilizing guiding questions as a practice to establish a school vision. Three out of four participants (P1, P2, and P4) implemented protocols and/or activities with staff to collectively develop a vision statement and brainstormed words as an initial step to create the final vision statement.

Leveraged Previous Experience/Expertise. P1 and P4 discussed leveraging their previous experience and training. P1 described utilizing a specific framework at her previous schools and bringing that knowledge into her planning. She stated, "I knew the quality tools and had been the principal already of two schools that used this method" (*ll*160-162). P1 was open to new suggestions of frameworks from her supervisor that mirrored her previous experience. She shared about her previous experience with establishing a school vision, "I had already written a vision statement and mission before at another school" (*ll*169-171). P1 further elaborated, "No one guided me on that process. I just had the expertise. I had done it before" (*ll*195-197).

P4 expressed the importance of relying on previous experiences when encountering new situations. She shared, "There wasn't a playbook for opening a new school. There really wasn't a playbook for opening a new school in the middle of a pandemic" (*ll*169-172). P4 further elaborated, "I was grateful for the years of experience I did have in the school division because I knew who I could really go to" (*ll*172-175). To develop the school vision, P4 reflected, "Some of

it was based on my own experience and the professional development that I felt passionate about or felt was going to lead to the overall school division mission" (*ll*116-120).

Developed an Initial Vision & Utilized Guiding Questions. P2 and P4 developed an initial vision to build upon with their staff. P2 described creating an initial vision to guide their work and stated, "I thought about what I want, what does a parent want to hear and know and feel" (*ll*134-136). P2 further elaborated, "I kept my opening words to my parents in mind when I thought about working with staff for that vision, too" (*ll*138-141). P4 discussed several focal points in the school division at that time including profile of a graduate, project-based learning, personalized learning, creating an inclusive learning environment, incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion, and focusing on social emotional learning. P4 described her initial vision:

> It was all encompassing. I wanted to make sure I spoke to each of those individual practices and frameworks and wanted people who were really passionate about it to be on board and feel like that was work they could contribute to. (*ll*130-136)

All four participants shared the guiding questions they used to inform the development of their school vision statement. P1 stated, "We looked at what we wanted ourselves to become" (*ll*187-189). P2 expressed, "We thought about what we wanted the school to sound like, to feel like, and to look like" (*ll*177-179). P3 described, "I thought about our staff and what we wanted kids to be doing and how we wanted them to be" (*ll*222-224). P4 guided her staff with thinking about the following: "What are the goals for the whole school? How are we going to get there? What do we want to be happening in classrooms? What professional learning is going to be necessary?" (*ll*182-187). P2 and P4 used the initial vision and guiding questions to influence and align staffing. P4 elaborated that the initial vision was a "huge driver in the hiring piece" (*ll*149-

150). P2 concurred that they were "aligned so well" due to hiring with the initial vision in mind (*l*185). Guiding questions led to specific protocols and activities with staff for P1, P2, and P4.

Implemented Protocols/Activities Collectively with Staff. P1, P2, and P4 implemented protocols and worked collectively with staff to develop the school vision. P1 described her process during a staff retreat after the previous school year ended, "I had them brainstorm verbs and adjectives. We took all the words we had in common. We wrote our vision and our mission based on working together and brainstorming. We did it as a collective team" (*ll*189-195).

P2 followed a similar process with a summer staff retreat and brainstorming words. She elaborated, "We spent the first day getting really comfortable with being uncomfortable at a local college outdoors course. That really bonded us and created a common experience. We felt we could trust and work with each other the next day" (*ll*161-163, 167-169). They brainstormed words, put them on sticky notes, and looked for common themes. In that moment, P2 described, "We just created a truly living statement of our building" (*ll*189-190).

Although P4 could not replicate an in-person staff retreat due to the pandemic, they were able to connect virtually with assistance from the division Professional Learning Team. P4 stated:

> They were skilled facilitators for us, being able to set up some really specific plans for rolling out next steps in what we were facing, which was not coming together to really connect in person to do some of that work that I know exists in every other school opening that there was. (*ll*187-194)

P4 discussed that staff would typically come together at the end of the previous school year to connect and collaborate to develop plans for the following year when opening a new school. Since this was a unique planning year during the pandemic, P4 iterated how they were able to

work around the constraints, “The Professional Learning Office really helped me. They went through a lot of protocols [virtually] that allowed us to decide what our focus was” (*ll*179-182). P2 concurred with P4 regarding collaboration with the division professional development team. She shared, “I did bring in some central office folks to help talk us through creating a vision because I wanted to be part of the conversation, not also trying to lead it” (*ll*171-174).

Although all four participants engaged in intentional work to develop a school vision, their experiences varied. Instead of collectively developing the vision with staff, P3 singularly “generated three vision statements and three mission statements” that were similar in nature (*ll*209-210). P3 elaborated, “They were what I wanted to see in a vision and words that meant something to me. I sent it out to the parents who were in my feeder schools and had them vote” (*ll*211-215).

Table 4

Practices for Establishing a School Vision

Practices	P1	P2	P3	P4
Leveraged Previous Experiences/Expertise	X			X
Developed an Initial Vision		X		X
Utilized Guiding Question(s)	X	X	X	X
Aligned Staffing to Initial Vision		X		X
Implemented Protocols/Activities Collectively with Staff to Develop Vision Statement	X	X		X
Brainstormed Words to Create Vision Statement	X	X	X	
Collaborated with Division Professional Learning Team		X		X

All four participants recognized the importance of developing a school vision to guide the mission of their work for students. Although the main focus of the school division was the bricks and mortar of the building, each participant described their intense focus on what happened within the school walls. P4 synthesized these sentiments when developing the school vision,

"I'm an instructional leader. I'm not a construction leader. I was able to then really focus on what was going to be happening on the inside" (*ll*145-149).

Interview Question 3

How did you develop a school climate? All four participants mentioned connecting staff and community events for students and families as methods for developing their school climate. Three out of four participants (P1, P2, and P4) also highlighted the importance of communication with the school community. P2 stated that everything connected back to the vision that they developed together and that their staff "all felt a huge responsibility for the culture" (*ll*214-215).

Connecting Staff. All four participants gave examples of connecting staff through email, staff meetings and retreats, or activities within the building. P1 began connecting staff through email in the summer. She described the process of building a school climate as challenging because of significant delays with construction. They were not in the building yet during workweek, the week before students return to school. However, the staff collaborated once they were able to move in. P1 stated, "Everyone helped move. We put our school together. I was in a t-shirt and shorts moving boxes. I did not ask anyone to do anything that I wouldn't do. The teachers saw that I was in it with them" (*ll*224-229).

