

High School Assistant Principals' Perceptions of Leadership Related to School Discipline in One
Public School Division Pre- and Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to identify assistant principals' perceptions of their roles in school leadership, their experiences with student discipline in the public school setting pre- and post-COVID-19, and the professional learning they were provided to navigate the student discipline process. The basic qualitative study addressed two research questions: What were high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to student discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID pandemic? Furthermore, what professional development would support assistant principals with the student discipline process post-COVID-19? Using a standard interview protocol, the researcher interviewed eight high school assistant principals in one southeastern Virginia school division. The interview questions were organized into themes in response to the research questions based on the respondents' shared perceptions of their roles, student discipline experiences pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic, including professional development needs. This study revealed that assistant principals perceived changes in their leadership capacity due to declining student behavior, and the frequency of student discipline referrals "increased dramatically" post-COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas high school assistant principals prioritized instructional leadership before the pandemic, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic, negative student behavior caused school leaders to focus on processing school discipline over instructional leadership. This research found that student behaviors changed the educational landscape post-COVID-19, highlighting areas of concern for student well-being, such as physical aggression, substance abuse, lack of school attendance, and mental health concerns.

The study also found that high school assistant principals reflected positive outcomes post-COVID-19 pandemic as they adjusted their professional practice as empathetic leaders fostering positive relationships with school stakeholders. Finally, the researcher sought to examine the high school assistant principals' experiences with professional development opportunities when learning the student discipline process. The study found that assistant principals wanted actionable, collaborative, and interactive learning opportunities, including authentic mentorships, hands-on learning experiences, and guidance to communicate with stakeholders during the student discipline process. Implications from this study include calling on the Department of Education, school divisions, and school principals to identify, plan, and support high school assistant principals as they navigate the role of school leaders post-COVID-19 pandemic.

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General Audience Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a catalyst for change in an uncertain educational environment for school leaders. As the “boots on the ground,” high school assistant principals became the front-line offense for school divisions and principals in navigating students' return to face-to-face instruction post-COVID-19 pandemic. This research interviewed eight high school assistant principals for their perceptions, interactions, and experiences as administrators, especially with the school discipline process before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also examined the professional development assistant principals perceived they needed to navigate the post-pandemic student discipline process. This study revealed that assistant principals perceived changes in their leadership capacity due to declining student behavior, and the frequency of student discipline referrals "increased dramatically" post-COVID-19 pandemic. Student behaviors changed the educational landscape post-COVID-19, highlighting areas of concern for student well-being, such as physical aggression, substance abuse, lack of school attendance, and mental health concerns. Although pre-COVID-19 pandemic high school assistant principals prioritized instructional leadership, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic school setting, the study found that negative student behavior shifted the school leaders' priority to processing school discipline over instructional leadership. In addition, the administrators in this study expressed the need for professional development focused on the school discipline process that is actionable, collaborative, and involves interactive learning opportunities. Authentic mentorships, hands-on learning experiences, and communication guidance during traumatic events are suggested. The study closed by calling on the Departments of Education, school divisions, and

school principals to identify and plan for support of high school assistant principals' need to navigate the role of school leaders post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all assistant principals in education that selflessly serve to create better outcomes for others. You make the magic happen. You make the grind appear easy. You build relationships where there were not any. Keep growing and stretching...this research is for you.

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I started my doctoral journey as a curious way to investigate school culture, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects of each on school leaders. I had no idea, at the time, the amazing support and creative relationships that would develop throughout this process. To my husband, Charlie Bács, thank you for your constant support, ability to make me feel centered, and how proud you are of the title, Dr. Bács. To my children, Ryley, Griffin, and Miles Harris, you inspire me in everything I do. You are amazing leaders in your own right who are inquisitive, innovative, and always push the envelope. I raised you right! To my amazing parents, Bob and Butchie Brett, you allowed me to discover that being quirky is not all so bad. As your OPD, your encouragement has meant so much to me. And to my co-writers, Bradie and Ryder, always underfoot as I write and just as excited to take a break.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

School leaders are in unparalleled times, challenged with uncertain outcomes due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Cash et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Fullan, 2020; Hofmann et al., 2021; Huber & Helm, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the educational landscape by disrupting American public school systems' standard patterns and schedules (Harris & Jones, 2020; Mette, 2020). Schools closed their buildings, and stakeholders transitioned to virtual at-home learning. The COVID-19 school closure interrupted student learning and the school leadership processes (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Huber & Helm, 2020; Rincones et al., 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). School leaders had no precedent as they led through the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020). In the evolving crisis, school leaders attempted to retain the perceived normalcy of the pre-COVID-19 pandemic educational environment to move forward from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hofmann et al., 2021; Huber & Helm, 2020; Mette, 2020; Parra & Tan, 2021; Stoller, 2020).

While most schools reopened their doors to students and teachers in the 2021-2022 school year, school leaders experienced changes that affected their daily professional practice (Brinkmann et al., 2021; Hofmann et al., 2021; Parra & Tan, 2021; Ramos Jones, 2021; Rincones et al., 2021; Van Tuyle, 2022; Welsh, 2022). Furthermore, evidence emerged that the widespread learning disruptions showed cause for alarm in areas of student learning and disruptive behaviors (García & Weiss, 2020; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Jones, 2020; Netolicky, 2020; Welsh, 2022). Korman et al. (2020) concluded that "students with severely disrupted education pathways remain in dire need of support" (para. 5). As Parra and Tan (2021) theorize that "no one can estimate precisely how much COVID-19 interruption will affect learning, but

one thing is for sure, the chaos that the COVID-19 pandemic brought has radically changed education forever" (p. 16301).

Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic affected assistant principals' roles, relationships, and responsibilities as they navigated the educational landscape as crisis leaders in emergency response (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021; Ramos Jones, 2021; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, high school assistant principals were identified as critical to the day-to-day operations of schools, applying their leadership capacity in their daily interactions with students and teachers (Demerath, 2018; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Houchens et al., 2018; Rath, 2019; Sun & Shoho, 2017; Van Tuyle, 2018). Assistant principals have a direct role in improving students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Goldring et al., 2021a; Ramos Jones, 2021; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). These daily interactions not only shape the reality of assistant principals but become a challenge when "one of the greatest untapped leadership resources in our school systems" is not recognized, as these school leaders identify the role of the disciplinarian as their primary responsibility in school leadership (Barnett et al., 2012, p. 123; Ramos Jones, 2021; Van Tuyle, 2022).

The post-COVID-19 return to face-to-face learning confirmed that "COVID-19 had exacerbated many of the social, economic, and health inequities that already existed in schools and communities" (Grooms & Child, 2021, p. 148). The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped school discipline by emphasizing discipline patterns and students' heightened emotional responses (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021; Grooms & Childs, 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Weiner et al., 2021; Welsh, 2022). According to Welsh, school leaders returned to their leadership roles, confronting anger, resentment, and emotional responses. Welsh continued that assistant

principals may not have been prepared to effectively help students recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and that these school leaders need support in managing their well-being. In reviewing the literature, few articles focused on assistant principals' experiences with leadership, student discipline, and the professional development these school leaders need to navigate the post-COVID-19 pandemic educational setting. Research on this problem is warranted as scholars agreed that assistant principals tend to be ignored in the literature compared to principals (Barnett et al., 2012; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Ramos Jones, 2021; Van Tuyle, 2022).

Furthermore, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to evolve, student discipline has become a pressing educational concern due to the stress and trauma felt by all stakeholders; a closer examination of assistant principals' leadership capacity is needed to support students' outcomes inside and outside the classroom (Welsh, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The study also determined what professional development assistant principals perceived they needed to navigate the post-pandemic student discipline process. This research examined how assistant principals' perceptions, interactions, and experiences illustrate changes in their roles as administrators and the school discipline process pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. Sun and Shoho (2017) shared that assistant principals' experiences strongly influence their perceptions of their work, positively or negatively. In agreement, Van Tuyle (2022) added that research is needed to determine whether assistant principals' leadership changed based on their experiences pre- and post-COVID pandemic. Further, Ramos Jones (2021) and Van Tuyle (2022) noted that

additional research based on assistant principals' professional learning needs in relation to student discipline in the post-COVID-19 setting is warranted.

Research Questions

Qualitative research questions address issues or concerns where the literature is void (Creswell, 2014). Guiding this research study addressing gaps in the changes in assistant principal leadership experiences and the need for professional development supporting student discipline practices are the following questions:

1. What are high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What professional development would support assistant principals with the student discipline process post-COVID-19 pandemic?

Overview of the Study

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, "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). Using a qualitative design, the researcher investigated and reported on high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to student discipline by examining their experiences before and after the pandemic. Additionally, the study determined professional development opportunities that would support assistant principals as they navigate the student discipline process post-pandemic. "The primary goal of qualitative research is to uncover and interpret" the lived experiences of study participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). Using interviews for data collection, the researcher sought to characterize assistant principals' perceptions of their roles in school leadership, their experiences

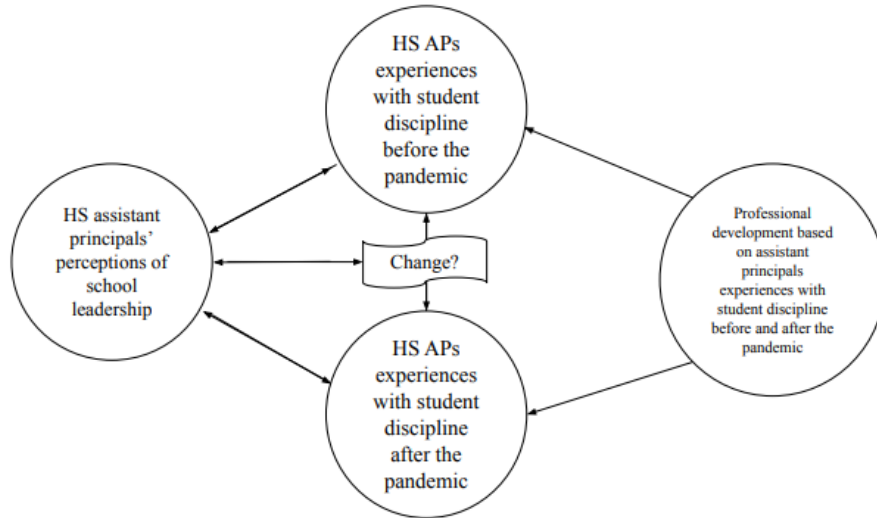
with school discipline before and after the pandemic, and the professional development needed to support them as they navigate the school discipline process.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework allows a researcher to explain, either graphically or in narrative form, the key factors to be studied and the relationship between variables while providing a boundary for the study (Creswell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher of this study developed the conceptual framework in Figure 1 based on a foundation of current literature that found assistant principals improve student outcomes in public schools through their leadership capacity. Further, this study explored the perceptions of assistant principals and their experiences with student discipline pre- and post-COVID pandemic and the changes they experienced as school leaders. The research will also determine if assistant principals felt they had adequate professional development in learning to navigate the student discipline process before and after the COVID-19 pandemic and if that knowledge applied to their professional practice of processing student discipline. Finally, the researcher explored the professional development needs of assistant principals based on changes in their experiences with student discipline in the post-COVID-19 pandemic academic environment. The study findings were the basis for recommendations supporting assistant principals as they continue to improve student outcomes as school leaders.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: High School Assistant Principals' Perception of Leadership as it Relates to School Discipline Pre- and post-COVID pandemic



Definition of Terms

Specific vocabulary terms were vital to this study and its findings. The terms are defined in the following paragraphs to provide clarity throughout the study.

Assistant Principal is an educational leader serving under the site-based principal and facilitating the school's day-to-day operations (Allen & Weaver, 2014; Bartanen et al., 2021; Houchens et al., 2018; Calabrese, 1991).

Change is a deeply applied phenomenon in people's minds (Fullan, 2006) that is a response to rapidly occurring threats or opportunities (Amis & Janz, 2020).

A *Pandemic* is an epidemic occurring worldwide or over a wide area, crosses international boundaries, and usually affects many people (Porta, 2014).

Perception is a sensory experience processing information to make sense of the world (Qiong, 2017).

Pre-COVID-19 is defined for this study as the period before schools were closed in March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

A *Principal* is a site-based educational leader responsible for all school affairs, including instruction, staffing, and management (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Fullan (2014) describes the role of the principal as the lead learner, system player, and agent of change.

Professional Development refers to the training and support needed to manage the tasks and responsibilities of an assistant principal (Allen & Weaver, 2014)

Post-COVID-19 is defined for this study as the time-period when brick-and-mortar schools reopened for face-to-face instruction after the 2020-2021 school year (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020).

School Discipline refers to the rules and strategies applied in school to manage student behavior and practices used to encourage self-discipline (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2022).

Limitations

Limitations are considerations the researcher has no control over and could impact the study. There were several limitations identified in this study. First, this study included sample bias based on the limited number of participants from one school division in southeastern Virginia. Secondly, there was little literature on the effects of COVID-19 on assistant principals as leaders through the pandemic. Although the school division had commenced face-to-face instruction, aspects of the pandemic were still prevalent as COVID-19 continued to impede instruction with instances of resurgence.

Additionally, the individual levels of experience of the assistant principals could influence their perceptions of preparedness when navigating the school discipline process and their professional learning needs. Also, the various demographic factors of the high schools in the school division may skew the perceptions of the individuals participating in the interviews. Lastly, the researcher serves as an assistant principal in the school division of the respondent sampling, which could influence the participants' answers.

Delimitations

Roberts and Hyatt (2019) described delimitations as “the factors that the researcher uses to clarify the study's boundaries” (p. 110). There were two delimitations identified in this study. First, the study was conducted in one Virginia school division, inhibiting the representations of assistant principals across the Commonwealth or nationwide. Moreover, this study focused on assistant principals' perceptions of their roles pre- and post-COVID-19. It does not illustrate the experiences of other school personnel, including principals and instructional staff, working during the COVID pandemic crisis. This study does not explore the perceptions of individuals who began as a new assistant principal during the COVID-19 pandemic or those who left an assistant position role due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 contains an introduction to the study, a statement of the problem, the study's purpose, research questions, an overview of the study, the conceptual framework, the definition of terms, limitations, delimitations, and the organization of the research study. Chapter 2 reviews and synthesizes the literature related to assistant principals' leadership capacity, school discipline, and professional development needs. The review includes the search process of collecting relevant literature, background information on the role of the

assistant principal, the school discipline experience pre- and post-COVID pandemic, and the professional development provided to support assistant principal roles in the discipline process. The researcher analyzed and synthesized relevant literature to determine themes and gaps for additional research on the topic. Chapter 3 shares the methodology of this qualitative study, including the purpose of the study, the justification of the research design, the instrument design, the research questions, the selection of the research setting and participants, data collection procedures, the instrument validity and reliability, data treatment and management, timeline of the study, and the methodology summary. Chapter 4 presents the data collected during the study and analysis of identified themes developed from the qualitative interviews. Finally, Chapter 5 delves into the findings, implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and the researcher's reflections.

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to explore the related research regarding the roles of assistant principals in school leadership, their experiences with student discipline in the public school setting pre- and post-COVID-19, and the professional learning they were provided to navigate the student discipline process. The researcher reviewed current literature and developed an analysis of interrelated themes revealed in the research. Moreover, the researcher summarized the related themes from the literature and highlight the absence of research when examining the assistant principal's role in the school discipline process pre- and post-COVID-19. The literature review concludes with suggested areas for continued research supported by this.