P3 discussed creating multiple opportunities for staff to come together within the building. Since they were able to access the building before summer, they had a pizza party, scavenger hunt, and teambuilding activity. P3 shared their goal, "For staff, it was intentional that we just got them together, got them communicating and getting to know each other" (*ll*256-259). P4 concurred with P1 and P3 stating the importance of "being committed to making connections with the staff" (*ll*210-212).

Community Events for Students and Families. All four participants shared specific examples of creating opportunities for students and families coming together with community events. P1 partnered with a feeder school for kindergarten registration, hosted a parent night at a sister school with the same design to provide school tours, held a meet and greet to introduce staff, and hosted a traditional open house once the building was accessible the weekend before school started. P2 held events in the community at neutral spaces including the local library and a local church to bring people together. P2 expressed, "We tried to keep things in a neutral space because we did not want families to associate with just one of the neighborhoods" (*ll*222-225).

P3 provided opportunities, popsicles on the playground, a pizza party with backpack giveaways and a tour the building, and a traditional open house, for students and families to visit the building over the summer before school started. P3 further elaborated their goal:

> If they attended all of those events, they at least got to be in the building one to three times before school started, which was the goal of wanting our families to feel comfortable that would then lend itself to helping us support the students and staff with a good, positive environment. (*ll*279-286)

P4 held virtual meet and greets until in-person playground and park events with popsicles were permitted. P4's goal was to "get people interacting again in the same space, not from a screen, to establish climate, wanting it to be positive, wanting it to feel like all members of the community had part in it" (*ll*225-231).

Communication with the School Community. P1, P2, and P4 shared how they utilized communication tools and strategies to engage the school community. They developed websites, sent messages through feeder schools, or posted on social media. P4 specifically posted comments regarding the stages of development of the building. She shared, "That was a fun way

to connect with them. That was a little bit different, but it invited them to get excited about this" (*ll*248-251). Communication was a priority for connecting with the community.

Table 5

Practices for Developing a School Climate

Practices	P1	P2	P3	P4
Connecting Staff	X	X	X	X
Community Events for Students and Families	X	X	X	X
Communication	X	X		X

With similar and different experiences, all four participants synthesized the importance of connecting staff through email, meetings, or in-building activities. They also shared the goal of connecting students and families through community events, such as popsicles on the playground, building tours, and traditional open house events.

Interview Question 4

What role did you have with instructional leadership as a planning principal? All four participants described their process for initiating a School Improvement Plan (SIP). Three out of four participants (P2, P3, and P4) mentioned how they developed an instructional focus. Two out of four participants (P1 and P4) shared about collaborating with division instructional specialists to develop their role as an instructional leader.

Developing Initial SIP. All four participants mentioned their process for developing their initial SIP or Title I Plan. P2, P3, and P4 accessed data from their feeder schools as a baseline for creating instructional goals. P2 stated, "I mirrored it from the feeder schools at that time. I used their level of achievement to at least develop a goal" (*ll*266-269). P3 shared, "Developing our initial SIP was hard. We were using data that wasn't really ours" (*ll*326-327, 335-336). P3 and P4 also noted inconsistencies with implementation of instruction at their feeder schools and the impact it had on their instructional focus. P4 elaborated about her process of

developing her school leadership team. Specifically, she shared about providing professional development with her grade level leaders to connect and establish goals as part of initial planning. P4 further elaborated, "You need your [leadership] team of people to be on the same page before you can expect it to transfer into teams of eight and nine teachers feeling aligned when they have never worked together before" (*ll*297-301).

Developing an Instructional Focus. Three out of four participants (P2, P3, and P4) discussed how they created an instructional focus. P2 shared, "It was less about the curriculum and more about how we would carry it out" (*ll*240-241). Their school streamlined their focus and implemented a cohesive social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. They built the cooperative learning structures into their protocols and expectations and modeled it during staff meetings. P2 elaborated, "I think that was probably one of the biggest instructional choices I made was that we really were going to prioritize the SEL curriculum. We navigated that together" (*ll*252-256).

P3 and P4 prioritized creating a structure for team planning. P3 created initial documents for grade level teams to utilize during team planning to develop instructional expectations and streamline their work. She discussed her process for preparing for Collaborative Learning Teams (CLTs):

> During that time, it wasn't necessarily that this document needed to be the document that we would use forever. It was the document I wanted us to get started with, so that we had some sort of roadmap into the expectation that I had for CLTs and their planning and their preparation of instruction for their students. (*ll*310-318)

P4 also ensured that a CLT structure was in place for her staff to create alignment among grade level teams. She mentioned the importance of "having a CLT structure, a strong CLT structure in place, and what that was going to look like" (*ll*288-290). P4 also shared the importance of

"honoring where students had been and what their previous school experience looked like" (*ll*270-272). She further elaborated that with developing their instructional focus, "We didn't want to take away something from what they had already participated in, or expect another group of kids to know what that looks like or feels like if they had never done it before" (ll278-283). All of these aspects were factored into initial instructional planning.

Collaborating with Division Instructional Specialists. Two out of four participants (P1 and P4) highlighted the importance of collaborating with division level instructional specialists to make instructional decisions. P1 collaborated with the Title I specialists to develop their initial Title I Plan. She relied on previous relationships with individual subject area specialists in the Office of Student Learning to assist with the instructional materials order. P4 collaborated with the Office of Professional Learning in her school division to outline their initial learning plan. She discussed "leaning heavily on them" to develop a cycle of learning for what they wanted to accomplish and what structures and protocols were needed to meet their goals (*l*306).

Table 6

Role with Instructional Leadership as a Planning Principal

Role with Instructional Leadership	P1	P2	P3	P4
Developing the Initial SIP	X	X	X	X
Developing an Instructional Focus		X	X	X
Collaborating with Division Instructional Specialists	X			X

All four participants discussed the unique steps they initially took to develop their SIP, including utilizing data and mirroring or incorporating instruction from feeder schools. Three participants (P2, P3, and P4) highlighted the development of their specific instructional focus or the structures utilized for team planning. Two participants (P1 and P4) shared their collaboration with division instructional specialists to support their role as instructional leaders.

Interview Question 5

With the many responsibilities that you had, how did you feel during different parts of your planning timeline? All four participants expressed a range of emotions, including humbled, calm, overwhelmed, and isolated, during various parts of their planning timeline. Three out of four participants (P1, P2, and P4) felt overwhelmed once staffing began and once they moved into the building. Throughout the planning process, three out of four participants (P2, P3, and P4) felt isolated.

Humbled. P2 and P3 reflected on feeling humbled with the unique opportunity of opening a brand new *plus one* elementary school. P2 shared, "I felt very lucky and fortunate knowing that this was a pinnacle moment. As far as a principal goes, this is the ultimate" (*ll*281-284). P2 and P3 recognized that there were many things that they didn't know or were out of their purview. P2 elaborated, "It humbled me, a huge sense of responsibility, a huge appreciation for the opportunity. It also really humbled me because there's a lot of things I didn't know" (*ll*295-299). P3 concurred, "There's no one reminding you what to do and not do. I think that there should be because there were a few things out of my realm" (*ll*369-372).

Calm. P1 and P4 described having a sense of calm early in their planning timeline. P1 felt "okay" and that it was less stressful than having teachers in the building (*l*348). She was able to focus and shared that it was calm prior to hiring the bookkeeper. P4 agreed, "Prior to [being in the building], I had this sense of calm" (*ll*337-338).

Overwhelmed. P1, P2, and P4 discussed feeling overwhelmed, especially once they were in the building and materials began arriving. P1 shared, "It picked up and got really busy at a certain time, especially when the hiring started. Once I started hiring people, it became more intense" (*ll*364-366). P2 felt a "huge sense of responsibility" throughout the planning timeline.

She specified, “There were some really hard times when it came to staffing, and what people were saying” (*ll*287-289). P4 summarized her emotions once materials began to arrive at the building, “It wasn’t until we were in the school building, and 18-wheelers showed up multiple times a day with loads of materials that didn’t even have a place to go yet, that’s when I was feeling like hair on fire” (*ll*331-337).

Isolated. P2, P3, and P4 described being isolated throughout portions of their planning timeline and sought out colleagues for support. P2 stated, “You feel isolated a little bit” (*l*295). P2 mentioned asking questions and relying on people around her. P3 expressed that she felt alone, “A lot of the time, I felt left high and dry by the school division. No one was reaching out to me asking how they could help or what I needed” (*ll*350-351, 354-356). P4 elaborated further, “It felt very isolating at times. While everybody was willing to support, I’m not sure at that point, they knew exactly how or what that should look like. I tried to lean on what I knew” (*ll*369-373).

Table 7

Emotions During Parts of Planning Timeline

Emotions	P1	P2	P3	P4
Humbled		X	X	
Calm	X			X
Overwhelmed	X	X		X
Isolated		X	X	X

All four participants acknowledged that they felt a range of emotions during different facets of the planning timeline. The data suggested that planning principals felt humbled and calm early in the planning process before staffing and overwhelmed once staffing began. They also felt stressed and overwhelmed again once the building was available. P2 and P3 spoke to the depth of isolation that they felt throughout their entire planning timeline.

Interview Question 6

Tell me about the guidance/direction that you had from central office personnel during your planning year. All four participants discussed meetings that they had with division personnel, although the format, frequency, and stakeholders varied. Three out of four participants (P1, P3, and P4) developed close relationships with their construction project manager. Three out of four participants (P1, P2, and P4) mentioned initiating their own guidance or support system. Data suggested a limited amount of guidance. P2 summarized, "Honestly, other than here's when things need to be ordered or we need this kind of stuff from the budget done here, there wasn't much guidance" (*ll*317-321).

Meetings with Division Personnel. P1 met with finance and technology to discuss budget and purchasing. Construction attended finance meetings. P2 had standing meetings to receive and provide updates. P3 described one large meeting in January to discuss budget and spending. P4 shared about monthly meetings:

> We had a monthly new construction build meeting, and, at that time, the different departments would come together again. It was virtual. It was really just updates. This is where we are, these are anticipated, movement dates, this is how things are rolling along in planning and programming. (*ll*357-364)

All four participants indicated that meetings with division personnel were mainly to receive updates on construction progress with the building.

Close Relationship with Construction Department. Three out of four participants (P1, P3, and P4) expressed building a close relationship with the construction team. P1 built a strong relationship due to significant delays with construction, "I was friends with the construction guys and the contractor. I came over to the new building frequently during construction, and they took

me on tours. I worked very, very closely with construction" (*ll*398-405). P3 remarked on her close relationship with the construction project manager:

> I had a project manager who was on site a lot, and he was my go to. He was the person that I reached out to with questions about the building. He would contact me if I had to make decisions on things regarding the building. (*ll*393-397, 399-401)

P4 concurred with P3 stating she worked very closely with construction project managers.

Principal Initiated Support. Three out of four participants (P1, P2, and P4) mentioned initiating their own guidance or support system to navigate the planning process. P1 shared about visiting schools that recently opened and discussing technology with the principal to better understand what to purchase. P2 felt that she initiated most contacts with division personnel and elaborated, "I remember thinking, how did anyone know what I was doing? I developed daily reports, which was a nice journaling time for me, so they would know what I'd been working on. Sometimes, that would start a conversation" (*ll*310-311, 313-317).

P4 concurred with P1 and P2 about initiating support. She shared, "I think everybody's available to provide support, it's just based on my outreach" (*ll*387-389). P4 further elaborated, "I think everybody has good intentions. If you have any questions, reach out. If you need anything, reach out" (*ll*364-367). Relying on previous relationships, P4 sought out close colleagues that previously opened schools. They helped her develop timelines for when to complete specific tasks. P4 summarized, "I don't want to give the impression that I didn't have support from people. I just grabbed and gathered from what I needed to do when I felt it was appropriate" (*ll*395-399).

Table 8

Guidance/Direction from Central Office Personnel

Guidance/Direction	P1	P2	P3	P4
Meetings with Division Personnel	X	X	X	X
Close Relationship with Construction Department	X		X	X
Principal Initiated Support	X	X		X

All four participants acknowledged that central office personnel were able and willing to provide support, mainly when initiated by the planning principal. If guidance was provided, it mainly pertained to budget logistics. Close relationships with the planning principal and construction department developed with the project manager being a key point of contact.

Interview Question 7

Tell me which responsibilities were completely autonomous? Which ones were not? Three out four participants (P1, P3, and P4) mentioned having a high level of autonomy throughout the planning process. All four applicants had autonomy with the staffing process and developing the vision and mission. P1 discussed having no autonomy with the overall budget as 95% had to be spent on staff. However, she had a high level of autonomy with determining and purchasing furniture and instructional materials. P2 expressed a lack of autonomy due to the leadership at that time, "I think it is all about who's in the [division] leadership position. This person very much believed that everyone gets the same" (*ll*345-348).