Search Process

In the search process, the researcher used the Virginia Polytechnic and State University (Virginia Tech) library and the Google Scholar search engine to locate relevant literature for research consideration. Additionally, the Virginia Tech library media specialist assisted by finding specific peer-reviewed journal articles, magazine publications, and books published within the past 10 years. Relevant books aligned to the topic were shipped to the researcher's home using the interlibrary loan program. Conducting the searches between September 2020 and August 2022, the researcher reviewed approximately 150 sources for the paper; however, the researcher cited 103 sources as references in summarizing relevant research. The articles were uploaded and organized into subject folders using Mendeley, a reference management software. The researcher reviewed each article to gather information regarding the purpose, methodology, research questions, framework, findings, and conclusions. Organizationally, the researcher developed a Google Sheet matrix of the findings and conclusions of articles based on specific themes and keywords relating to the topic. The matrix allowed the researcher to sort and group

themes among the cited research relevant to the topic. The matrix contains connections to other research articles from the cited literature for further investigation based on the themes indicated in the matrix. The literature review included searches on the roles of assistant principals, student discipline, COVID-19, pandemic, and professional development for assistant principals.

Background

When the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools in March 2020 and students learned through virtual platforms, educators across the United States responded instantly to transform learning for students (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013; Harris & Jones, 2020; Hofmann et al., 2021). Change was inevitable for students, teachers, and administrators due to the pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020; Stone-Johnson & Miles Weiner, 2020; Van Tuyle, 2022). While school leaders focused on the changes to the educational aspects of learning, social-emotional growth for students was in question in a learning environment of isolation that may have lacked supervision, accountability, and attendance (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Welsh, 2022).

During the 2021-2022 school year, teachers and administrators were challenged as students returned to in-person learning (Ferguson, 2021; Welsh, 2022). Students, teachers, and administrators returned to brick-and-mortar schools navigating learning under mitigation guidelines provided by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, exploring peer relations in real-time, and relearning school operations without being behind a computer screen (Silberstein, 2022; Striepe & Cunningham, 2022; Van Tuyle, 2022; Welsh, 2022). Educators reported a rise in school discipline issues, including misbehaviors, heightened emotional responses, and physical altercations in schools (Chapman, 2021; Einhorn, 2022; Gomez, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the educational environment created adaptations to school leadership that

led to changes in the assistant principals' "role, relationships, and responsibilities" in the post-COVID-19 setting (Van Tuyle, 2022, p. 63).

Leadership Capacity and Role of the Assistant Principal

In a pre- and post-COVID-19 educational setting, principals and assistant principals were vital for laying a foundation of organizational culture that supported and developed a sense of psychological safety for all stakeholders (Khalifa et al., 2016; Stoller, 2020; Weiner et al., 2021). Effective administrators were committed to making a difference in students' lives and influencing the teaching and learning within the educational environment (Dahlkamp et al., 2017). Jacobson et al. (2013) agreed that principals are characteristically analytical, reflective, innovative, creative, and flexible and are supportive of developing these leadership strengths in others. In agreement, Sun and Leithwood (2015) found that effective principals built the leadership capacity of their assistant principals and identified opportunities to collaboratively develop the role of the assistant principal, promoting collaboration and collective efficacy. Effective principals knew they could not flourish in isolation and building the leadership capacity of their assistant principals supported student achievement and success in their schools (Garza et al., 2014).

Although shared leadership was an important aspect in the development of the assistant principal, their roles in school leadership differed from that of the principal and focused on organizational management (Bartanen et al., 2021; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Houchens et al., 2018). However, the role of the assistant principal was one that scholars described as loosely defined, with the role in school leadership created at the discretion of the school principal (Bartanen et al., 2021; Goldring et al., 2021c; Houchens et al., 2018; Sun & Shoho, 2017; Van Tuyle, 2018). In the book, *The Assistant Principal*, the author shared that assistant principals

performed a critical role in educational leadership for several reasons, including "maintaining the norms and rules of the schools" (Marshall, 1992, p. 6); however, their duties contained gray areas that were ill-defined, inconsistent, and consumed much time outside instruction. Marshall (1992) explained that assistant principals' days are "microcosms representing the array of issues that arise when children bring society inside the school walls" (p. 2). In addition, assistant principals frequently performed the role of mediator, addressing conflicts that emerged with students, teachers, and the community. Moreover, although Marshall wrote *The Assistant Principal* 30 years ago, many scholars agree that assistant principals still face these issues today (Barnett et al., 2012; Bartanen et al., 2021; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Sun & Shoho, 2017; Van Tuyle, 2018).

Several scholars focused their research on student discipline and other duties assistant principals perform in their roles. Goldring et al. (2021) found that assistant principal jobs were highly varied, administrative, and primarily focused on student discipline. Goldring et al. conducted a research synthesis analyzing the assistant principal role in school administration. The evidence suggested that assistant principals served in many roles and engaged in the discipline, management, and instructional leadership work delegated by the principal. Goldring et al. (2021) found, "assistant principals work closely with students and thus play a direct role in improving students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes" (p. 2). The research synthesis also found that the assistant principals' roles varied considerably and were not focused on one consistent area except when processing student discipline. Assistant principals perceive student discipline as among the job's most challenging tasks and consuming the most time compared to other duties. The scholars continued that although assistant principals are uniquely positioned to promote positive student outcomes by working closely with students, additional research in this area is encouraged (Goldring et al., 2021). Furthermore, Goldring et al. shared

that their study neglected to determine which leadership tasks were most effective in supporting student outcomes as the roles of assistant principals are widely varied and limited in the depth of the evidence. The scholars concluded their study by suggesting reframing and redefining the assistant principal role despite the limitations of the available literature (Goldring et al., 2021).

Also examining the assistant principal role, Van Tuyle (2022) found that effective assistant principals build relationships, connections, and trust while developing their leadership capacity to support positive student outcomes. Van Tuyle (2018) also found that assistant principals aspire to be instructional leaders and want to be viewed in this capacity; however, they are often discouraged and regarded as school disciplinarians. The study suggested that the more student discipline referrals an assistant principal processes during the school day, the fewer opportunities to demonstrate their role as instructional leaders. Van Tuyle (2018) stated, "the resistance to change the way assistant principals have primarily operated as disciplinarians ... may mean not much will be gained in assistant principals acting as instructional leaders" (p. 18). To change the role of the assistant principal to one as an instructional leader, Van Tuyle indicated that improvement in discipline policies, specifically absenteeism, tardiness, and truancy, would reduce the time assistant principals spend in the disciplinarian role.

Van Tuyle (2022) continued to study the roles of assistant principals after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews with assistant principals at the secondary level, Van Tuyle focused on the changes in assistant principals' relationships and roles during the first year of the pandemic. The scholar found that during the COVID-19 crisis, the assistant principals participating in her study perceived that their role required "being responsive and understanding of families and teachers' struggles" and that the genuine building of relationships was crucial for the school leaders (Van Tuyle, 2022, p.71). In addition, Van Tuyle found that the pandemic's

remote school learning environment allowed assistant principals to explore their roles and expand their responsibilities; fewer in-school discipline issues permitted them to build stronger relationships with stakeholders. The researcher acknowledged the limitations of both studies she was involved with, noting there is not a robust body of research published regarding the roles of the assistant principal (Van Tuyle, 2018; 2022). Further, Van Tuyle suggested that future studies focus on the assistant principal's role as a school leader outside of being the school disciplinarian. Van Tuyle (2022) acknowledged a shift in the perception of assistant principals' leadership efficacy due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

School Discipline Before the Pandemic

Although literature regarding the high school assistant principals' leadership role in the student discipline process is limited, research regarding school discipline before the pandemic is noteworthy. School discipline refers to the rules and strategies used to manage student behavior and the practices used to encourage self-discipline (The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2022). The research on public school discipline before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic reported that student behavior issues have always been an urgent educational problem in the United States, filled with racial disparity and disparities amongst social classes (Sorensen et al., 2022; Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018; Williams et al., 2020).

Historically, the U.S. Congress enacted several education acts to support disadvantaged communities and produce equal access to education for all students, although not directly addressing student discipline. In 1965, Congress enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to create school accountability constructed upon rigorous standards, measuring student progress based on those set standards and holding schools and school divisions accountable if schools were unsuccessful at mastery (ESEA, 1965). However, in the

1980s, the A Nation at Risk report highlighted that student achievement in America's schools was falling significantly behind other countries worldwide (Hoffmann, 2001; Selya et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). In 1992, President Bush pressed for a more rigorous assessment and accountability system requiring all states to ensure students were meeting set education standards. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2002) compelled states to take more responsibility in school improvement practices to improve the education of all students and to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (Hoffmann, 2001; Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). The purpose of the act's provisions was to close the achievement gap between "minority and non-minority students along with advantaged and disadvantaged students" (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011, p. 1). However, the legislation did not address discipline disparity among students. Maleyko and Gawlik (2011) concluded, "the accountability provisions in the NCLB proved ineffective in evaluating school performance" (p. 11) and created zero-tolerance discipline policies that did not consider individual student's situations and promoted exclusionary discipline.

In 2015, the U.S. Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which served to reauthorize ESEA and replaced NCLB, allowing states more flexibility to identify and support struggling schools by focusing on additional factors such as student discipline practices. Implemented in the 2017-2018 school year, ESSA focuses on additional factors relating to school accountability such as attendance, school climate, and student access to advanced placement coursework; these considerations would now be included in measuring a portion of schools' performance. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education collaborated with state educational agencies to develop a state plan template as a means of flexibility and transparency for states to develop educational policies to safeguard the success of all students. Informing parents of the states' educational goals aligns with the premise of maintaining and protecting

procedural safeguards for disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities (U.S. Congress, 2017). Under ESSA, although standardized testing is still at the core of the accountability system, states must also include other indicators, including student suspension and expulsion data (U.S. Congress, 2015). The ESSA allowed states to use federal funds to implement programs to effect positive and inclusive school climates with the intent to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. Title I of ESSA specifically requested that states develop plans to address the overuse of disciplinary practices that take away students from the learning environment and use aversive behavioral interventions, compromising student health and safety (U.S. Congress, 2017). Additionally, Title II of ESSA advised states to provide high-quality training for school personnel to identify students who have experienced trauma or are at risk for mental health issues (U.S. Congress, 2015). However, even with the provisions outlined in ESSA, the use of exclusionary discipline is historically disproportionate for Black students and students with disabilities (DeAngelis & Lueken, 2020; Losen et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2021; Shores et al., 2020; Sorensen et al., 2022; Welsh, 2022; Williams et al., 2020).

In an executive summary, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2019) concluded that during the 2015-2016 school year more than 2.7 million K-12 public school students received one or more out-of-school suspensions. An out-of-school suspension refers to suspension off of school grounds without face-to-face teacher instruction. The report also proposed findings “suggest[ing] that school discipline policies may not be impacting all students equally” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019, p. 3). The Office of Civil Rights (OCR) analysis of data from the 2017-2018 Civil Rights Data Collection continued to show a persistent disparity in the discipline data for students of color and students with disabilities in contrast to their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In 2017-2018, 50.9 million students enrolled in K-12

public schools. The Civil Rights Data Collection data showed that Black students represented 38 % of students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions, although this was 2 times the overall Black student enrollment of 15% (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Additionally, Black students accounted for 36% of all expulsions and 33% of students expelled without educational services (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). From the same data, their White peers represented 47% of overall student enrollment; however, they received fewer expulsions—36% of all expulsions and 41% of students expelled without educational services. Disparities in discipline worsen when considering the connection between race and gender. Black girls accounted for 11.1% of the in-school suspensions and 13.3% of out-of-school suspensions in the analyzed data representing two or more times their total student enrollment of 7.4%. The overrepresentation of students with disabilities was also prevalent in the data. Despite representing 13% of the student population, students with disabilities represented 25% of students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions and 15% of expulsions without educational services in 2017-2018 (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Several scholars concur that racial disparities in exclusionary discipline characterized school discipline in the pre-COVID-19 school setting despite programmatic solutions such as Restorative Justice, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (commonly referred to as PBIS), and policy implementation (Lamont, 2013; Losen et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2021; Pierce et al., 2022; Shores et al., 2020; Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018). Restorative practices, a relational approach to addressing student behavior, benefited all student groups but only marginally minimized disparate suspension rates between Black and White students (Gregory et al., 2018). Their research concluded that while reducing the out-of-school suspension rates is essential, it was equally important to “increase safe, supportive, racially just, and academically

engaged communities” (Gregory et al., 2018, p. 177). Moreover, the findings suggest that efforts to close opportunity gaps and equality efforts may make greater headway if focused on prevention rather than intervention after the discipline response. Furthermore, the researchers called for additional research to investigate the role of restorative practices to determine if “racial equity, community building, and social-emotional learning can serve as a preventive civil rights remedy before disciplinary incidents occur” (Gregory et al., 2018, p. 179).

Welsh and Little (2018) concurred with other research in their review of empirical studies on K-12 public school discipline published between 1990 and 2017. The review found evidence linking school organizational learning structures to numerous discipline disparities, indicating educational inequity. According to Welsh and Little, student disruption and teachers’ management skills may not be the catalyst of the discipline problem; however, it may also be about how learning occurs in the classroom. Removing disruptive students from classrooms to maintain productive learning environments increases disproportionalities and highlights the lack of educational equity in schools across the nation. Moreover, “although low-income and minority students experience suspensions and expulsions at higher rates than their peers, these differences cannot be solely attributed to socioeconomic status or increased misbehavior” (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 752). Similarly, Gregory et al. (2012) concluded that student performance is directly connected to student discipline, and the extensive use of exclusionary discipline can widen the opportunity gaps between students of color and their White peers. While the federal mandate under the ESSA requires states to collect and analyze discipline data as part of the yearly accreditation process, research recommends that states focus more on holding schools accountable for making changes in serious discipline disproportionalities and inequities among minority students (Welsh & Little, 2018). Moreover, Welsh and Little indicate that the results of

the review underscored the importance of culturally responsive practices in schools, including preservice programs for school staff addressing disparities of discipline and how to disrupt inequities in schools.

Although there is not much research on the influence of assistant principals and school discipline, a few studies indicate that these school leaders are the final decision-makers when disciplining students (Barnett et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2020). Research conducted by Barnett et al. acknowledged that assistant principals who serve in urban, rural, or underserved schools may spend over 50% of their instructional day handling student discipline issues. Researchers acknowledge that assistant principals lack the training and experience to implement support systems such as culturally responsive practices, building interpersonal relationships with students, and implicit bias to navigate the *complicated algorithm* of administering student discipline (Barnett et al., 2012; Bukoski et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2020).

School Discipline After the Pandemic

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic created a catalyst for change in an uncertain educational environment for school leaders. Elmore (2004) prophesized that educators must learn to do new things “in the setting in which they work” (p. 73). In the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizational change was inevitable. School leaders assumed roles with the urgency and demands of the COVID-19 emergency state without preparation (Striepe & Cunningham, 2022). In *Leading in a Culture of Change*, Fullan (2020) stated that change is a subjective, emotional phenomenon that constructs effective school leaders to develop a belief in themselves and become more courageous due to their experiences. In agreement, Striepe and Cunningham (2022) stated, “leadership during times of crisis in schools required leading responsively, instinctively and virtuously as leaders react to manage and recover from the

immediacy, urgency, and complexity of the crisis and resulting needs of the community” (p. 143). After the 2019-2020 school year shifted to at-home learning due to COVID-19, suspension and expulsion rates decreased dramatically due to isolation. School discipline was an afterthought for school leaders when responding to the global pandemic (Welsh, 2022).

The underreporting of discipline infractions during the COVID-19 pandemic was problematic (Welsh, 2022). The suggestion that discipline looks different in the virtual setting raises concerns regarding the fidelity of reporting school discipline data during virtual learning using traditional measures (Preston & Butrymowicz, 2021). The research conducted by Preston and Butrymowicz found that teachers used alternative exclusionary discipline methods during virtual learning, such as muting students, turning off cameras, isolating students in breakout rooms, and removing students from zoom sessions. With little guidance from school division leaders, disciplinary infractions and consequences were largely left to the discretion of school-level administrators (Klein, 2020). Welsh (2022) found the underreporting of incidents of discipline and the corresponding dispositions problematic as this underreporting may lead to the “false evaporation of racial disparities in exclusionary discipline, mask the extent of exclusion in virtual classrooms, and undermine the urgent necessity of school discipline reforms” (p. 300). Conversely, Welsh (2022) concluded that empathy due to the COVID-19 pandemic may also play a part in reducing office discipline referrals (ODRs) and suspensions as empathetic teachers and administrators turn a *blind eye* to perceived misbehaviors.