High Level of Autonomy. Three out of four participants (P1, P3, and P4) expressed having a high level of autonomy. P1 mentioned having a high level of autonomy with several facets of the planning process. However, she did seek input from staff before ordering furniture and instructional materials. P3 had full autonomy to make decisions and felt that the school division was disconnected from what was occurring in the new school. P4 indicated a high level of autonomy with processes and procedures and would reach out for support if needed. She

elaborated, “I felt like I had a lot of autonomy because something would come up, and I would say, okay, we need a process for this, or we need to make decisions about this” (*ll*405-409).

Autonomous Responsibilities. All four participants expressed having autonomy with staffing and developing the vision and mission. P1 and P3 also had full autonomy with determining and purchasing furniture and instructional materials. P1 stated, “I had autonomy in ordering the furniture and the technology. I had all that autonomy.” (*ll*414-416). P3 concurred, “I had carte blanche as to what kind of furniture I wanted. I chose everything” (*ll*411-412, 414-415). Even though P1 had full autonomy with purchasing furniture and instructional materials, she sought teacher input. P1 elaborated, “I didn’t just get what I wanted. I didn’t just go in a magazine because I wasn’t going to be the one in the classroom, and that’s my way of getting buy-in from them. I got their voice” (*ll*421-425).

Table 9

Level of Autonomy and Responsibilities that were Completely Autonomous

Level of Autonomy and Autonomous Responsibilities	P1	P2	P3	P4
High Level of Autonomy	X		X	X
Autonomy with Staffing	X	X	X	X
Autonomy with Ordering Furniture	X		X	
Autonomy with Ordering Instructional Materials	X		X	
Autonomy with Vision & Mission	X	X	X	X

Three out of four participants (P1, P3, and P4) described having a high level of autonomy throughout the planning process. All four participants mentioned having autonomy throughout the staffing process. Although they had to adhere to staffing guidelines with taking candidates from feeder schools that were downsizing or typical staffing caps to prevent depletion of other locations, they were able to have full autonomy with their interview process and selecting candidates. The process for developing a vision and mission was also autonomous for all four participants.

Interview Question 8

If you could go back and start your planning year over again, what is one thing or process you would do differently? When reflecting on their planning process, all four participants recognized things that they would do differently. Suggestions for revisions included the timeline of the planning process and staffing implications.

Planning Timeline Suggestions. Three out of four participants (P1, P2, and P3) mentioned revising the planning process timeline. P1 discussed significant delays with the construction timeline due to weather which was out of her control. She elaborated, "We would have preferred to have been in the building sooner. The teachers were anxious" (*ll*444-446). They moved in right before the first day of school. P2 also described construction delays and a last-minute move into the building. She would have preferred an earlier planning timeline to prevent challenges for her previous school. P2 elaborated, "Leaving that school in the middle of a school year was also challenging for the principal taking over in November after the school year already started" (*ll*364-368). P3 mentioned the importance of being in the building early. Since she moved into the building in March, there were multiple opportunities for staff and families to develop a level of comfort with the new building before the first day of school. P3 would have preferred a more detailed timeline of planning tasks, events, and deadlines to prevent "flying in the dark" (*ll*432).

Staffing Implications. All four participants appreciated a high level of autonomy with staffing. However, three principals (P2, P3, and P4) would adjust this process if given the opportunity. P2 recognized the impact of hiring decisions on her previous school and shared:

> Even though we went with all the rules, did all the things we were supposed to, I would wonder if I could have done something a little different there to not leave that school feeling depleted. They're doing great, but that was a hard time for them. (*ll*358-364)

P3 highlighted the importance of having a strong, trusting relationship with the bookkeeper. Due to the lack of guidance regarding budget and spending and the implications of overstaffing, she would have prioritized this role and brought her previous bookkeeper with her. P4 reiterated her unique experience with staffing during the pandemic when people were isolated. Recognizing the importance of building relationships, P4 elaborated on the efforts she would make to "increase the number of opportunities that staff and teams had to prepare for the opening of a new school" (*ll*444-447).

Table 10

Suggested Planning Year Revisions

Revisions	P1	P2	P3	P4
Planning Timeline Suggestions	X	X	X	
Staffing Implications		X	X	X

All four participants reflected on their planning year and identified a process that they would do differently. Suggested revisions predominantly involved the planning timeline and staffing. Although she would make revisions, P2 would not change her investment in people during the planning process. She reiterated, "We really, really, really prioritized people and invested in them, so that I wouldn't have changed. I think I focused my energy on the right thing" (*ll*377-381).

Interview Question 9

Did your planning year or process of opening a new plus one school go as you envisioned? Tell me about what you were not prepared for. Two out of four participants (P3

and P4) mentioned not being prepared for the implications of inaccurate student enrollment projections. However, their experiences varied.

Inaccurate Student Enrollment. Two out of four participants (P3 and P4) elaborated on the implications associated with inaccurate student enrollment projections. P3 reflected, "I wasn't prepared for the budget with overstaffing. I wasn't prepared for the emotional start to the school year in the fall with overstaffing" (*ll*461-465). P4 concurred, "There were so many things I was not prepared for, the number of students within the building capacity was exponentially higher" (*ll*472-475). P3 and P4 mentioned being overwhelmed by inaccurate student enrollment projections and the impact on opening a new building.

Table 11

Not Prepared for During Planning Process

Not Prepared for During Planning Process	P1	P2	P3	P4
Inaccurate Student Enrollment			X	X

P3 and P4 elaborated on their experiences with the impact of inaccurate student enrollment projections. P1 felt prepared for everything except the struggles with construction delays. She stated, "I was prepared because of my experience, my work experience, and my connections with other people" (*ll*465-467). P2 described not being prepared for the lack of direction and level of autonomy. P3 synthesized and reiterated the importance of a dedicated planning year, "Amongst all the chaos, it was nice to take a breath last year and just focus on this" (*ll*446-449).

Interview Question 10

What were the three most important things that you did that you would want to share with a future planning principal? All four participants reflected on the importance of focusing on people during the planning process. Strategies for engaging various stakeholders

included building relationships, intentional staffing, connecting with the community, and incorporating many voices in the process.

Focus on People. All four participants described the importance of focusing on people throughout the planning process. P1 discussed the importance of building relationships, "Building relationships with people, I would say that would be the number one thing. I couldn't do any of this without other people. One of the most important things is to have relationships with people" (*ll*478-483). P4 concurred that prioritizing relationships was key.