Similarly, Van Tuyle (2022) questions the assertion that the COVID-19 pandemic created mostly negative outcomes in public schools during the pandemic. The study revealed that in some instances, the changes led to better student outcomes, and fewer in-school discipline issues allowed assistant principals to develop stronger relationships with students, teachers, and

families. Assistant principals had to “become coaches to teachers, providing formative feedback, rather than summative rating as an evaluator” (Van Tuyle, 2022, p. 70). The scholar ascertains that it is important to acknowledge the positive outcomes resulting from the radical change caused by the pandemic. Additionally, the research challenges the notion of discarding the new practices developed in schools during the pandemic for “the way we have always done things,” signifying the resistance to change or accepting changes as the *new normal* (Van Tuyle, 2022, p. 57).

Welsh (2022) also found that the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped school discipline patterns and that each year since the pandemic disrupted schools should be considered “an era in school discipline in the ongoing response” (p. 295). As the 2021-2022 school year is the third consecutive COVID-19 pandemic year, emerging anecdotal evidence shows that office ODRs and suspensions are approaching levels comparable to pre-COVID-19 pandemic education settings now that schools are back to in-person instruction. School leaders have needed to adjust to students’ behavioral changes in the aftermath of isolation and lack of accountability. Still, Black students and students with disabilities are disproportionately ODRs, and there are pervasive instances of undocumented exclusion from learning (Welsh, 2022). Furthermore, inequities in ODRs caused by trauma and burnout of educators negatively impact the discipline process by creating subjective offenses involving perceptions in decision-making (Welsh, 2022).

Welsh’s (2022) research included interviews conducted with district and school-based administrators who indicated that fighting in middle and high schools had increased substantially since the return to in-person learning. The researcher notes several reasons for increased physical altercations, including gang-related feuds involving students fighting in groups. In the interviews, school administrators indicated the uptick in fighting among ninth and 10th grade

student—or the “two sets of freshmen” transitioning into high school for the first time (Welsh, 2022, p. 301). Ongoing disputes and conversations on social media created additional conflicts leading to physical altercations. The participants in the qualitative study reported that incidents of vaping, possession of drugs and drug paraphernalia, and possession of weapons has also increased since returning to in-person learning. It is valuable to note that this reporting is anecdotal, and the researcher suggests additional analysis when the 2021-2022 discipline data is released (Welsh, 2022).

Several scholars indicated a noticeable decline in respect for school authority after the COVID-19 pandemic began to wane and that students have forgotten how to *do school* (Belsha, 2021; Kurtz, 2022; Meckler & Strauss, 2021; Welsh, 2022, p. 301). The tasks of returning to learning in classrooms and following school rules have challenged students and are “affecting how students behave, their decision making, and how they learn” (Welsh, 2022, p. 301). According to an EdWeek Research Center monthly survey, nearly half of all school leaders (44%) say they are receiving more threats of violence by students now than before the pandemic (Kurtz, 2022, para 2). Showing signs of arrested development, Welsh (2022) reports that students’ tolerance level for redirection has decreased, and students often react with a heightened emotional response. Hernández (2019) found that suspension and expulsion rates for serious offenses are higher after students experience disruption and trauma. In agreement, researchers recommend future research in the area of burnout in schools as there is growing concern that trauma is not limited to students but is also a concern for assistant principals navigating the behavioral changes of students due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartlett, 2021; Belsha, 2020; Welsh, 2022).

Professional Development Needs of Assistant Principals

When provided with professional development, assistant principals find the learning valuable and supportive of their professional growth (Barnett et al., 2012; Goldring et al., 2021a; Master et al., 2020; Van Tuyle, 2022). Additionally, when professional development is provided to assistant principals, they can improve instruction by developing their learning to support relationships to advance equity in their schools (Master et al., 2020). Conversely, assistant principals in Busch et al.'s research shared that they are unprepared for leadership roles as they are not afforded the breadth of professional development that teachers and principals receive.

Wilson and Clayton (2020) conducted a qualitative study examining professional development opportunities provided to assistant principals and topics these learning opportunities address. The study of new assistant principals found that “district-offered professional development sessions are rarely useful to novice assistant principals, whether it be redundant, offered at inappropriate timing, uninformative, or nonexistent” (Wilson & Clayton, 2020, p. 29). In agreement with this finding, the literature review provided limited information about the effectiveness of professional development for assistant principals, specifically in student discipline (Barnett et al., 2012; Goldring et al., 2021; Master et al., 2020; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Assistant principals are often onboarded into positions where they are required to rely on their random interpersonal experiences to understand how school discipline should be enforced (Armstrong, 2012). Furthermore, there is limited evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of different preservice preparation programs or program components, such as mentoring and coursework, for improving assistant principals' leadership skills. Lastly, the professional development needs of assistant principals, including the school discipline process,

need further research (Busch et al., 2012; Jamison & Clayton, 2016; Ramos Jones, 2021; Van Tuyle, 2022; Welsh, 2022)

Summary

Assistant principals are important to developing positive student outcomes (Barnett et al., 2012; Garza et al., 2014; Houchens et al., 2018; Master et al., 2020; Van Tuyle, 2022); however, the assistant principal is typically viewed as a school disciplinarian (Barnett et al., 2012; Calabrese, n.d.; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Ramos Jones, 2021; Searby et al., 2017; Sun & Shoho, 2017; Van Tuyle, 2022; Van Tuyle, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). While the literature offers insight into principals' leadership capacity, the assistant principal tends to be ignored (Barnett et al., 2012; Goldring et al., 2021; Marshall, 1992; Van Tuyle, 2022). Although the assistant principal has multiple interactions with students, there is little literature to report on the experience of building relationships to support student outcomes. Professional development needs of assistant principals, including the school discipline process, need further research (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016; Murphy, 2022; Oleszewski et al., 2012; Ramos Jones, 2021; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018; Van Tuyle, 2022; Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018). When provided with professional development, assistant principals find the learning valuable and supportive of their professional growth; however, the information regarding the effectiveness of the professional development is limited (Barnett et al., 2012; Goldring et al., 2021a; Master et al., 2020; Van Tuyle, 2022). Rincones et al. (2021) may say it best when it comes to the assistant principal role stating, "COVID-19 presents us with an opportunity to rethink and reimagine the role educational leaders play" (p. 4).

Public schools report that student behavior issues are an urgent educational problem, prevalent before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sorensen et al., 2022; Welsh,

2022; Welsh & Little, 2018; Williams et al., 2020). In agreement, several scholars found that prior to the pandemic, school discipline was a pressing educational problem rife with inequitable discipline practices (Diem & Welston, 2021; McIntosh et al., 2021; Welsh, 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018; Williams et al., 2020). Welsh (2020) concluded that the post-COVID-19 educational equity indicators “paint a picture of opportunities and outcomes in public schools that are trending in the wrong direction” (p. 303). McLeod and Dulsky (2021) found that the pandemic created unprecedented challenges for school leaders and that further research is needed to determine the support needed. Conversely, Van Tuyle's (2022) research suggested that there were benefits from the pandemic for assistant principals to explore their capacity outside disciplinarians' role in developing instructional leadership to support student outcomes. Scholars advised that the pandemic should catalyze change in the educational setting (Amis & Janz, 2020; Cash et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Netolicky, 2020; Zhao, 2020). McLeod and Dulsky (2021) agreed that effective crisis leadership during this pandemic remains undetermined, and “it will take years to reveal the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on schools and their leaders” (p. 187).

This literature review aimed to examine assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID pandemic and determine what professional development would support assistant principals in navigating the post-pandemic student discipline process. The literature revealed that assistant principals are important to the daily functioning of schools and positive student outcomes; however, there is little understanding of why the role is significant, especially with student discipline. While several factors influence the responsibilities of the assistant principal, there were also gaps in the literature specific to the role they play as educational leaders. Although new research regarding

school leadership and the pandemic are prevalent, there is little in the way of the effects of assistant principals' leadership and their effect on school discipline before and after the pandemic. Additionally, there should be careful consideration in this area of study to determine the catalyst of ongoing behavioral challenges in high schools leading to school discipline. Finally, additional research is needed regarding professional development for assistant principals to support navigating the student discipline process in the post-pandemic setting.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will describe the research design and methodology used by the researcher to examine assistant principals' perceptions of student discipline. The study also determined what professional development would support assistant principals in navigating the post-COVID-19 pandemic student discipline process. This study's population included assistant principals in a large school division in southeastern Virginia that were in the role pre- and post-COVID pandemic. This chapter explains the qualitative research design, including the purpose of the study, research design, question, needed data, sampling selection, validity, and data analysis and treatment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify assistant principals' perceptions of their roles in school leadership, their experiences with student discipline in the public school setting pre- and post-COVID-19, and the professional learning they were provided to navigate the student discipline process. This research examined how assistant principal perceptions, interactions, and experiences illustrate changes in their roles as administrators and the school discipline process pre- and post-COVID pandemic.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this basic qualitative study:

1. What are high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID pandemic?
2. What professional development would support assistant principals with the student discipline process post-COVID-19 pandemic?

Justification of the Research Design

This basic qualitative study sought to identify assistance principal perceptions relating to school discipline and the professional development needed to support these school leaders as they navigate student discipline post-COVID-19. "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or a human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that "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). In this study, the researcher sought to explore assistant principal perceptions relating to an ongoing problem in education--school discipline. Assistant principals are often the primary disciplinarian in schools; therefore, this study sought to understand their activities and experiences with student discipline as well as the professional development needs to assist their efforts in effectively handling issues of discipline.

The primary goal of qualitative research is to "uncover and interpret meanings" through lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). Creswell (2014) agreed, stating that the researcher pursues the meaning of phenomena from the participants' opinions. Specifically, "identifying a culture-sharing group and studying how it develops shared patterns over time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 19). The basic qualitative design is suited to developing an image through the lens of the assistant principal of what may be different about their leadership capacity and student discipline in schools now that we have experienced a full year of instruction after the COVID-19 shutdown. Using standard interviews for data collection, the researcher sought to characterize assistant principals' perceptions about change in their roles,

responsibilities, and relationships concerning the student discipline process and the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Instrument Design

Qualitative research involves investigating the various interpretations of how individuals experience a specific phenomenon, how they make meaning of their lives, and how they understand specific processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher designed the interview instrument used in this study to seek the perceptions of the assistant principals' experiences with student discipline before and after the pandemic. The interview questions created for the data collection instrument focused on opinion and values, hypothetical, and devil's advocate question types. Patton (2015) explained that opinion and values questions are appropriate when the researcher is interested in the person's beliefs and feeling and what they think about an experience. Hypothetical questions ask a respondent to speculate about what someone might do in a particular situation and state that the response typically reflects a person's experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, Patton (2015) added that a devil's advocate question is good to use when the topic is controversial to elicit an interview participant's opinions and feelings. In the study context, interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their lived experiences with the student discipline process during the pandemic. The interview questions probed each participant to describe their perceptions of their leadership roles as assistant principals with student discipline pre- and post-COVID-19 and the professional development needed to support their leadership capacity in student discipline. Table 1 illustrates the alignment of the interview and research questions for this study.

The standard, open-ended interview questions developed allowed participant to contribute detailed information that reduced the researcher's biases within this study (Gall et al.,

2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview methodology provided an exploratory, in-depth, and descriptive setting to understand best the phenomena of assistant principals' perceptions of their experiences with the school discipline process in the school environment before, during, and post-pandemic (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the study findings include rich, thick descriptions with "adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews" to ensure transferability to another setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Finally, the interview protocol used in this study included a heading to record the date, place, interviewer, and interviewee; an *ice-breaker* introductory question; the interview questions, and a concluding question. The interview protocol document was organized to include space for the researcher to record responses or observations during the interview process. The interview protocol was a guide during the interview process to ensure consistent questions were asked of each study participant (Appendix A). Lastly, the researcher developed a log to record all data collected.

Table 1

Alignment of Research Questions and Interview Questions

Research questions	Interview questions
What are high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID pandemic?	To begin the interview, can you tell me how long you have been in the role of an assistant principal? How would you define your role as an assistant principal in school leadership? How did your leadership style change due to the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the top three responsibilities that consumed most of your time as an assistant principal before the COVID-19 pandemic? Share with me an example of how your responsibilities as an assistant principal may have changed after the COVID-19 pandemic. Tell me about your experiences with student discipline before the pandemic. What types of discipline referrals were you processing most frequently before the COVID-19 pandemic? Did student discipline referrals increase, decrease, or stay the same after the pandemic? What types of discipline referrals are you processing most frequently in the post-pandemic setting? Some people would say there is no difference in students' behavior before and after the pandemic. What would you say to them? Describe in one word your role as an assistant principal navigating the pandemic as a school leader.
What professional development would support assistant principals with the student discipline process post-COVID-19 pandemic?	Describe to me how you learned to navigate the student discipline process when you started your position as an assistant principal. What professional development was provided to you after you started your position as an assistant principal? After the pandemic, if you could design the ideal professional development for assistant principals managing the student discipline process, what elements would you include? Why?

Is there anything you would like to add that I may not have asked you?

Validity

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that all research aims to "produce valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner," including qualitative research (p. 237). To ensure the validity of the interview questions for this study, the researcher vetted the interview questions with a trial group with school leaders currently in the assistant principal role to determine the value of each question for potential authentic, robust answers that align with the study's research questions. The assistant principals who vetted the questions were not included in the study. Additionally, current school administrators in the Virginia Tech Leadership and Policy Studies 2023 cohort assisted in the validation of the interview questions protocol. Cohort members reviewed each question for clarity and alignment with the research questions guiding the study. The researcher also consulted with the dissertation chair to ensure the clarity and conciseness of the instrument. Based on feedback received from the group of assistant principals in the trial group and cohort members, the researcher revised several questions to allow for more thoughtful and expansive responses from participants and ensure alignment with the conceptual framework and research questions.

Reliability

Reliability typically refers to the extent to which the research findings can be replicated and yield the same results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By incorporating reliability checks, the researcher can interpret the respondents' experiences. However, the researcher acknowledges that reliability in qualitative research can be problematic as human behavior is never static; human experiences cannot be replicated. To maintain the reliability of this study, the researcher ensured the ethical nature of this basic qualitative study by implementing respondent validation (member

checks), reflexivity (researcher's position), the creation of a research log or an audit trail, and the use of rich, thick descriptions.

Respondent validation, or member checks, is necessary to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher solicited participant feedback on the preliminary or emerging findings from the interview to establish respondent validation. The process involved sending the participant a transcript of the interview to ensure the interpretation is suitable and without misrepresentations. Within 10 days of each interview, an invitation to review the transcript was sent to each participant via email (Appendix B).

Next, the researcher practiced reflexivity throughout the qualitative study. A research log was designed to incorporate reflection as part of the interview, data analysis, and interpretation process. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), reflexivity, or the researcher's position, allows investigators to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research. Using this method allows the reader to better understand how the researcher may have arrived at the interpretation of the data. In this study, the researcher examined and checked their own judgments and beliefs throughout the data collection process to identify personal assumptions that may affect the research. The professional experiences of the researcher serving as an administrator were acknowledged and set aside. The researcher did this by focusing on the problem, specific issues, and reflection as part of the research log (Appendix C).

A research log, or an audit trail, was developed to describe how data are collected, how the categories or codes were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This included research goals set by the researcher, the dates and times research activities took place, and reflections on the research process as it was being

undertaken. The log allowed the researcher to identify and practice reflexivity and to ensure there were procedural notes on why decisions were made and how meaning was made from the data.