P2 and P3 elaborated on the importance of staffing. P2 suggested being "incredibly thoughtful, intentional about the people that you hire" (*ll*403-405). P3 reiterated, "Make the time to hire well" (*ll*472-473).

P2 and P4 discussed the importance of connecting with the community, seeking and listening to input, and communicating clearly and often. P2 suggested "connecting with the community and making sure you've got that good parent base, so they can be good stewards of the message" (*ll*405-408). She further elaborated the strength of "getting the kids involved and having a voice from the beginning as much as possible" (*ll*409-411). P4 agreed with connecting with all stakeholders:

> Listen to all of the voices of the people who are surrounding you. Whether that's your administrative team, your parents, your community, all of the people who you connect with, listen first and help that influence your plans to execute. (*ll*499-505)

Table 12

Advice for Future Planning Principal

Advice	P1	P2	P3	P4
Intentional Staffing		X	X	
Build Relationships/Connect with Stakeholders	X	X		X
Listen and Seek Input		X		X

All four participants reflected on the importance of focusing on people during the planning process through intentional staffing, building relationships and connecting with stakeholders, and seeking input and incorporating many voices in the process. P1 also suggested the importance of managing the budget well and focusing on good instruction right away. P3 reminded future planning principals to "be proud of yourself and what you have been able to accomplish" throughout the planning process (*ll*479-481).

Summary of Chapter 4

New *plus one* elementary schools continue to be built regularly within the United States to address student enrollment increases in existing schools with limited capacity, yet there is no set of instructions to guide a planning principal. For this study, four planning principals were interviewed to identify the initial actions taken to open a new *plus one* elementary school. All four planning principals indicated that they had no playbook or guide, were self-directed and initiated support when needed, and exercised a high level of autonomy with decision-making, specifically with staffing, developing a school vision, and determining the school mascot and school colors. Additional responsibilities included developing the school climate and the initial SIP. Although all four planning principals did not have any input on the building design or the predetermined budget, some were provided the opportunity to provide input on the furniture or instructional materials.

All four planning principals exhibited a range of emotions throughout the planning process. Even without guidance, planning principals identified an intentional process to develop a school vision, provided specific advice on how future planning principals can focus on people to develop the school climate, and made recommendations for revising the planning timeline to

lay the foundation for a successful school opening. Chapter 5 will summarize findings, present implications, suggest future studies, and provide reflections.

Chapter 5

Findings, Implications, and Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to identify the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one* elementary school. Interviews were conducted with four planning principals from the United States in the Mid-Atlantic Region. Planning principals were selected based on the following criterion: public elementary school principal serving students in grades K-5; at least three years of experience as a school administrator; planning principal within the past five years; and new *plus one* school versus a rebuild. The planning principal participants in this study lead in suburban or urban locations, range from 22-36 total years of experience in education, had previous experience of 4-9 years as a building principal prior to their planning year, and had a planning timeline of 7-12 months to prepare and open a *plus one* elementary school.

This study was designed to answer the following research question:

R1: What actions do planning principals take to start a new *plus one* elementary school?

Summary of Findings

New *plus one* elementary schools continue to be built regularly within the United States to address student enrollment increases in existing schools with limited capacity, yet there is no set of instructions to guide a planning principal. For this study, four planning principals were interviewed to identify the initial actions taken to open a new *plus one* elementary school. All four planning principals indicated that they had no playbook or guide, were self-directed and initiated support when needed, and exercised a high level of autonomy with decision making, specifically with staffing, developing a school vision, and determining the school mascot and school colors. Additional responsibilities included developing the school climate and the initial SIP. Although all four planning principals did not have any input on the building design or the

predetermined budget, some were provided the opportunity to provide input on the furniture or instructional materials.

All four planning principals exhibited a range of emotions throughout the planning process. Even without guidance, planning principals identified an intentional process to develop a school vision, provided specific advice on how future planning principals can focus on people to develop the school climate, and made recommendations for revising the planning timeline to lay the foundation for a successful school opening.

Findings

This study sought to identify the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one* elementary school. Five findings emerged after an analysis of data.

Finding 1

Planning principals of *plus one* elementary schools indicate that they have autonomy in staffing, mascot and school color determinations, vision/mission development, and instructional focus. Principals expressed having a high level of autonomy throughout the planning process of opening a new *plus one* elementary school. Tables 3, 4, 6, and 9 in Chapter 4 provide reference to Finding 1.

All four planning principals discussed their autonomy with staffing. P1, P2, and P3 detailed their staffing procedures and highlighted their hiring process as a large component of their planning responsibilities. P4 also shared highlights of planning responsibilities regarding staffing. Collectively, they detailed working with human resources to determine any staffing caps, utilizing the internal transfer process, drafting interview questions for each position, accessing a written sample, completing observations of potential candidates, and hiring with their initial vision in mind.

Principals expressed having full autonomy with determining the school mascot and school colors. P1 selected the school mascot based on a unique request from a family member of the school's namesake and determined the school colors aligned with the interior colors of the building. P2, P3, and P4 followed the original plan set by P1 and had their students vote on the school mascot. Students from feeder schools filled out a paper or digital ballot. P2 and P3 also had students get involved with selecting the school colors.

The process for developing a vision and mission was also autonomous for all four principals. They discussed leveraging previous experiences and expertise when developing the school vision. P4 expressed the importance of relying on previous experiences when encountering new situations. All four planning principals utilized guiding questions as a practice to establish a school vision. They implemented protocols and/or activities with staff to collectively develop a vision statement and brainstormed words as an initial step to create the final vision statement.

Principals also described their autonomous process for developing an instructional focus. All four planning principals discussed their process for developing their initial SIP or Title I Plan. P2, P3, and P4 accessed data from their feeder schools as a baseline for creating instructional goals. Collectively, principals detailed creating an instructional focus, focusing on how to carry out the curriculum, building cooperative learning structures into their protocols and expectations, creating structures for team planning, and collaborating with division level instructional specialists to make instructional decisions.

Finding 1 aligns with previous research highlighting the important roles of an effective school leader. As a planning principal, a high level of autonomy brings a great deal of responsibility. "As a leader of a brand-new school, you are involved in every aspect of what the

school day will look and feel like, and how it will be remembered" (Korto & Thompson, 2019, para. 1). Educational leaders support and develop classroom teachers, create a positive school climate and working conditions, allocate resources effectively and efficiently, construct productive organizational systems, and engage in other meaningful tasks outside of the classroom that powerfully impacts what happens inside of the classroom (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Daniëls et al. (2019) synthesized that effective school leaders focus on curriculum and instruction, effectively communicate and build internal and external relationships, shape the school climate and culture, foster trust and collaboration, help define, implement, and sustain the school's vision and mission, give frequent feedback to teachers, and invest in hiring and retaining qualified personnel.

Finding 2

Planning principals indicate that developing a school vision is an integral part of the planning process. Principals recognized the importance of developing a school vision to guide the mission of their work for students. Although the main focus of the school division was the bricks and mortar of the building, each principal described their intense focus on what happened within the school walls. The process for developing a vision and mission was autonomous for all four planning principals. Engaging in intentional work, all four planning principals utilized guiding questions as a practice to establish a school vision. Collectively, planning principals detailed leveraging previous experiences and expertise, implementing protocols and/or activities with staff to develop a vision statement, brainstorming words with staff as an initial step in crafting the final vision statement, and collaborating with the division professional learning team to determine their focus. Tables 4 and 9 in Chapter 4 provide reference to Finding 2.

Finding 2 aligns with previous research highlighting the role of a principal in designing and implementing a school vision. Hallinger and Heck (1998) explained that effective principals shape the direction of the school through developing and shaping the vision, mission, and goals. Accordingly, the principal's ability to formulate and clearly articulate a shared vision focused on learning and set explicit goals creates the foundation for other important leadership strategies (Hallinger, 2011). Capp et al. (2022) synthesized that all staff members are integral components of creating a school climate that fosters the development and achievement of students and, ultimately, the quality of the school culture and climate begins with the staff. Furthermore, the importance of the principal role was described. The principal is the key player in developing the school climate and ensuring that the school mission is important and shared (Capp et al., 2022).

Finding 3

Planning principals indicate that staffing is a key responsibility during the planning process. All four principals discussed staffing as a key responsibility during the planning process. P1, P2, and P3 detailed their staffing procedures and highlighted their hiring process as a large component of their planning responsibilities. P4 also shared highlights of planning responsibilities regarding staffing. Collectively, they detailed working with human resources to determine any staffing caps, utilizing the internal transfer process, drafting interview questions for each position, accessing a written sample, completing observations of potential candidates, and hiring with their initial vision in mind.

Principals detailed their autonomous staffing responsibilities throughout the planning process. Although they had to adhere to staffing guidelines with taking candidates from feeder schools that were downsizing or typical staffing caps to prevent depletion of other locations, they were able to have full autonomy with their interview process and selecting candidates. When

providing advice for future planning principals, all four principals described the importance of focusing on people throughout the planning process. P2 and P3 elaborated on the importance of staffing. P2 suggested being "incredibly thoughtful, intentional about the people that you hire" (*ll*403-405). P3 reiterated, "Make the time to hire well" (*ll*472-473). Although P2 would revise staffing decisions given the opportunity to go back and do something differently during her planning year, P2 would not change her investment in people throughout the process. Tables 3, 9, 10, and 12 in Chapter 4 provide reference to Finding 3.

Finding 3 aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of hiring a high quality staff. Effective principals understand that one of the most important factors in student success is the classroom teacher (Allen et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2003; Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). School leaders have immense potential to impact the collective belief and instructional practices of classroom teachers (Goddard et al., 2015). Access to a succession of effective teaching in a more congruous instructional environment with stronger instructional leadership appeared to create compounding learning benefits for students (Heck & Hallinger, 2014). Teachers often provide more effective instruction to students when they feel connected to their colleagues and students and have higher job satisfaction (Allen et al., 2015). All staff members are integral components of creating a school climate that fosters the development and achievement of students and, ultimately, the quality of the school culture and climate begins with the staff (Capp et al., 2022).

Finding 4

Planning principals indicate that connecting the staff, students, and community is vital when building the school climate. Principals discussed the importance of connecting the staff, students, and community when building the school climate. They gave examples of

connecting staff through email, staff meetings and retreats, or activities within the building. P1, P2, and P4 implemented protocols and/or activities with staff to collectively develop a vision statement. P2 stated that everything connected back to the vision that they developed together and that their staff "all felt a huge responsibility for the culture" (*ll*214-215). P3 wanted staff to have multiple opportunities to access the school building prior to the summer and held a scavenger hunt, pizza party, and teambuilding activity. P3 shared their goal, "For staff, it was intentional that we just got them together, got them communicating and getting to know each other" (*ll*256-259). Recognizing the importance of building relationships, P4 elaborated on the efforts she would make to "increase the number of opportunities that staff and teams had to prepare for the opening of a new school" (*ll*444-447).

P1, P2, and P4 highlighted the importance of communication with the school community. They utilized school websites, email blasts, and social media to connect with families. P4 specifically shared building updates and photos regularly to get the community excited about the new school. All four principals shared the goal of creating opportunities for students and families to come together with community events, such as popsicles on the playground, building tours, and traditional open house events. P2 and P4 discussed the importance of connecting with the community, seeking and listening to input, and communicating clearly and often when sharing advice with future planning principals. Tables 4, 5, 10, and 12 in Chapter 4 provide reference to Finding 4.

Finding 4 aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of building and sustaining a strong school climate. According to P. A. Smith et al. (2020), savvy principals understand that positive interactions among students, staff, and administration are vital to establishing positive school climates. Principals that consistently deliver persuasive, efficacious,

and inspiring messages influence motivation and produce opportunities to impact the self-efficacy and accomplishment of others (P. A. Smith et al., 2020). T. Smith and Shouppe (2018) asserted that since the impact of school climate on student outcomes is statistically significant, the development of a school climate that is conducive to student learning is critical (T. Smith & Shouppe, 2018). Principals are responsible for making school climate changes, developing and maintaining the instructional vision for the school, and initiating the foundation for student success (P. A. Smith et al., 2020).

The principal is the key player in developing the school climate and ensuring that the school mission is important and shared (Capp et al., 2022). According to Versland and Erickson (2017), school leaders should look for opportunities to create collaborative efforts to positively impact relationships among the stakeholders and the overall school culture versus just focusing on instructional initiatives that increase student achievement. The dynamics of the relationships between principals and teachers could be underestimated in existing school improvement research, but concur that school climate and culture must be a critical factor of any school improvement agenda (Louis & Murphy, 2017). Thus, policy conversations should shift to understanding that a strong school culture is pertinent for sustainable school improvement (Lee & Louis, 2019).

Finding 5

Planning principals indicate a sense of isolation during their planning year.