Lastly, the researcher used a rich, thick description or an *insider's account* to report the findings (Maxwell, 2013). This type of narrative refers to a descriptive presentation of the setting and findings of the study to "enhance the possibility of the results of a qualitative study transferring to another setting" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher intended to give detailed descriptions and interpretations of the situations the study's participants relayed about their experiences with student discipline as an assistant principal. This allowed for not only the descriptions and observations made by the researcher but in the context in which the behavior occurs and the significance of the events experienced. The readers of the study will *see* the lives of the study participants because of the way the text is written (Denzin, 1989).

Selection of Setting and Participants

The setting of this research study was one school division in southeastern Virginia. The researcher chose this school division for its size, diversity, and professional development opportunities afforded to staff. The assistant principals recruited as study participants were identified through purposeful sampling with specific criteria. In accordance with recommendations provided by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), these assistant principals were considered good respondents or *informants* as they were able to understand, reflect, and articulate their experiences based on their perceptions of the student discipline and professional development needs. To be included in this study, participants must have been employed as secondary high school assistant principals in a public school for a minimum of 1 year pre- and post-COVID-19 and have experience in the student discipline process. 71% of school

administrators in the selected school division met the established criteria for the participant sample as acting veteran assistant principals.

From the school division's sample of respondents fitting the criteria, the researcher conducted virtual interviews with eight high school assistant principals. Interviews were conducted from the sample population until saturation was achieved. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that sample size should support saturation or when no new information is collected from increasing the sample. Saturation was obtained after conducting 8 interviews. This number of participants will allow at least an 80% saturation rate of the responses to interview questions developed into themes to answer the study's research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Namey et al., 2016). In support, Namey et al. found that "the median number of data collection events required to reach 80% and 90% saturation was eight" compared to three for focus groups (Namey et al., 2016, p. 425).

Data Collection and Gathering Procedures

This research study used a standard interview protocol with high school assistant principals in southeastern Virginia. Merriam and Tisdale (2016) stressed that qualitative research strives to interpret reality directly through observations and interviews. In accordance with requirements to conduct research, the researcher completed and earned the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Social and Behavioral Research certification prior to beginning this study (Appendix D). The researcher followed specific protocols and regulations to obtain permissions needed before conducting the study. The researcher submitted a research proposal and received approval from the Virginia Tech IRB (Appendix E). An application was then submitted to the select school division. Written permission to solicit study participants from within the school division was received (Appendix F). Next, the researcher sent a request to

participate email, to the population of 42 high-school assistant principals in the school division (Appendix G). This email communication included a summary of the dissertation study and explained the parameters used to select participants. The assistant principals who indicated a willingness to participate in the study then received an invitation to participate in a synchronous virtual interview using Zoom, an online meeting platform from the research. Interviews were scheduled at a time of convenience for the participants. The Zoom platform allowed for secure video conferencing with recording to capture the interaction. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that constraint due to the location of the interviews is not an issue with using an online interview platform. The video recording of the Zoom interview allowed the researcher to explore participants' non-verbal cues during the data analysis process.

Data Treatment and Management

The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis for this study. Developing the interview questions, applying the interview protocol, and completing the data analysis matrix structure ensured confidentiality in all aspects of the process. All data collected were stored in a secure, password-protected electronic database—Virginia Tech Google Drive—on a password-encrypted computer. Password encryption allowed the researcher to ensure the interview space was secure. The study participant was the only person granted access to the Zoom conferencing space to ensure the confidentiality of the conversations during each interview. The Zoom platform also allowed for a safe atmosphere for the participants and interactions to transpire where there was Wi-Fi access. Interviews were recorded uploaded to the secure Virginia Tech Duo encrypted and password-protected Google Drive. The researcher deleted the interview recordings per protocol after each participant approved the transcribed interviews (member checks).

To maintain anonymity of the study participants during the process, each participant chose a pseudonyms at the beginning of the interview (Allen & Wiles, 2016). Each participant's secure file was stored in a Virginia Tech Google Drive folder. The researcher placed the labeled transcripts in each participant's folder identified with the pseudonym code. The researcher was the only person having access to the secured files. The Virginia Tech Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study (Appendix H) notified participants of their respondent validation entitlements, data protection protocols, and anonymity safeguards. It also explained their ability to decline further participation in the study and how to complete this process.

Data Analysis

After each interview, the researcher transcribed and reviewed the narrative by listening to the audio recording created during each interview to verify the transcriptions. After interview transcription and verification by the participants, the researcher uploaded each interview file to the NVivo software platform for data analysis. Interview questions were uploaded into two groups based on the guiding research questions of the study. The researcher analyzed each interview question's responses to determine common themes and create codes within each response for synthesis and study findings. After reviewing all the transcripts, the researchers listed topics to cluster in groups based on similar themes. By grouping relational topics, the researcher developed abbreviated codes to position next to the appropriate text. This process was repeated to reveal new codes and themes to recode existing data. The codes were alphabetized to assemble the data belonging to each category for preliminary analysis and recoding as necessary (Creswell, 2014; Tesch, 1990). After analyzing each interview question, the researcher created data tables based on the codes and themes from the assistant principals' responses. These data tables led to the study's findings, implications, and future suggested research.

Timeline of the Study

Upon completion of the Prospectus Examination in September 2022, the researcher proposed the study to the Virginia Tech IRB committee for research approval under the guidance of the dissertation committee chair. Concurrently, an application was submitted to the selected school division for approval to conduct research with assistant principals. Once approval was granted by the IRB and school division, the researcher engaged participants and began the interview process in December and January 2022. The researcher intended to identify the findings, implications, and suggestions for future research by February 2023, with the final defense commencing in March 2023.

Methodology Summary

A qualitative research approach creates different assumptions and worldviews than traditional research models (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this basic qualitative research study, the researcher investigated assistant principals' perceptions of leadership as it related to student discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID-19. The study also determined what professional development would support assistant principals navigating the student discipline process post-COVID-19. The researcher sought to understand individuals' views and experiences using a highly structured interview protocol on a sample of eight individuals. Participant responses to the interview questions presented were analyzed thoroughly by inductive coding to discover themes. After critically analyzing and developing themes and categories, the researcher identified the findings, proposed the implications, and created suggestions for future research.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Presentation

Chapter 4 is organized into three sections. This chapter focuses on analyzing data from each research question, describing the data collected, and the research findings based on the perceptions of high school principals serving before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Section one describes the purpose of the research study, the study's research questions, an explanation of codes, and interview participant information. Section two will report on the data from each participant through qualitative data analysis of each interview question, including tables and detailed descriptions. The third section will close Chapter 4 by summarizing the data and introducing the emerging themes discussed in Chapter 5.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The study also determined what professional development assistant principals perceived they needed to navigate the post-pandemic student discipline process. This research examined how assistant principals' perceptions, interactions, and experiences illustrate changes in their roles as administrators and the school discipline process pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative research study focused on the perceptions of eight high school assistant principals serving before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

The research focused on two centralized questions to guide the study and interview protocol.

1. What are high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID pandemic?

2. What professional development would support assistant principals with the student discipline process post-COVID-19 pandemic?

Codes

The researcher assigned codes to represent the assistant principals participating in the research study. "AP" plus a number designates each of the eight high school assistant principals.

Participant Information

The primary population of this study is assistant principals from a large school division in southeastern Virginia that was in the role before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher identified high school assistant principals who served at least one year before the COVID-19 pandemic, during, and after the return to face-to-face instruction to contribute to this research. Purposeful sampling with specific criteria enabled the researcher to recruit eight high school assistant principals. The participant pool of eight participants included three male assistant principals and five female assistant principals with experience ranging as an administrator from three and a half years to 18 years. Table 2 details the pseudonym codes for each participant, their gender, and the years employed as an assistant principal.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information (n = 8)

Participant	Gender	Years as assistant principal
AP1	Male	18
AP2	Female	6
AP3	Female	4
AP4	Female	3.5
AP5	Female	6.5
AP6	Male	8

AP7	Female	6
AP8	Male	12

Research Results

The following section presents the study's results, beginning with the research questions and the aligned interview questions.

Research Question 1

What were high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to student discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic? The researcher determined it is important to understand the findings by investigating the assistant principal's role, responsibilities, and perceptions of student discipline pre- and post-pandemic. The researcher engaged in the discourse regarding the school leaders' perceptions of leadership and school discipline process in public schools pre and post-pandemic. The following data represents the responses from each participant's answers to the qualitative study's interview questions.

Interview Question 1. *How would you define your role as an assistant principal in school leadership?* Interview Question 1 establishes the respondents' perceptions of the assistant principal role, regardless of the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The high school assistant principals interviewed for this study all perceived their roles in school leadership as having multiple layers. They described their roles as a combination of instructional leadership (88%, $n = 7$), program and process management (75%, $n = 6$), principal support (75%, $n = 6$), disciplinarians (75%, $n = 6$), and cultivators of relationships (63%, $n = 5$). Table 3 outlines the participants' perceptions as they define their roles as assistant principals.

Table 3*Definition of the Assistant Principal Role*

Roles of the assistant principal	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Instructional Leader	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Program and Process Management		X	X	X	X		X	X
Principal Support			X		X	X		X
Disciplinarian	X	X	X	X	X			X
Cultivating Relationships	X		X		X	X	X	

Instructional Leadership. Seven of the eight participants (88%, n = 7) mentioned instructional leadership as one of their primary roles. The assistant principals concurred that instruction is at the forefront of their daily leadership responsibilities supporting teachers and students. AP1 stated that the assistant principal has two roles when it pertains to being an instructional leader, to support teachers and students, as evident in this vignette:

There's two different roles. One dealing with teachers, and one is dealing with students. In both roles, you trying to support teachers; you're trying to make their job as easy as possible. ...It's the same thing for students. You're trying to support students, to make their learning as easy as possible. (14)

AP5 furthered, "instructional leadership is going into classrooms, professional learning committees (PLCs), rolling my sleeves up giving instructional feedback." (120) AP6 revealed that instructional leaders should focus on the principal's vision and the school division's strategic plan. AP6 furthered that the assistant principal must serve as an "instructional leader and an exemplary instructional leader to staff." (130)

AP8 agreed that instruction should be the primary focus of assistant principals; however, being an instructional leader as an assistant principal is not always the reality of the position, as other responsibilities pull them away from the instructional focus. AP8 continued, "Obviously, we are supposed to be instructional leaders, but the reality of that is there's no time to really be an instructional leader because you're really managing the building. You're managing people; you're managing behaviors; you're managing life." (I12)

Program and Process Management. Six of the eight participants (75%, $n = 6$) indicated that program and process management of the school building was pivotal to their roles as assistant principals. Management to ensure the functionality of a school building includes overseeing areas such as transportation, facilities, assessment, food services, human resources, and more. AP2 concluded that the role of an AP is crucial to school operations and ensuring all is ready for students and staff, "the role of an assistant principal is to create optimal conditions for effective student outcomes. And I think that includes programs and processes and operations."(I13) AP7 agreed, stating, "We're making sure that the school functions and we always have duties assigned" (I13). Additionally, AP5 voiced that management roles can quickly overshadow instructional leadership if not carefully managed. "There's a lot of management, there's a lot of paperwork, and different things that I may oversee....There's certainly a lot of bureaucratic paperwork that you have to fit in." (I22)

Disciplinarian. Six of the eight assistant principals (75%, $n = 6$) acknowledged that acting as the school disciplinarian was a part of their role in school leadership. AP1 alluded that "taking troublemakers out of class" allows teachers and students to focus more on instruction without distractions (I10). AP2, AP3, and AP4 all mentioned student discipline as a component of their roles as assistant principals. Furthermore, the assistant principals described their role as

disciplinarians as an opportunity to foster positive relationships with students. AP5 reflects, "building relationships with the kids is one proactive way to deal with discipline before it happens. So I see that as part of the discipline process. I mean, the whole thing is building relationships with the students." (126).

Cultivating Relationships. Five of the eight assistant principals (63%, $n = 5$) indicated that building positive relationships with teachers, students, and the community was a primary role in school leadership. Similarly, two assistant principals described their school roles as a combination of working and building relationships with adults and students as part of their leadership capacity. AP3 shares:

another side of my role is to support my stakeholders, my students, my parents, and get to know my students and work with them in the classrooms and hallways through discipline, activities, and sports, and to be a part of that culture. (121)

AP6 concludes that positive relationships are needed to support all stakeholders successfully. These relationships allowed "motivating students and staff alike to maximize their potential and feel like they belong to something greater than themselves" (131).

Principal Support. Lastly, four of the eight participants (50 %, $n = 4$) noted supporting the school principal as a crucial part of the assistant principal position. The participants conveyed that assistant principals must steward the principal's mission and vision in achieving and building their leadership capacity. AP3 reflected that supporting the principal is the most important role, "First and foremost, I'm here to support our principal, to support our principal's mission and vision, and how he wants the school to run. I'm here to support him" (117). AP6 concurred, explaining:

The AP serves at the pleasure of the principal....I believe it's the goal of the AP to make the principal look good, but that's for a better purpose of serving the mission and the vision of that principal and to support the overall school division. (I26)

AP5 and AP8 used analogies to describe their role as school leaders supporting the principal. AP5 described the role of the assistant principal as the *boots on the ground*, meaning they are actively involved with all workings of the school, including instructional and managerial operations. AP5 further explained, "We're the principal's leadership and the vision of the school where the rubber meets the road. So we're the ones that have the most interaction directly with the students and with the teachers" (I29). AP8 defined the assistant principal's role as,

The lieutenants on the ground to make the school move in the direction that it needs to move. We get the marching orders from the principal, and it's our job as the lieutenants to go out and make sure that those things are happening. (I15)

In summary, assistant principals found their role in school leadership is multifaceted, regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. The school leaders perceived themselves as mostly instructional leaders (88%, $n = 7$) while navigating all administrative duties, such as program and process management (75%, $n = 6$), principal support (75%, $n = 6$), school discipline (75%, $n = 6$), and cultivator of relationships (63%, $n = 5$).

Interview Question 2. *How has your leadership style changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?* Interview Question 2 asked the assistant principals to reflect on changes to their leadership style caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Seven of the eight assistant principals (88%, $n = 7$) responded that their perceived leadership styles changed along with stakeholders' behavior caused by factors of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants described the changes

to their leadership capacity as developing empathy, compassion, and thoughtfulness, focusing more on building relationships in the post-COVID-19 pandemic setting. Table 4 outlines the assistant principals' perceptions of change in the leadership role due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4

Changes in Leadership Style Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Changes in leadership style	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
More Empathetic		X	X		X			
More Compassionate			X	X			X	
More Thoughtful						X		X

Empathy. Three of the eight assistant principals (38%, n = 3) responded that they are more empathetic towards others after the COVID-19 pandemic. AP2 conveyed, "the pandemic has required me to become more empathetic... how I approach things with teachers now, I'm a little bit more empathetic to mental health, to just things that could be affecting employees and students" (119). In this extract, AP3 explains that leading through the pandemic has made them more empathetic and compassionate,

There's just a lot of factors that are at play now after the pandemic. Even things we didn't know about have come to light many times here. And so, I would say my leadership style; I've definitely become a little bit more compassionate in a sense towards students and families and towards parents giving a little bit more grace. (137)

AP5 agreed and explained that as an assistant principal working with high school students pre-COVID-19, they have always been empathetic to students. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed their leadership style in the way they interacted with adults. In this vignette, they share the following:

I've become a little bit more patient and empathetic with the adults and understanding that they have gone through some trauma in the pandemic... There were a lot of people that were living in fear for quite some time, and I can understand and relate to that—and just realizing that adults also have their own experiences that color how they interact with kids. (AP5, 140)

Compassion. Three of the eight participants (38%, $n = 3$) perceived being more compassionate after the COVID-19 pandemic. AP7 clarified that as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed,

Our kids have changed through the pandemic, and I think when we shut down, we were seeing that the basic needs that kids didn't have, came to light. And I think for me, I'm a little more compassionate and I think I've spent more time building relationships with different types of kids than I did pre-pandemic. (129)

Thoughtfulness. Two of the eight interviewees (25%, $n = 2$) deemed that the COVID-19 pandemic has made them more thoughtful as school leaders. AP6 described this change of being more thoughtful as having to "learn to be less black and white about things, that I've had to live in the gray area, at least live in the gray area for a longer period of time than I was used to." (136) AP6 elaborated and shared,

I had to learn how to slow down. But that's actually helped me a lot,...even for my own family. I moved too fast with the decisions that I make....It's taking your time and slowing down. Maybe that's how my leadership style has changed. And being okay with people going in different directions for a little while. (142)

AP8 also approached leadership differently after the COVID-19 pandemic by being more thoughtful with staff and students and focusing on the stakeholders' social-emotional health. A

different dynamic (I27) created by the school shutdown and return to learning warranted a more thoughtful leadership style. AP8 further explained,

It's a different dynamic. You can see the shift in people's overall behavior towards certain things, the morale, all of that. I think in that regard, I'm just a little bit more thoughtful in how I approach things and how if we are given a directive, if you will, to move forward on something instead of just being, "Hey, this is what we're told to do, get it done. (I31)

No Change to Leadership Style. Finally, one of the participants (13%, $n = 1$) shared that their leadership style did not change due to the COVID-19 pandemic. AP1 explains that while they perceived no change to their leadership style, they appreciated their role as a school leader more post-pandemic. They clarified,

I'm a servant leader, so I think during the pandemic I had a rough time when dealing with teachers and kids. That's why I'm in this business, to serve, especially the kids, and not being able to deal with them during the pandemic, that was really hard on me. So I think I actually appreciate my job even more now. (AP1,I16)

Interview Question 2 found that seven of the eight (88%, $n = 7$) assistant principals perceived that their leadership styles changed in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic allowing them to be more relationship focused by developing empathy, compassion, and thoughtfulness toward students, their families, teachers and school staff.

Interview Question 3. *What are the top three responsibilities that consumed most of your time as an assistant principal before the COVID-19 pandemic?* Interview question 3 asks the participants to reflect on the three most time-consuming responsibilities as assistant principals before the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses aligned to four categories of responsibilities: student discipline, instructional leadership, school management of programs and

processes, and student activities. The assistant principals ranked school management (63%, n = 5) as the most time-consuming responsibility before the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, the participants identified instructional leadership (75%, n = 6) as the second most time-consuming pre-pandemic responsibility. Lastly, processing student discipline (63%, n = 5) was ranked the third most time-consuming responsibility for school leaders in the assistant principal role before the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 5 describes the perceptions of the assistant principals' top three responsibilities before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 5

Ranking of Top Three Responsibilities of Assistant Principals Before the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants	Top responsibilities of assistant principal pre-pandemic
AP1	school management, instructional leadership, discipline
AP2	school management, instructional leadership, discipline
AP3	school management, instructional leadership, discipline
AP4	student discipline, school management, instructional leadership
AP5	school management, instructional leadership, discipline
AP6	student discipline, instructional leadership, student activities
AP7	student discipline, school management, instructional leadership,
AP8	school management, instructional leadership, discipline

School Management. Five out of the eight participants (63%, n = 5) indicated that managing the school building's programs and processes was the first responsibility that consumed much of the day for assistant principals. AP5 noted that having time to be creative in their *collateral duties* (155) before the pandemic allowed them to embrace their leadership role to create innovative programming.

I had a lot of time for creating special programs or new innovative ways of doing things. I had more time to make the job my own. And again, I didn't realize it at the time, that creating these special programs is good for students, for families, and staff. (156)

Instructional Leadership. Six of the eight assistant principals (75%, n = 6) shared that instructional leadership was the second most time-consuming responsibility in day-to-day operational roles. AP2 revealed that instructional leadership included "professional development, observations and feedback." (128) AP3 stated that before the COVID-19 pandemic, "the main focuses of my admin team and assistant principals were instruction." (152) Additionally, AP6 indicated that while school discipline was the responsibility that consumed the most time before the school shut down, instructional leadership was the second. AP6 also alluded to a shift in instructional leadership compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, "I feel like back then (before the pandemic), it was in the form of professional development for teachers. It was hands-on with teachers after school or during PLCs, that kind of instructional leadership." (150)

Student Discipline. Five of the eight participants (63%, n = 5) reported that the third most time-consuming leadership responsibility for assistant principals before the COVID-19 pandemic was processing student discipline. The sentiment regarding the responsibility of processing student discipline pre-pandemic was that it is the leadership responsibility of assistant principals. Assistant principals did not mention that processing student discipline was at the forefront of their duties pre-COVID-19 pandemic. Although they noted student discipline as one of their responsibilities pre-COVID-19, there was no elaboration on this identification.

Four of the eight assistant principals (50%, n = 4) expressed the same three responsibilities that consumed most of their time in order of importance; school management, and instructional leadership, followed by student discipline as the most time-consuming before

the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, Interview Question 3 found that pre-COVID-19 pandemic, assistant principals perceived that the most time-consuming responsibility was school management (63%, n = 5), followed by instructional leadership such as teacher observations and evaluations (75%, n = 6), and finally, processing student discipline (63%, n = 5).

Interview Question 4. *Share an example of how your responsibilities as an assistant principal may have changed after the COVID-19 pandemic.* Interview question 4 asked the interviewees to reflect on the changes to their school leadership responsibilities after the return to in-person learning post-pandemic. The most frequent response regarding how responsibilities changed for assistant principals was in student discipline (50%, n = 4), followed by school mitigation practices (38%, n = 3), instructional leadership (25%, n = 2), school attendance (25%, n = 2), and finally, student activities (13%, n = 1). Table 6 outlines the changes to responsibilities perceived by assistant principals after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 6

Changes to Assistant Principal Responsibilities After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Changes to AP Responsibilities	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Building Mitigation	X				X		X	
Discipline	X		X		X		X	
Attendance		X			X			
Student Activities						X		
Instruction	X							X

Student Discipline. Four of the eight participants (50%, n = 4) indicated that after the COVID-19 pandemic, assistant principals reported that their responsibilities changed in response to students' behavior in the school building, with student discipline becoming more of a focus

than their other responsibilities. AP1 explained that student discipline overshadowed the instructional leadership role as the "the discipline overtook the teacher evaluation piece." (137) AP3 concurred and stated that after the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2021-2022 school year, their school environment changed, causing a change in their responsibilities as student discipline took the majority of their time. AP3 concluded that their school environment changed dramatically after the COVID-19 pandemic and that student discipline referrals were "through the roof" in the 2021-2022 school year. (162) The assistant principal continued and shared,

After Covid last year, the increase in posturing, aggression, and fighting was palpable.

You could tell it was a big change in our building, and we still had vaping, we still have the drugs, but just so much more discipline-wise, especially a lot of physical. (161)

AP5 described navigating the student discipline process post-pandemic as,

Overwhelming, and it's consuming far more of my time now. It is my top priority every day, and the volume has increased. The severity and the unusualness of the behavior also slow down the process because it's not something I've dealt with before. So frequently, I'm encountering things that I haven't encountered before. I can't say, "oh, well, I did this one last week." A lot of situations are really unique and different. (1299)

AP7 agreed that their responsibility in the student discipline process has changed due to an escalation of more severe violations of the student code of conduct.

My discipline load is less now, but I feel they're for more severe things. For example, before the pandemic, most of my discipline were detentions, maybe a couple of ISS (in-school suspension). And I feel like it's mostly OSS (out-of-school suspension) now. There are bigger offenses. (148)

School Mitigation. Three of the eight assistant principals (38%, n = 3) reported that mitigation due to social distancing became a focused responsibility upon the immediate return to school that they had not experienced before the pandemic. AP1 clarified that upon the immediate return to school for staff and students, most of their time was spent on mitigation practices to ensure social distancing, which was "the biggest part of my job." (I33). However, the assistant principal continues, "Then when we returned to normal, discipline became a bigger part of the job." (I34)

AP 5 further expounds,

When we came back, there was a lot of covid-related mitigation. That drove everything else. Whereas I did the master schedule before COVID and after COVID. A lot of the decisions that I made with the master schedule were COVID related. (I34)

Instructional Leadership. Instructional leadership responsibilities became less of a focus after the COVID-19 pandemic, with two of the eight assistant principals (25%, n = 2) reporting a change. AP1 shares that the instructional leadership focus decreased during and after the COVID-19 pandemic as "instructional evaluation almost became null and void during and after the pandemic because we were kind of instructed just to leave teachers alone." (I35). However, AP8 found that once face-to-face instruction returned without mitigation practices, the expectation of being an instructional leader focused on teacher evaluation and feedback. AP8 explains that while this was the exception, the other job responsibilities made it difficult to prioritize instructional leadership.

We've been asked to be in the classroom a lot more, and we're trying to be in the classroom as much as possible. But we're getting sidelined on that by all the other fires

that crop up, a parent emergency, a bus emergency, some situation in the building or with a class or whatever. It's really kind of been more dealing with putting out fires. (143)

Attendance. Two of the eight assistant principals (25%, n = 2) reported tracking attendance, tardiness, and class cutting as a change in their leadership responsibilities after the COVID-19 pandemic. They report that students are not committed to attending school, are late to class, or are skipping classroom instruction while in school. AP2 reported that the responsibility of tracking students for attendance since the COVID-19 pandemic is more prevalent than before, and this problem might be connected to students' mental health.

We've done a lot more after the pandemic with things about attendance and tardies, and mental health. I think those things have become a lot more prevalent than before the pandemic. And I don't know if it just exposed the things already there and made it more obvious or exacerbated it. So it did come to the surface? I don't remember having to track so many kids and find out where they were because they're not coming to school at all. (134)

Student Activities. Lastly, one of the eight assistant principals (13%, n = 1) reported a positive change in their responsibilities as they prioritized student activities outside of instruction, like sports, clubs, and activities. AP6 explained that when students find balance outside classroom instruction through student activities, they find a sense of belonging to their school. AP6 asks, "What are we doing during the school day that allows kids to have opportunities to be involved even if they're not involved in those sports and clubs after school?"(157) AP6 furthered,

We all wanted to go slow and try to focus on academics. Student activities really lost their place in schools, in my opinion. And to me, that's not extracurricular. My first

principal in high school said, "Learning's too important to be confined to the four walls of the classroom." And I still believe that. And so that really has taken a bigger focus. (l61)

Assistant principals perceived that their responsibilities changed post-COVID-19 pandemic, with student discipline (50%, n = 4) at the forefront of their duties due to the changes in student behavior. Interview Question 4 found that the changes in student behavior created a school environment where instructional leadership (25%, n = 1) became less of a priority due to the enormity of student discipline referrals.

Interview Question 5. *Tell me about your experiences with student discipline before the pandemic.* Interview Question 5 asks assistant principals to reflect on their experiences with student discipline before the COVID-19 pandemic. All assistant principals (100%, n = 8) reported fewer student discipline experiences in pre-COVID-19 pandemic education. AP1 reported they perceived "*very little discipline issues*" (l41) before the pandemic. Additionally, their discipline experiences in the pre-pandemic setting were mostly processing violations of the student code of conduct for classroom disruption, and "teachers wrote very few referrals for that. There were days I wouldn't process one referral. There were weeks where I'd do two or three referrals in the whole week." (AP1, l46)

AP5 agreed that they experienced less processing student discipline, "before the pandemic, I would say that I might receive one, maybe one referral a day on average." (l133) Moreover, AP5 determined that although they had fewer experiences in processing student discipline pre-pandemic, their experiences involved repeat offenders or *super highflyers*. (l138) AP5 concludes that no major experiences stood out before the pandemic and, "I didn't feel overwhelmed by it." (l140) AP2 asserts that the experience with student discipline before the pandemic was just *normal discipline*,

Before the pandemic, I think it was normal discipline....But then you had the kids that are repeat offenders. You had the occasional drug, alcohol, maybe weapon, those are definitely far between, but they were there. (145)

AP6 explained the experiences they faced before the pandemic with student discipline were *inward-directed referrals*, that students were not necessarily acting out against each other, but "they were acting out against themselves in a lot of ways. Vaping, drugs, those kinds of things. It was individualized types of discipline." (172)

AP8 expressed that the experience of building strong relationships with students before the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to positive outcomes in student discipline.

Once your kids know who you are and how you deal with them they tend to calm down.

So, I didn't have a ton of discipline. I was dealing more with teacher issues, things that needed to be done in the classroom, things that I could help them to grow professionally.

(153)

In the pre-COVID-19 pandemic setting, 100% of the assistant principals reported fewer student discipline incidents than post-COVID-19, for mostly non-violent violations of the Student Code-of-Conduct. Additionally, assistant principals found positive student relationships influenced positive outcomes for repeat student offenders.

Interview Question 6. *What types of discipline referrals were you processing most frequently before the COVID-19 pandemic?* Interview question 6 explored the assistant principals' perceptions of the types of student discipline referrals processed before the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants conveyed that in the pre-pandemic setting, discipline violations processed most frequently were disruption, defiance, disrespect, disobedience (75%, n = 6), vaping, drug and alcohol usage (75%, n = 6), fighting, and aggressive behaviors (38%, n = 3),

and attendance-related infractions (38%, n = 3). Table 7 describes the types of discipline referrals assistant principals perceived they processed before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 7

Types of Discipline Referrals Processed Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Discipline Referral Types	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Disruption, Defiance, Disrespect, Disobedience	X	X		X	X	X		X
Substance Abuse	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Fighting and Aggressive Behaviors			X		X	X		
Tardiness/Class Cutting		X			X		X	

Substance Abuse. Six of the eight assistant principals (75%, n = 6) reflected that the student incidences of addiction-related behaviors in school were an increasing pre-pandemic problem. AP1 concluded that the incidence of students' vaping before the COVID-19 pandemic was primarily "the biggest problem" in student discipline. (160) AP3 stated, "vaping was the main issue " with students inhaling nicotine, marijuana, or THC on school premises. (165) AP7 also indicated that addiction behaviors increased in their school before the COVID-19 pandemic. AP2, AP5, and AP6 shared that vaping, drugs, and alcohol were occasional student discipline offenses in their schools, although not processed frequently.

Disruption, Defiance, Disrespect, Disobedience. Six of the eight assistant principals (75%, n = 7) noted that disrupting classroom instruction was a frequently processed discipline referral pre-pandemic. AP1, AP2, AP4, AP5, AP6, and AP8 all mention these behaviors as being frequently processed; however, AP8 elaborated, stating, "a lot of that was going back to the

classroom management or the classroom leadership. It was working with those teachers on giving them strategies to deal with these certain personalities and that kind of thing." (162)

Fighting and Aggressive Behaviors. Three of the eight assistant principals (38%, n = 3) indicated they were processing referrals for fighting or aggressive behaviors; however, the occurrence was rare before the COVID-19 pandemic. AP3 remembers, "my first year here, we had maybe one fight, I think, at the bus loop." (166) AP5 reflects, "We would have an occasional fight, maybe one or two a year." (1) AP6 concludes, "I could probably count on my hand how many fights we had before the pandemic, total, ever at this school." (1137)

Tardiness and Class Cutting. Three assistant principals (38%, n = 3) shared that they processed student discipline referrals for tardiness and class cutting before the COVID-19 pandemic. AP2, AP5, and AP7 all perceived tardiness and class cutting as commonly processed student discipline referrals. AP2 shared that analysis of student discipline data from before March 2020 revealed that processing tardiness referrals for students being late to class happened most often in their school. Although the participants indicated tardiness and class cutting frequently occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was little elaboration in their answers.