Principals described feeling isolated throughout portions of their planning timeline and sought out colleagues for support. P4 elaborated further, “It felt very isolating at times. While everybody was willing to support, I’m not sure at that point, they knew exactly how or what that should look like. I tried to lean on what I knew” (*ll*369-373). Data suggested a limited amount of

guidance. P2 summarized, “Honestly, other than here’s when things need to be ordered or we need this kind of stuff from the budget done here, there wasn’t much guidance” (*ll*317-321). Although there appeared to be standing meetings with division personnel, all four principals indicated that these meetings were mainly to receive updates on construction progress with the building.

P1, P2, and P4 mentioned initiating their own guidance or support system to navigate the planning process. P4 concurred with P1 and P2 about initiating support. She shared, “I think everybody’s available to provide support, it’s just based on my outreach” (ll387-389). P4 further elaborated, “I think everybody has good intentions. If you have any questions, reach out. If you need anything, reach out” (*ll*364-367). P4 expressed the importance of relying on previous experiences when encountering new situations. She shared, “There wasn’t a playbook for opening a new school. There really wasn’t a playbook for opening a new school in the middle of a pandemic” (*ll*169-172). P4 further elaborated, “I was grateful for the years of experience I did have in the school division because I knew who I could really go to” (*ll*172-175). P2 described not being prepared for the lack of direction and level of autonomy. Tables 4, 6, 7, 8, and 11 in Chapter 4 provide reference to Finding 5.

Finding 5 highlights the lack of a manual and the need for initiating support as the role of a planning principal is isolated and self-directed. A new school facility is a multi-million-dollar investment for a school division, yet there are no manuals or instructions on how to actually open a new school building as a planning principal (Lane, 2008). Too often, the focus is on the completion of the bricks and mortar of the facility instead of what takes place in the building once construction is complete (Lane, 2008). Thus, the opening of a new *plus one* school requires a well-planned, detailed, organized approach for occupying the facility as the success or failure

of the school opening process weighs heavily on the ability of the planning principal (Lane, 2008).

Implications

In response to the findings that emerged from the study, several implications for practitioners were identified. Four implications were recommended for consideration in response to the study's findings.

Implication 1

School division leaders should create a guide or handbook detailing the responsibilities required during the planning year. Implication 1 responds to Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Given the high level of autonomy, lack of direction or guidance, and many key responsibilities of a planning principal, a handbook would provide a base level of support. According to data from this study, commonalities exist in creating a school vision, staffing, and building a school climate. A pattern of the timing of key responsibilities also emerged. Therefore, a planning principal handbook would outline key responsibilities and timelines while also maintaining a level of autonomy to meet the needs of specific *plus one* elementary schools.

Implication 2

Leadership programs should ensure that future principals understand the importance of developing and revisiting a clear school vision. Implication 2 responds to Finding 2. Effective principals understand that creating a clear school vision creates the foundation for every other factor, process, and decision pertaining to the school. Accordingly, the formulation of an articulate, shared vision paves the way for other paramount leadership strategies. Data from this study highlight the importance of the school vision. Since the principal has an integral role in developing a school vision, leadership programs should ensure that the

process and importance of developing and revisiting a clear school vision is interwoven throughout coursework and training.

Implication 3

School division leaders should provide professional development on strategies for developing and sustaining an effective school vision, school climate, and staffing procedures. Implication 3 responds to Findings 2, 3, and 4. According to data from this study, developing and sustaining an effective school vision, school climate, and staffing procedures are key responsibilities of a planning principal. An effective school vision and school climate create positive student outcomes. Since school leadership indirectly impacts student achievement, previous research studies discovered the school-level mediating effects of an articulated, shared school vision, strong learning climate, strengthening teachers' competence and capacity, and collective teacher efficacy on student learning outcomes (Cansoy & Parlar, 2018; Day et al., 2016; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Mombourquette, 2017; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Staffing effective teachers is also critical to student success. Effective principals understand that one of the most important factors in student success is the classroom teacher (Allen et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2003; Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). School division leaders should provide ongoing professional development to principals that supports developing and maintaining a school vision, school climate, and staffing procedures as these important facets directly impact student outcomes.

Implication Four

School division leaders should develop a structure of support for planning principals that includes standing scheduled meetings, a detailed timeline, and departmental contacts. Implication 4 responds to Findings 1 and 5. According to data from this study,

planning principals exhibit emotions of being isolated and overwhelmed. The planning principal role lacks guidance and principals indicated the need to initiate support due to the level of autonomy and required self-directedness. In accordance with Implication 1, a planning principal handbook would outline key responsibilities and timelines while also maintaining a level of autonomy to meet the needs of specific *plus one* schools. Having all department contacts at the table for standing meetings and discussing what happens beyond the bricks and mortar of the building on a regular basis would provide crucial guidance and support.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This qualitative study identified the actions planning principals take to start a new *plus one* elementary school. The descriptions provided by four elementary school planning principals led to recommendations for school division leaders and leadership programs in providing professional development and coursework. Additional studies surrounding the actions that planning principals take to open *plus one* schools may contribute to a handbook and influence future practices involving the impact of school vision and climate.

- Increase the sample size to incorporate 25-50 planning principals.
- Expand the setting to cover more states and/or regions in the United States.
- Consider a study that includes secondary planning principals to compare and contrast responsibilities with elementary planning principals.
- Consider a study that focuses on the characteristics or traits of effective planning principals.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one* elementary school. Interviews were conducted with four planning principals

from the United States in the Mid-Atlantic Region. Study findings suggest that planning principals of new *plus one* elementary schools indicate that they have autonomy in staffing, mascot and school color determinations, vision/mission development, and instructional focus. Planning principals specify that developing a school vision is an integral part of and staffing is a key responsibility of the planning process. Planning principals indicate that connecting the staff, students, and community is vital when building the school climate. During their planning year, planning principals also indicate a sense of isolation. The development of a planning principal handbook would outline key responsibilities and timelines while also maintaining a level of autonomy to meet the needs of specific *plus one* elementary schools. A handbook would provide a base level of support and keep all shareholders informed during the planning process. The mindset shift of focusing on what happens within the walls of the building versus just the brick and mortar would ultimately provide the necessary foundation for student success.

Reflections

As a planning principal of a new *plus one* elementary school, I understand the enormity of the task of opening a school and recognize the need for a handbook or guidance document. I respect the level of autonomy, self-directedness, and trust granted to planning principals, but also value the power of connectedness and support initiated and sought. Although overwhelming, the experience of opening a new school is rewarding. Interviewing other planning principals gave insight into the actions taken to start a new school. Originally I was surprised that instructional leadership was not at the forefront of key responsibilities, but understand the predominant focus on developing a school vision and staffing. The focus on people is the foundation for all other leadership strategies.