In summary, pre-COVID-19 pandemic, assistant principals perceived that disruption, defiance, disrespect, disobedience (75%, n = 6), and vaping, drug and alcohol usage (75%, n = 6) were processed more frequently than violent behaviors such as fighting and aggressive behaviors (38%, n = 3) and tardiness and class cutting (38%, n = 3).

Interview Question 7. *Did student discipline referrals increase, decrease, or stay the same after the pandemic?* Interview question 7 asked the participants to reflect on the number of student discipline referrals they processed after the return to face-to-face learning post-pandemic.

Six out of eight (75%, n = 6) assistant principals reported that the student discipline referrals increased, and one of the eight (13%, n = 1) perceived a decrease in referrals. Additionally, one of the eight (13%, n = 8) felt the frequency of student referrals they received was the same as before the pandemic. Table 8 outlines the perceived frequency of student discipline referrals that assistant principals processed after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 8

Frequency of Student Discipline Referrals After the COVID-19 Pandemic

Student Discipline Referrals	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Increased	X		X	X	X	X		X
Decreased							X	
Stay the Same		X						

AP1 expressed that after the pandemic, the frequency of student discipline referrals "increased dramatically." (159) AP3 concurred, explaining that student discipline referrals "definitely increased," especially for physical aggression. (1105) AP6 stated that although they perceived an increase in referrals, there was a decrease in student discipline immediately after the pandemic. However, this changed as mitigation practices ended in schools and students became mask-free. AP6 explained,

I feel that immediately after (the pandemic) it decreased. And that was when we were all like, "Oh, we're just happy to be here. And the kids were happy to be here, and we were looking the other way." But then, once we became mask free and we had our first full year of being back, I feel like it exploded. (191)

AP8 observed that during the 2021-2022 school year, "student behavior was out of control." (171) The respondent elaborates and explains that student referrals for long-term

suspension or expulsion from school resulted in more student leadership discipline hearings for heightened student behaviors. AP8 added, "we probably had 48-50 discipline packets last year where typically we might have 19. A lot of it was vaping, fighting, drugs, those types of things that are automatic referrals to the Office of Student Leadership." (173)

AP7 felt their experience with student discipline was unique, and having the same set of students multiple years in a row allowed them to build lasting relationships with students and families. AP7 explained, "the students really know me, the parents know me, and I think that plays a big role in it." (161) AP2 concluded that in their high school, the rate of discipline referrals after the pandemic was the same frequency as before and mostly attendance based. AP2 shared, "I processed a lot of tardy referrals before the pandemic. I don't know if it's the discipline is more evident to me, with the kids not coming to school. I think that's about the same." (159)

In response to Interview Question 7, six of the eight assistant principals (75%, n = 6) felt the frequency of student discipline referrals significantly increased post-COVID-19 pandemic, especially for physically aggressive behaviors and higher-level offenses that warranted recommendations for long-term suspension and expulsion.

Interview Question 8. *What types of discipline referrals are you processing most frequently in the post-pandemic setting?* Interview question 8 asked assistant principals to reflect on their experiences processing student discipline referrals by type after the COVID-19 pandemic. Substance Abuse (75%, n = 6), fight and aggressive behaviors (75%, n = 6), tardiness (25%, n = 2), and cell phone violations (25%, n = 2) were behaviors identified processed most frequently post-pandemic. Table 9 outlines the responses of the participants' perceptions regarding the types of student discipline referrals processed most frequently after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 9*Student Discipline Referrals Processed Most Frequently After the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Student Discipline Referrals	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Substance Abuse	X	X	X		X		X	X
Fighting and Aggression	X		X		X	X	X	X
Tardiness		X			X			
Cell phone				X				X

Substance Abuse. Six of the eight assistant principals (75%, n = 6) reported processing vaping and drug violations on school property after the pandemic. AP1 perceived vaping and drug use escalated after the Covid-19 pandemic, with the behaviors attributed to habits students acquired due to lack of supervision and availability of nicotine and marijuana during virtual learning. AP2 acquiesced that the incidents of referrals for nicotine and marijuana vaping increased post-pandemic and observed: "a lot of vaping that wasn't there before." (l68) Additionally, AP3, AP5, and AP7 shared that while vaping and drug use was prevalent before the pandemic, the occurrences in the post-pandemic setting were just as widespread. Additionally, AP8 concluded that when reflecting on the highest-level offenses of the most frequently processed discipline referrals after the COVID-19 pandemic, the discipline referrals resulting in long-term suspension or expulsion recommendations were drug-related.

Fighting and Aggression. Fighting and aggressive behavior discipline referrals were frequently processed post-pandemic. Six of the eight assistant principals (75%, n = 6) indicated that fighting and aggressive behaviors happen more frequently after the pandemic than in the pre-pandemic educational setting. The participants indicated that the escalation of physical behaviors was prevalent daily after the COVID-19 pandemic.

AP3 states that in comparison to the pre-pandemic educational setting, physical aggression was frequently processed and feels "issues stemmed from social media. A lot of our issues, we traced it right back to via Snapchat or Instagram." (181) Additionally, AP3 shared that the physical altercations start in out-of-school environments and that students are "saying things to each other outside of the building. Most of it was always outside the building, and then it was brought in. I would attribute a lot of it to that lack of communication skills with the kids." (186) Regarding fighting, AP6 conveyed in this vignette,

we've had more fights and arguments and conflicts than ever before. We've had multiple days where we've had multiple fights in one day. And even when they're not fights, there's almost fights. We even have students set up fake fights that are in the bathrooms, and they record them. And then, they think it's hilarious, and they're like, "Hey, you look like his size; you should fight him." (1111)

AP5 shared similar experiences and explained that students planned physical altercations to film and post to online social media platforms,

we had a big issue last year with students having a fight club in the school bathrooms. And when we traced it back, it was something that had originated at the parks during COVID. They were meeting at the local park or somebody's backyard or in the community association, planning fights, filming them, and posting them online. (1201)

Tardiness. Two of the eight assistant principals (25% or $n = 2$) identified tardiness and class cutting as frequently processed referrals after the COVID-19 pandemic. AP2 explained that discipline referrals for tardiness were *nonstop* (166) after the COVID-19 pandemic, with an increase in student mental health issues contributing to the problem, especially those "students

who suffer from anxiety, depression and that results in them not coming to school, skipping class, making those bad choices." (I78) AP5 concluded that students developed habits while at home during the pandemic shutdown that carried over the school house after the pandemic and explained that while in school, students "disregarded the rules, just skipping (class), just sort of wandering, and being non-compliant to adults in the hallway." (I80)

Cell Phone Violations. Two of the eight participants (38%, n = 3) expressed that cell phone violations were processed frequently after the COVID-19 pandemic. AP4 and AP8 indicated the problem with personal cell phone devices in the educational setting; however, AP8 elaborated that although there are cell phone policies, students and parents do not always agree with the guidelines. The COVID-19 pandemic caused students to be "a little bit more in your face with all the cell phone issues with TikTok and the dancing." (AP8,I94)

Post-COVID-19 pandemic, assistant principals identified substance abuse (75%, n = 6), fighting and aggressive behaviors (75%, n = 6), tardiness (25%, n = 2), and cell phone violations (25%, n = 2) as behaviors processed most frequently in student discipline. Additionally, AP5 explained that processing student discipline in the post-pandemic setting is not really about the types of discipline processed, "but the frequency, the volume, and then the extremeness of the behaviors we are seeing." (I154) AP5 emphasized that assistant principals are experiencing "a lot more firsts" after the COVID-19 pandemic in student behaviors. (I164)

Interview Question 9. *Some people would say there is no difference in students' behavior before and after the pandemic. What would you say to them?* All assistant principals (100%, n = 8) indicated a noted difference in student behavior before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They revealed the observed differences in student behaviors as regression or lack of

maturity (63%, n = 5), negative behaviors (75%, n = 7), mental health issues (38%, n = 3), lack of school attendance (38%, n = 3) and addiction (50%, n = 4). Table 10 outlines the assistant principals' perceptions regarding the differences in student behavior pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 10

Differences in Student Behavior Before and After the Pandemic

Student Behavior Differences	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Regression	X		X	X	X		X	
Negative behaviors	X		X	X	X	X		X
Mental Health		X	X	X				
Lack of School Attendance		X	X	X				
Addictions			X		X		X	X

Regression. Five of the eight participants (63%, n = 5) indicated that they observed student behavior indicative of regressive behaviors due to the factors of the COVID-19 pandemic. AP1, a former middle school teacher, discussed how high school students are behaviorally middle school students as "they are displaying the same behavior, but of eighth graders and not tenth graders" after the COVID-19 pandemic. (l83) AP1 explains,

A lot of the behaviors I saw from high school kids (after the pandemic) are behaviors I witnessed from middle school kids back in the day. That goes back to what I was saying; they lost a year and a half of maturity. So maybe they're not that different, but just not as mature. (l78)

AP3 shared that most of the student discipline processed after the COVID-19 pandemic was attributed to ninth and tenth-grade students. Because students in these grade levels missed

two years of school, AP3 suggested, "a lot of our kids needed resocialization. They honestly did not know how to use their words." (I79) This lack of socialization and communication skills contributed to students being unable to navigate the social aspect of the school environment. AP3 concluded that in addition to environmental factors in the home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students had "forgotten what structure is like and what the expectations are. A lot of kids didn't remember what an expectation is of being in a school from being home for so long." (I80)

AP4 perceived that "younger students missed out on a critical time to develop social-emotional competency skills by being isolated and are suffering academically or socially." (I75) AP5 concurred that the trauma of missing school and the lack of adult supervision contributed to students' negative behaviors as they "missed key transitional years between middle and high school. And those are already significant times that are difficult. But it just added the layer of delay and difficulty." (I214) AP5 continued that the pandemic contributed to the development of a "free-range feral child." (I204) The assistant principal furthered that students left unattended contributed to the *feral nature* of some students. AP5 explained

We had a big issue last year with students having a fight club in the bathroom. And when we traced it back, it was something that had originated in the parks during COVID. They were meeting at the local park or somebody's backyard or in the community association,...planning fights, filming them, and posting them online. And they brought that back into the building. (I203)

Negative Behaviors. Six of the eight assistant principals (75%, n = 6) identified negative behaviors due to the lack of social interactions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. AP1, AP3, AP4, AP5, AP6, and AP8 all expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted students' behavior.

AP1 explained that with students missing a year and a half of school, they began to make immature decisions when attending school virtually in the home setting. As they were isolated from their peers and parents during the school day, the lack of social interactions was more evident as their behaviors became less restrained. AP1 shared an example of negative behaviors made by a high school student, developed during virtual learning with an illustration,

A lot of immature decisions were made by students at home. Virtually turning off the camera and hitting a vape while sitting there watching instruction. Or turn off the speaker and cuss out their little brother. You could do that at home, right? But now, I think students were not ready to come back to the real world. And they still think they can hit the vape whenever they want, or cuss at their little brother whenever they want. (I66)

AP3 indicated that students struggled academically and emotionally post-pandemic once they returned to the school building. AP5 also found that traumatic experiences triggered students' behaviors and that due to their developmental age, the traumas are "hard to process" for students. (I199)

AP6 furthered that due to the social distancing mandates of the COVID-19 pandemic, students "lost the normal conflict resolution that they naturally had by being together all the time. That year and a half off radically made an impact on their ability to deal with each other." (I116) The assistant principal concluded that social media is an *intervening variable* into negative student behaviors exasperated by the social peer separation and students not knowing "how to deal with normal conflict." (AP6,I123) AP6 explained,

They use (social media), and it becomes bigger and quicker; they're quick to make it physical. They don't know how to deal with their emotions. And talking, there is no talking to anyone. You text, and you're angry, and then you text in a group. And

everything exists on (social media); you've got a Jerry Springer mentality throughout a fight." (I127)

AP8 observed the same types of behavior post-pandemic, describing it as "more in your face" as they attempt to "get their power back" by questioning and being non-responsive to adult authority. AP8 continued and described students as "more brazen" than before the COVID-19 pandemic. (I101)

Mental Health. Three of the eight participants (38%, n = 3) reported that mental health issues contributed to a difference in student behaviors after the COVID-19 pandemic. AP2, AP4, and AP7 mention mental health contributing to the negative behaviors observed after the pandemic. AP2 determined that students' mental health issues are "hard to navigate at the school level." (I79) However, AP2 perceived an increase in students suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health ailments. AP2 continued explaining that students' mental health exacerbates attendance rates as these students are not attending school in the post-pandemic setting. AP4 noticed that "more students are struggling with anxiety and depression since the pandemic, and their grades are suffering due to missing school for mental health concerns." (I77) AP7 countered that the students "don't really know how to cope and deal with their issues" after the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

School Attendance. Three of the eight participants (38%, n = 3) reported that students' behavior regarding school attendance has changed in a post-pandemic learning environment. AP2 and AP4 reiterated that mental health issues affect school attendance post-pandemic, as students are not attending school due to anxiety and depression. AP3 shared that there is an increase in attendance issues, not just in coming to school but making the parents of students

understand that their child must attend school and cannot stay in the home-learning environment. AP3 suggested "re-educating the parents" on attendance policies "to get the students what they need" in the learning environment. (I119)

Substance Abuse. Four of the eight assistant principals (50%, n = 4) described addiction-like behaviors as more prevalent in student behavior after the COVID-19 pandemic. AP3, AP5, AP7, and AP8 recognized that when students lost structure, routine, and supervision of the school day during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were more apt to use drugs, nicotine, and alcohol post-pandemic. AP5 explained that students "picked up antisocial behaviors" during the COVID-19 pandemic, including vaping and marijuana use (I211). AP7 expanded that students are "definitely more addicted to vaping" at a higher rate than before the pandemic (I80). AP7 continued to explain that although students in their school are not exhibiting physical misbehaviors, the students do "have addictions and don't really know how to cope and deal with their issues" (I86) AP8 continued to share that students' behaviors are more blatant because there were no repercussions for negative behaviors during the pandemic, including vaping and drug use.

All assistant principals found that student behavior has changed pre- and post-COVID-19 (100%, n = 8). They revealed the observed differences in student behaviors as regression or lack of maturity (63%, n = 5), negative behaviors (75%, n = 6), mental health issues (38%, n = 3), lack of school attendance (38%, n = 3) and addiction (50%, n = 4). The assistant principals perceived these changes due to the traumatic events of the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of social interactions, and no repercussions for negative behaviors.

Interview Question 10. *Describe in one word your role as an assistant principal navigating the COVID-19 pandemic as a school leader.* Assistant principals were asked to reflect

on their experiences as school leaders throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and describe them using one word. According to the Oxford dictionary, sentiment is a view of, or attitude toward, a situation or event. The school leaders used the following words to describe the sentiment of their professional practice while circumventing the COVID-19 pandemic: frustrating (25%, n = 2), ever-changing (25%, n = 2), flexibility (12.5%, n = 1), fluid (12.5%, n = 1), communicator (12.5%, n = 1), and tricky (12.5%, n = 1). A sentiment analysis using a sentiment generator determined whether the chosen words were considered positive, neutral, or negative as follows: two of the eight (25%, n = 2) responses are positive; flexibility and fluid. Secondly, two of the eight responses (25%, n = 2) are neutral sentiments: ever-changing and communicator. Lastly, three of the eight participants (38%, n = 3) answered negative sentiments; two participants using the word frustrating and one participant describing their experience as tricky. Table 11 outlines the one-word description of the perceptions of assistant principals leading during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 11

Description of the Leadership Roles of Assistant Principals Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

One word description	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Frustrating	X						X	
Ever-Changing		X				X		
Flexibility			X					
Fluid				X				
Communicator					X			
Tricky								X

The sentiment of the assistant principals leading through the COVID-19 pandemic were 25% positive sentiments, 25% neutral sentiments and 38% negative sentiments. The school

leaders perceived their roles as ever-changing, flexible, fluid, communicators, tricky, and frustrating.

Research Question 1 Summary

The participants provided a variety of perspectives regarding their experiences as assistant principals leading through the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically with student discipline. All participants indicated that leading through the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging due to changes in student behavior (100%, n = 8), decrease in instructional leadership roles due to more negative student behaviors (50%, n = 4), and changes in relationships by developing empathy, compassion, thoughtfulness, and supportiveness (88%, n = 7) with stakeholders. The assistant principals suggested that their administrative roles changed post-COVID-19 pandemic, as they spent more time navigating negative student behaviors and student discipline processes, instead of their focusing on their instructional leadership responsibilities.

Research Question 2

What professional development would support assistant principals in the student discipline process post-pandemic? To interpret the findings of research question 2, it is important to understand the perceptions of assistant principals' experiences with professional learning in their professional practice. The researcher sought to understand how the participants learned the student discipline process by asking them to reflect on their experiences as new administrators. Next, the researcher determined what professional learning on student discipline practices was provided to them as assistant principals. Additionally, the researcher asked the participants to share what elements they would include in designing professional development for new assistant

principals learning the student discipline process. The following is an examination of the data regarding Research Question 2.

Interview Question 11. *Describe to me how you learned the student discipline process when you started your position as an assistant principal.* The question asked assistant principals to reflect on how they learned to student discipline process as new high school administrators—defining the student discipline process as managing student referrals, due process procedures, administering discipline, and communicating with students and parents. As new administrators, the APs shared that they learned the student discipline process from other administrators (88%, n = 7), school district-led professional development (38%, n = 3), the school district's discipline guidelines (25%, n = 2), and other staff members (13%, n = 1). Table 12 outlines how new assistant principals learned to navigate the student discipline process.

Table 12

How New Assistant Principals Learned the Student Discipline Process

Training of New APs	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Other Administrators		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Other Staff Members	X							
Discipline Guidelines		X		X				X
District Professional Development		X	X		X			

Learning from Other Administrators. Seven of the eight assistant principals explained that as new administrators, they first learned how to process student discipline, seeking other assistant principals' advice on their administrative teams. AP2, AP3, AP4, AP5, AP6, AP7, and AP8 conveyed that watching veteran assistant principals process the student discipline referrals were the main source of learning the protocols. Equally, AP3 explained, as a new AP, that the

lack of professional development and knowledge of the student discipline process forced a collaborative relationship with other administrators on their administrative team. AP3 shared

my training came from other assistant principals. And it was collaborative; it's not like one person knows more than the others. It's brainstorming. They ask me, I ask them, we pull out the guideline book, and we look through it together. (I145)

AP3 added that there was a marked difference in collaboration due to the proximity of the other administrators. When the offices of the administrative teams are in the same vicinity, as opposed to different areas of the school building, "being all together in the office on a hallway was really valuable specifically for student discipline." (AP3, I154) AP5 shared that they also utilized their colleagues to "look over my work,...saying, "Hey, here's what I'm thinking." (I258) AP6 offered that learning from other experienced administrators was how they grew their professional practice in processing discipline. Similar to AP3 and AP5, AP6 acquiesced, "it really was knocking on the door next to me and going, "Hey, how do you do this?" (I143) They continued, "I did that throughout my whole first year. "Give me your statement; give me your packet. Let me see how you do this." And just trying to pick and choose the best of everything." (I147) AP5 and AP6 mentioned mentorships as beneficial to learning student discipline; however, they did not elaborate with specific examples.

District-led Professional Development. Three of the eight assistant principals (38%, n = 3) indicated that district-led professional development was a part of learning the student discipline process. However, the participants did not indicate the usefulness of the training.

AP2 shared that "some training given by the division" (I92) was part of the learning process as a new administrator, along with learning from colleagues and the district's discipline

guidelines. AP3 conveyed that although they did not remember attending professional development on the student discipline process, they "think we got one training, maybe, on the guidelines." (I139) AP5 concluded that they also could not remember the content of the training; however, they felt the training was scenario based at a new assistant principals training.

Discipline Guidelines. Three of the eight participants (38%, n = 3) established that they gained knowledge of the student discipline process by exploring the school division's discipline guidelines. AP2 and AP4 mentioned the discipline guidelines to support learning and administering discipline protocols. AP8, an 18-year veteran administrator, shared that although professional development was not offered until their "fourth or fifth year" in the position, they used the student discipline guidelines to be consistent when administering student discipline. (I136)

Learning from Other Staff Members. AP1 shared a unique learning experience learning the student discipline process as an aspiring administrator eighteen years ago. The participant described themselves as being "green" and someone that did not know what they were doing in processing student discipline. (I106) However, a principal mentor would send AP1 to another school to gain experience in processing discipline. AP1 furthered in this vignette,

I would leave work early every day to go and help process referrals as a favor to a principal. Basically, the security assistant there taught me how to do it. And the discipline secretary taught me how to process referrals. (I106)

AP1 acknowledged that learning in this format did not allow time to build relationships with the students as they issued discipline dispositions. AP1 continued, "I took a lot less time to

help students and a lot more time punishing students. I wasn't listening to their stories. I didn't really listen to the kids or try to assist them in any way." (I109)

When answering Interview Question 11, the assistant principals indicated that authentic and ongoing professional development on the student discipline process was unavailable as new assistant principals. Instead, 88% of the participants shared that they learned the student discipline process in real-time from veteran assistant principals on their administrative teams (Table 12).

Interview Question 12. *What professional development was provided regarding student discipline after you started your position as an assistant principal?* Interview question 12 asked the school leaders to reflect on the professional development provided by the school division specific to learning the student discipline process. Four of the eight participants shared that school-based presentations from district leaders (75%, n = 6) were the primary source of professional learning as an administrator new to the role. Three of the eight participants (38%, n = 3) shared that while they received training as a new AP, it was not specific to school discipline. Table 13 outlines the types of professional development provided to new assistant principals in learning the student discipline process.

Table 13

Professional Development Provided to New APs Regarding the Student Discipline Process

Types	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
School-based Presentations		X	X	X	X		X	
Non-specific to Student Discipline	X					X		X

Although all the assistant principals responded to interview question 12, four of the eight APs (50%, n = 4) were uncertain upon their initial responses to the question, opening with their answers with the phrase *I don't remember*. AP1 explained that when reflecting on the professional development provided when they started the position, they struggled to recall when, where, or if it occurred, adding, "I don't remember." (I118) AP2 conveyed the same uncertainty stating, "I don't remember, but I don't think so." (I100) Likewise, AP5 reflected, "I can't even remember what it was" (I265). With AP6 adding, "I couldn't really recall anything that was specific to new APs." (I155) Conversely, AP6 concluded that while assistant principal professional development was "a blind spot for a while, and I feel like it's actually a bit better in the last few years" (I162).

School-based Presentations. Five of the eight (75%, n = 6) assistant principals mentioned school-based sessions when referencing the professional learning they received on the student discipline process. The professional development was in an informational format that was "more of a how-to...what you do on a referral and what not to do on the referral."(AP2, I102) AP3, AP5, and AP7 conferred that division leaders formatted the school-based sessions as tabletop sessions that included student discipline scenarios, coding of discipline dispositions, and procedural changes. AP7 continued to share that the sessions were not timely as they had "already learned the things that were provided in that professional development" as an administrative intern. (I117) AP7 concluded that the sessions were a one-time learning experience with little elaboration on other aspects of the student discipline process.

Non-specific to Student Discipline. AP1, AP6, and AP8 communicated that professional development specific to the student discipline process was not part of their learning experiences as new school leaders. However, the participants shared the professional learning provided as

new leaders covered administrative topics school leaders needed to manage their schools and were non-specific to the student discipline process. AP6 shared that professional learning for new administrators learning to navigate the student discipline process would have been useful, but they did not "recall discipline per se, being something targeted for new APs." (I158) AP8 said they received "professional development, but there was no real training." (I145) The assistant principal furthers that while professional development expands with new learning opportunities, the application is still in question.

Right now, we have a lot of great opportunities with the training or the development that we get. But, I mean, ten minutes after you walk out of there, it's like, okay, that was great. Now how do I apply it? (AP8, I164)

In initially responding to Interview Question 12, 50% of the eight participants struggled to recall any professional development on the student discipline process offered to them as new assistant principals. After more consideration, 75% of the eight participants mentioned school-based presentations that did not offer follow-up sessions for authentic learning experiences.

Interview Question 13. *After the pandemic, what elements would you include if you could design the ideal professional development for assistant principals managing the student discipline process? Why?* The eight participants spoke candidly about the elements needed to develop professional learning to manage student discipline and why those elements are needed. The eight participants outlined suggested several elements they deemed as important to include in developing professional development for managing student discipline: understanding the student discipline process (75%, n = 6), using student discipline guidelines (25%, n = 2), hands-on learning experiences (38%, n = 2), using real-world scenarios (50%, n = 4), communication (38%, n = 2), and resources to respond to student behavior (13%, n = 1). Table 14 outlines the

components the participants indicated would be meaningful to assistant principals learning to manage the student discipline process. Table 14 outlines the suggestions the participants shared in designing the ideal professional development in learning how to navigate the student discipline process.

Table 14

Ideal Elements of Professional Development for APs to Manage Student Discipline

Elements	AP1	AP2	AP3	AP4	AP5	AP6	AP7	AP8
Student discipline process	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Student discipline guidelines				X		X		
Hands-on learning experiences	X		X					X
Use of real-world scenarios	X					X	X	X
Communication				X	X		X	
Response to students' behavior		X						

Creation of Ideal Professional Development to Manage Student Discipline. Six of the eight participants mentioned that an examination of the student discipline process is included in the professional development created for assistant principals. This element included exploring the logistics of the process to include writing and understanding student discipline referrals, coding of student dispositions, the interview process, time management, and including the resources needed to understand the higher levels of discipline. AP4 included consistency as a key element in the student discipline process to eliminate bias in determining discipline dispositions using the example, we "don't give one student a full day of ISS for a second cell phone referral and give another student after school detention for that referral." (I105) AP5 stressed the importance of organization in the post-pandemic setting, an area that they may not have considered before the pandemic stating, "I get eight to ten referrals a day that comes in through

email. Whereas before the pandemic, if I got one." (I276) AP6 offered that a simulation of higher discipline offense procedures, such as student discipline hearings and school board appeals, would be an important component of understanding the process and one that is often overlooked. AP6 continued,

I remember hearing about the discipline hearing...that would happen and thinking it would be this courtroom thing. Like, what am I walking into? After the hearing, you think, oh, this is nothing. And then after the school board, it's like, whoa, this is something. (I185)

AP6 and AP7 both mentioned that understanding the legal aspects of student discipline, such as due process, is an important addition to understanding the student discipline process. AP6 elaborated and shared, "legal briefs on searches...what's in your rights, what's not in your rights. Reasonable suspicion, what is it? Briefing on differences between the legal side and the school side." (I192)

In addition to learning the student discipline process, AP4 and AP6 suggested thoroughly investigating the school district's student discipline guidelines. AP6 compared the student discipline guidelines to the "rule book" administrators use to stay consistent when administering students' consequences for violating the student code of conduct. (I168) The participant furthers that it is necessary to "understand the philosophy of it and how it's organized" to make informed decisions regarding the levels of student discipline. (AP6, I170)

AP1, AP6, AP7, and AP8 all mentioned using real-world student discipline scenarios in creating the ideal professional development. AP1 shared that school leaders shared actual discipline referrals with teachers to model decision-making skills. AP1 stressed that the aspect of

including scenarios when learning the student discipline process is important as schools are different and "not all size fits all." (I132) AP6 counters that discipline scenarios may not be an element to share with beginning administrators as "you're just trying to figure out what happened. Sometimes scenarios don't always get at what new people need, in my opinion." (I176) Instead, AP6 suggested the creation of

"a well-produced video of investigation elements. From start to finish, have actors playing out a kid getting caught with drugs or whatever in the bathroom.... you meet with the kid; you meet with parents, conduct a search, make the recommendation, tell the principal, or go down to the hearing office. All that to visualize that whole process." (I178)

Hands-on learning experiences were an element that AP1, AP3, and AP8 would incorporate into developing the ideal student discipline professional learning session. AP3 stressed that, in their own experience, an authentic mentoring program was the most beneficial element in learning the student discipline process. AP3 found that strategically matched mentors that openly communicate create an experience that is a valuable learning tool. AP3 explained, "...number one, I've been fortunate to have some really great mentors. I feel fortunate I have that in my building, but also outside of my building." (I176) AP3 furthered that being able to shadow a mentor through the student discipline process was more of a learning experience than the new administrator training that AP3 described as *sporadic* with a lack of follow-up and in a "sit and get" format. (I194) AP8 suggested that administrative interns should be exposed to the discipline process as an apprenticeship or precursor to the assistant principalship. AP8 further explains that this professional development would support the school divisions' mentorship program and

create stronger school leadership teams.

AP4, AP5, and AP7 indicated that communication is a key skill that should be explored in creating the ideal professional development for managing student discipline. Each explained that communication skills are paramount when building relationships with students and their families. AP4 explained that cultivating relationships with students supports clear communication as they will be "more likely to follow your directions and or accept the consequences if you have a pre-established relationship with them." (I290) AP5 and AP7 conferred that training is needed for new administrators to navigate conversations with conversations. AP5 stresses that learning to communicate with difficult parents is even more important post-pandemic as they question if "the trauma that parents have gone through" is causing more interactions with "difficult parents that push back on the discipline." (I292)

Lastly, AP2 suggested creating additional professional development to respond to the changing landscape of student behaviors. AP2 expressed that while administrators may have been trained to process student referrals, the professional development they received did not offer resources or effective interventions in correcting challenging student behaviors. AP2 advised that this resource would be significant to school leaders, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, stating that "behavior that is really rooted in the home and has just surfaced at the school" is difficult to develop interventions to change student behavior without support. (I108) AP2 furthered that with the *nuanced situations* of the post-pandemic era, *creative, solution-oriented* support should be developed for situations that do not fall under the student discipline guidelines.

In summary, the assistant principals interviewed in this study found that several important elements should be included in professional development for assistant principals learning to

manage the student discipline process. 75% of the 8 participants indicate that it is important to understand the student discipline process while incorporating hands-on experiences (38%, n = 3), real-world scenarios (50%, n = 5), and how to communicate with students and families (38%, n = 3). Additionally, professional development based on interventions for correcting challenging student behaviors for assistant principals is suggested post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Interview Question 14. *That ends my questions for this interview. Is there anything you would like to add?* AP1, AP5, and AP8 contributed additional comments to add to their interview responses. AP1 shared that as an assistant principal for 18 years, their outlook on student discipline changed from "punisher to building relationships with the students" to support their growth. (I151) Additionally, AP1 shared that the role of the assistant principal is different based on the individual strengths of an administrator.

AP5 continued to explain that student discipline experiences are different from pre-pandemic. It was important for AP5 to stress to the researcher their experiences with student discipline after the COVID-19 pandemic were time-consuming and draining, leaving little time to focus on other responsibilities.

Likewise, AP8 felt that after the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership roles shifted with "many moving parts," making it "hard to do a lot of things." (I76) AP8 concluded that school division leaders want school-based leaders to lead in a tight-loose style, but "when it really comes down to things, they really want to control" what is happening in schools. (I178) AP8 stressed that school leaders must do "what is right for each building" because what "fits at one high school may not fit another high school." (I182)

In reflection, assistant principals that participated in this study all indicate a strong resignation of wanting to serve their schools to better student outcomes while acknowledging the challenges brought forward due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the challenges are recognized in this study, the assistant principals also acknowledge an empathic, compassionate outlook in the post-COVID-19 educational setting (Table 4).

Research Question 2 Summary

The participants provided a range of perspectives regarding professional development related to student discipline. When asked how they learned to navigate the student discipline process as new administrators, 88% of the eight participants shared that they learned by watching and shadowing their colleagues on their administrative teams (Table 5). Similarly, 38% of the assistant principals acknowledged gaining knowledge from the school division's professional development, while 38% referenced learning from the school division's student discipline guidelines.