It is my plan to create a handbook with detailed responsibilities and timelines to assist planning principals with opening new *plus one* elementary schools. I envision that this guide will also support sitting principals with revisiting important leadership practices including the implementation and sustainment of a school vision, the careful effectuation of the school climate, and the components and value of the staffing process. It is my hope that this work will continue to encourage a mindset shift that recognizes school culture as a catalyst for school improvement and student outcomes.

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Appendix A

CITI Certification

CITI PROGRAM

Completion Date 27-Sep-2021
Expiration Date 26-Sep-2024
Record ID 44849964

This is to certify that:

Karen Dubiel

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Social & Behavioral Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech)

CITI
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w1c8bd5f2-4ff6-46dc-8d89-9c59e31981d3-44849964

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Division of Scholarly Integrity and Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp

VIRGINIA TECH

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 6, 2023

TO: Carol S Cash, Karen Lee Dubiel

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Perceptions of the Initial Steps a Planning Principal Takes to Open a New Plus One Elementary School

IRB NUMBER: **23-1250**

Effective December 6, 2023, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)**
Protocol Determination Date: **December 6, 2023**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Appendix C

Information Sheet

Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: **Karen L. Dubiel**
IRB# and Title of Study: **Perceptions of the Initial Steps a Planning Principal Takes to Open a New *Plus One* Elementary School**

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

- **WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an ***interview.*** *As part of the study, you will be asked to share the initial steps that you took as a planning principal to open a new plus one elementary school. The questions are related to key responsibilities and experiences, as well as, guidance that you would recommend to future planning principals of new plus one schools. The interview will be conducted and recorded via zoom.* The study should take approximately 30-45 minutes of your time. We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. At the beginning of the interview, you will be asked demographic information such as years of experience as a principal, type of school district (rural, urban, or suburban), and length of planning timeline. You will be asked to use a pseudonym as a "rename" on the zoom site. Thus, your responses are coded, so no one can associate your answers back to you. Please do not include your name or other identifying information in your responses that can identify you.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be recorded using the zoom platform and then transcribed. The researchers will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name) which you will have chosen at the time of the interview. The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer in the researcher's office and will be destroyed after transcription.

- **WHO CAN I TALK TO?**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact **Karen Dubiel** (karendl0@vt.edu). You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix D

Principal Recruitment Email

Email Subject Line: Perceptions of the Initial Steps a Planning Principal Takes to Open a New Plus One Elementary School

Dear Prospective Interview Participant,

My name is Karen Dubiel. I am a doctoral student at Virginia Tech in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. I am conducting research to analyze the initial steps a planning principal takes to open a new plus one elementary school. As part of the study, you will be asked to share the initial steps that you took as a planning principal to develop your new plus one elementary school. The questions are related to key responsibilities and experiences, as well as, guidance that you would recommend to future planning principals of new plus one schools.

I am looking for planning principals of new plus one elementary schools to participate in an interview. If you are interested in learning more about this research, please reply to this email and I will be happy to share an information sheet. A verbal consent process will be conducted prior to your participation in the interview. During the interview, participants will be recorded, via zoom, for transcription purposes. The interview should last between 30-45 minutes and is very informal.

Responses to the questions will be kept confidential. The participants will use pseudonyms during the interview and will not identify any demographic or work location, other than type of school district (rural, urban, or suburban), total number of years in education, number of years in educational leadership prior to securing a planning principal role, and length of planning timeline. Recordings will be stored on a password protected VT secured and managed computer until transcribed. Once recordings have been transcribed, they will be shared with you for verification prior to being destroyed.

There is minimum risk involved in participating in this research. It will not be possible to identify you as the person who provided any specific information for the research.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this study. If you are willing to participate, please reply to schedule a date and time convenient for your schedule.

This interview protocol has been reviewed by the Human Research Protection Program of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (IRB #23-1250). Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Fondly,
Karen L. Dubiel
karend10@vt.edu
804-914-5476

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Title of the Study: Perceptions of the Initial Steps a Planning Principal Takes to Open a New *Plus One* Elementary School

Time of the Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer: Karen L. Dubiel

Confirm receipt of information sheet (emailed to participant before meeting).

Turn on the Zoom record and audio recorder.

Say:

Thank you for meeting with me this [timeframe]. I appreciate your agreeing to participate in this study. I am interviewing planning principals to find out their perceptions of the initial steps they take to open a new *plus one* elementary school. The insight that you provide in this interview will be used for my dissertation.

The interview should take between thirty and forty-five minutes and will capture your perspectives. Do you have any questions about the Information Sheet that I shared with you earlier via email? As a reminder, this interview will be recorded and transcribed. The transcription will not include any identifying information and will be shared with you to review for accuracy. All recordings and data will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

Do I have your permission to proceed with the interview process and record your responses? [*Researcher waits for the participant to respond. If yes, proceed. If no, thank the participant for their time and end the process.*]
Before we get started, please answer the following demographic questions:

- School Geographic Descriptor: Urban, Suburban, or Rural
- Total Number of Years in Education:
- Number of Years in Educational Leadership Prior to Securing a Planning Principal Role:
- Length of Planning Timeline:

The interview today centers around the initial steps that a planning principal takes to open a new *plus one elementary* school. The first question will begin with, Tell me about your planning year; what key responsibilities/priorities stand out?

Then, subsequent questions will address developing a school vision and climate, any guidance or direction you received during your planning year, autonomy, and advice for future planning principals. Thank you in advance for participating in this interview today.

1. Tell me about your planning year; what key responsibilities/priorities stand out?
   Probing Questions: If not mentioned, probe for information about responsibilities with the input and design of the facility, staffing, budget and finance, and safety.
2. Tell me how you established a school vision.
   Probing Question: Describe your specific steps and procedures for developing your initial school vision.
3. How did you develop a school climate?
   Probing Questions: If not mentioned, probe for information about communication, building relationships, and engaging the school community.
4. What role did you have with instructional leadership as a planning principal?
   Probing Questions: How did you create your initial School Improvement Plan? Tell me how you determined initial goals.
5. With the many responsibilities that you had, how did you feel during different parts of your planning timeline?
6. Tell me about the guidance/direction that you had from central office personnel during your planning year.
7. Tell me which responsibilities were completely autonomous. Which ones were not?
8. If you could go back and start your planning year over again, what is one thing/process you would do differently?
9. Did your planning year/process of opening a new *plus one* school go as you envisioned? Tell me about what you were not prepared for?
10. What were the three most important things that you did that you would want to share with a future planning principal?

Thank you for participating in this interview. Your responses will inform my research and add to a unique body of literature.