Half of the participants (50%, $n = 4$) were initially uncertain of their answers when asked about the professional development they received in the student discipline process from the school district. Moreover, 75% of the participants recognized that school-based training presentations on student discipline were provided to administrative teams, while 25% described that they had not received professional development on this topic (Table 13).

Finally, the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with student discipline to develop the ideal professional learning for new assistant principals (Table 14). The participants shared that the elements needed to develop the ideal professional learning for new assistant principals should include the following: learning the logistics of the student discipline process (75%, $n = 6$), the use of real-world scenarios as practice examples in the processing of

student discipline referrals (50%, n = 4), experiencing hands-on learning through authentic mentorships or internships (38%, n = 3), communication skills with stakeholders (38%, n = 3), using the student discipline guidelines (25%, n = 2) and developing responses to students' behavior (13%, n = 1).

Summary

This qualitative research study explored high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to student discipline pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. The interview data elicited five findings for Research Question 1 in understanding the high school assistant principal's role, responsibilities, and perceptions of student discipline pre- and post-pandemic. First, assistant principals perceived that their roles as disciplinarians now take priority over their instructional leadership roles due to negative student behaviors experienced post-COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the participants indicated that building positive relationships with students, staff, and parents is crucial for the post-COVID-19 pandemic educational setting in supporting their roles as school leaders. Next, the assistant principals perceived a decline in students' behavioral functioning post-COVID-19, causing changes to their professional practice as they responded to their students' aggressive behaviors, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Next, the data reveals that assistant principals need mental health programming support to navigate the mental health issues of their students that affect student behaviors and daily attendance.

Research Question 2 examines what professional development would support assistant principals in the student discipline process post-pandemic. The researcher sought to understand how the participants learned the student discipline process by asking them to reflect on their experiences as new administrators. Next, the researcher determined what professional learning

on student discipline practices was provided to them as assistant principals. Additionally, the researcher asked the participants to share what elements they would include in designing professional development for new assistant principals learning the student discipline process. The data reflect high school assistant principals' professional development on the student discipline process that is actionable, collaborative, and interactive for lasting retention and applicable to practice.

Chapter 5: Findings, Implications, and Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline in public schools before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also determined what professional development assistant principals perceived they needed to navigate the post-pandemic student discipline process. The data reflect that assistant principals' perceptions of leadership changed due to circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These perceptions include changes to assistant principals' roles and responsibilities, student discipline responses, and relationships with students, staff, and families post-COVID-19. Additionally, the data reflect the need for authentic, real-world professional development opportunities centered around student discipline to support assistant principals post-COVID-19.

Summary of Findings

The eight assistant principals who participated in the study served in the high school setting in one public school division in southeastern Virginia. The participant pool of eight participants included three male assistant principals and five female assistant principals with experience ranging as an administrator from three and a half years to 18 years. The researcher identified high school assistant principals who served at least one year before the COVID-19 pandemic, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic to contribute to this research through virtual interviews. Transcripts of the interviews were shared with each participant for approval before the researcher began to analyze the data.

After reviewing and analyzing the data from the interviews of high school assistant principals, several findings and themes emerged. These findings were identified to address the research questions:

1. What are high school assistant principals' perceptions of leadership related to school discipline before and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What professional development would support assistant principals with the student discipline process post-pandemic?

Discussion of Findings

The study findings are presented in order of the related research question. Finding 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 align with Research Question 1, with Finding 6 addressing Research Question 2.

Finding 1

High school assistant principals indicated that student discipline takes priority over instructional leadership post-COVID-19 pandemic. The data reflect that the assistant principals in this study perceived that their roles and responsibilities changed pre- and post-COVID-19. In the pre-COVID-19 setting, 88% of the eight assistant principals interviewed shared instructional leadership as their primary role (Table 3). The school leaders agreed that instruction was at the forefront of their responsibilities pre-COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that it took priority over the other administrative duties. The participants also revealed that before the pandemic, they also were responsible for school management (75%), supporting their principals' vision (75%), student discipline (75%), and cultivators of relationships (63%). As shown in Table 5, the participants identified their top three time-consuming administrative duties pre-COVID-19 pandemic. The assistant principals ranked the skills as follows: first, school management (63%); secondly, instructional leadership (75%) and lastly, processing student discipline (63%).

In comparison, post-COVID-19, the participants indicated their roles changed due to the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, as 50% of the assistant principals indicated that processing student discipline overshadowed other responsibilities, especially instructional leadership, due to the changes in student behavior (Table 6). Additionally, 25% of respondents indicated that their role as instructional leaders changed as there was less focus on daily instruction immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic. While the assistant principals attempt to prioritize instructional leadership by completing the teacher observation feedback cycle, the reality is that other responsibilities of the post-COVID-19 educational setting have made it difficult to do so. Half of the study participants (50%) noted that their roles and responsibilities as assistant principals changed in response to negative student behaviors in the post-COVID-19 pandemic setting. In turn, AP1 explained that instructional leadership was not the priority it once was.

Finding 1 aligned with the pre-COVID-19 research findings of Goldring et al. (2021) and Van Tuyle (2018). Goldring et al. (2021) found that assistant principal jobs were highly varied, administrative, and primarily focused on student discipline. Van Tuyle also found that more incidents of assistant principals acting as disciplinarians allow fewer opportunities to establish their roles as instructional leaders. Van Tuyle concluded that principals must protect their assistant principals' time for evaluating teachers and support their assistant principals' recommendations for instructional improvement in the classroom.

The alignment of prior research and this study indicate that the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic may not have been the catalyst for a change to the assistant principal's role but has exposed an issue already revealed in the research. Previous research and this study's findings indicate that school divisions and building principals should investigate ways to support assistant

principals in prioritizing their instructional leadership capacity over processing student discipline.

Finding 2

High school assistant principals indicated that building strong relationships with students, staff, and parents is crucial post-COVID-19 pandemic. The study's data reflect that cultivating relationships with teachers, students, and the community was a primary role of the assistant principal pre- and post-pandemic. A common theme of developing and cultivating relationships evolved in the analysis of the interview answers of AP1, AP3, AP5, AP6, and AP7 (Table 3). Additionally, the assistant principals specified a change in how they developed relationships with stakeholders due to the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 4). AP3, AP4, and AP5 described themselves as more empathetic, and AP2, AP3, and AP5 shared that they are more compassionate when interacting with stakeholders. Additionally, AP6 and AP8 noted they are more thoughtful in their professional practice than before the COVID-19 pandemic, as students, staff, and parents experienced trauma due to isolation practices. When describing the changes to cultivating relationships, the participants mentioned using *more grace*, *maximizing potential*, and *motivating students*. Assistant principals acknowledged a change in the opportunities to build relationships with stakeholders that they did not have previously. The assistant principals found that with the increase in behavior challenges in students and adults, adjusting their leadership style was necessary to continue creating positive relationships. AP8 expressed that positive relationships pre-COVID-19 influenced positive outcomes post-COVID-19.

Prior research corroborates the findings of this study. Van Tuyle (2022) found that assistant principals are influential in building genuine relationships with stakeholders and that

this skill is crucial for positive student outcomes post-COVID-19 pandemic. Goldring et al. (2021) agreed, stating, "assistant principals work closely with students and thus play a direct role in improving students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes" (p. 2). Research and the study's findings indicate that a continued focus is needed on developing positive relationships between school leaders and stakeholders, as it is crucial to the success of the school culture and student progress.

Finding 3

High school assistant principals indicated a decline in students' behavioral functioning post-COVID-19 pandemic. The data reflect that 100% of the eight assistant principals interviewed for this study indicated a noted decline in student behavior after the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 10). 63% of the participants' discussed regressive behaviors resulting from immaturity caused by the isolation of quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ninth and tenth-grade students are described as developmentally regressed seventh and eighth graders, missing key interpersonal milestones due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When describing student behavior in the post-COVID-19 pandemic setting, the study participants mentioned terms such as *resocialization*, *noncompliance*, *lack of communication skills*, and *loss of normal conflict resolution*.

Additionally, 75% of the study participants indicated that post-Covid-19 students were more apt to engage in negative behaviors such as fighting and substance abuse than pre-COVID-19 (Table 10). AP1, AP3, AP5, AP6, AP7, and AP8 specified that fighting and aggressive behaviors happened more frequently and at a higher intensity than pre-COVID-19. Additionally, the assistant principals noted that most of the altercations in the school building stemmed from community conflicts or social media. AP1, AP2, A3, AP5, AP7, and AP8 reported that substance

abuse on campuses post-COVID is a widespread problem affecting school communities pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic (Table 7, Table 9). They described the increase in the vaping of nicotine and marijuana in schools and theorized the increase was due to the lack of adult supervision and the product's availability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The assistant principals perceived substance abuse as the highest frequency of student discipline, resulting in recommendations for out-of-school and long-term suspensions.

The findings of this study align with previous research on student behavior in the post-COVID-19 pandemic setting. Welsh (2022) found that fighting and aggressive behaviors had increased substantially since the return to in-person learning, along with increased incidents of vaping and drug possession. Concurrently, this study and Welsh indicated that the changes in student behavior were predominantly observed in ninth and tenth grade. Research and this study's findings support the data suggesting a change in students' behavior due to factors of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finding 4

High school assistant principals indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for mental health support in the high-school setting. The study found that when students do not have the coping mechanisms needed to process or understand their issues, assistant principals deal with the repercussions. Assistant principals who participated in the study indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for mental health support in the high-school setting. The participants perceived that post-pandemic, there was an increase in students suffering from mental health ailments that result in mental health crises at the school level (Table 10). AP2, AP3, and AP4 shared that students' mental health directly influences their school behavior, making it difficult for school leaders to navigate as they have little experience

treating mental health disorders. AP4 theorized that when students miss school due to mental health issues, their learning progress becomes concerning.

The finding supports prior research regarding students' mental health, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for mental health programming support in high schools. Grooms and Child (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated school health inequities. Further research regarding the effects of assistant principals on effectively supporting student recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic finds that school leaders are not equipped or prepared to do so (Welsh, 2022). Research and this study's findings support the data that assistant principals need assistance and mental health resources for students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finding 5

High School assistant principals indicated that attendance-related issues increased post-COVID-19. The participants identified tardiness, class cutting, and lack of attendance as frequent concerns post-COVID-19 (Table 10). AP2 described their experience with attendance-related issues as the most significant area of concern post-COVID-19, as students battled mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, affecting their ability to attend school regularly. AP2, AP3, and AP4 all indicated a pattern of attendance-related problems stemming from the need to reeducate students and parents on the school attendance expectations previously set pre-COVID-19. AP2 and AP5 reported that the increased frequency of processing attendance-related referrals and tracking student attendance has affected their time in classroom observations and focus instructional leadership.

This finding aligns with previous research suggesting widespread reduced learning opportunities for students lacking school attendance in post-COVID-19 pandemic settings (Korman et al., 2021). Korman et al. (2021) acknowledged that while current data from the

2021-2022 school year has not been released, practices, policies, and resource allocation changes can assist all students with attendance related issues. Research and this study's findings support the data that assistant principals observe that student attendance concerns are prevalent in the post-COVID-19 pandemic setting.

Finding 6

Assistant Principals want professional development in the student discipline process that is actionable, collaborative, and interactive. The data reflect that the study participants observe that the current professional development in navigating the school discipline process was not pertinent to their professional practice (38%, n = 8). When asked how they learned how to process student discipline, all participants indicated they learned from other administrators on their teams or staff members (Table 12). AP2, AP3, and AP5 concluded that the division-led professional development was mainly focused on a review of the school divisions discipline guidelines but neglected to integrate the necessary steps to complete the process fully. AP2, AP3, AP4, AP5, and AP7 indicated that the sessions they attended were informational but not applicable to their professional practice, especially as new administrators. Additionally, the study found that assistant principals wanted to acquire knowledge of the student discipline process as an ongoing process that includes authentic collaboration with mentors or other administrators, interactive resources that allow for review of the processes, and resources that will support them in meeting students' behavioral needs.

Finding 6 aligns with the prior qualitative research of Wilson and Clayton (2020), who found that division-led professional development is rarely useful to novice assistant principals. Similar to Finding 6, Master et al. (2020) found that when assistant principals are provided authentic learning experiences through professional development, they can apply their

knowledge in advancing their schools. Research and this study's findings support the data that assistant principals want authentic professional development that is actionable, collaborative, and interactive.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of this study and the data, school divisions should consider the following recommendations when implementing support for assistant principals.

Implication 1

School divisions and principals should consider evaluating the structure of high school administrative teams to prioritize instructional leadership. Finding 1 found that 88% of the eight assistant principals interviewed stated that pre-COVID-19 instructional leadership is their primary role as school leaders (Table 3). Conversely, post-COVID-19 pandemic, 50% of the participants shared that student discipline has taken over as their primary responsibility (Table 6). School divisions and principals should consider evaluating the structure of high school administrative teams to prioritize instructional leadership. An administrative position specializing in administering student discipline could be created in addition to the traditional assistant principal position. Each high school should consider employing a site-based administrative intern to be responsible for processing low-level violations such as tardiness, class cutting, and cell phone violations, as the frequency of these infractions takes time away from assistant principals as instructional leaders. Similarly, in high schools with frequent physical and substance abuse incidents, school divisions should employ an administrator primarily focusing on administering the discipline, creating intervention programming, and liaising for community-based partnerships.

Implication 2

School divisions and principals should consider professional development opportunities for assistant principals on trauma-informed best practices, response to adverse childhood experiences, and navigation of crucial conversations with students, staff, and parents in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finding 2 found that assistant principals adjusted their leadership styles to encompass empathic and compassionate emulations when communicating with students, parents, and staff due to the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 4). School divisions and principals should consider professional development opportunities for assistant principals on trauma-informed best practices, response to adverse childhood experiences, and navigation of crucial conversations with stakeholders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This professional learning opportunity should be conducted by professionals specializing in mental health awareness with resources to support school leaders continually as they continue to forge relationships and school and community connections.

Implication 3

The Department of Education and school divisions should consider budgeting for and employing student support specialists at all high schools to advocate for students in developing positive behavior support, positive communication skills, and peer interactions. Finding 3 found that assistant principals indicated a noted decline in student behavior after the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 10). 63% of the participants' discussed regressive behaviors resulting from immaturity caused by the isolation of quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 75% of the study participants indicated that post-Covid-19 students were more apt to engage in negative behaviors such as fighting and substance abuse than pre-COVID-19 (Table 10). The Department of Education and school divisions should consider budgeting for and

employing student support specialists at all high schools to advocate for students in developing positive behavior support, positive communication skills, and peer interactions. Similarly, in-house substance abuse counselors are needed as liaisons of high school counseling teams to develop connections with students, develop substance abuse programs, and provide resources and a haven for recovery.

Lastly, principals and assistant principals should push into their communities to develop relations with school stakeholders in their surrounding zoned neighborhoods. Building community partnerships and developing outreach programs for students in their neighborhood environments creates support in all areas of their living environment. School becomes synonymous with a caring place for students to learn while intentionally supporting all in the community.

Implication 4

Departments of Education, school divisions, and school leaders should consider prioritizing the accessibility of mental health professionals and community-based partnerships in response to student mental health issues intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The high school assistant principals perceived an increase in students suffering from mental health ailments post-COVID-19 pandemic that result in mental health crises at the school level that exasperate negative student behaviors such as absenteeism, aggressive behaviors, and substance abuse (Table 10). Departments of Education, school divisions, and school leaders should consider prioritizing the accessibility of mental health professionals and community-based partnerships in response to student mental health issues intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to school counselors who conduct the programming of instruction for students, school divisions should budget for a school-based mental health professional

specializing in adolescent mental health conditions. Additionally, school principals should create school-based knowledge sessions to assist students in learning to alleviate stress and develop coping skills. School divisions should promote student self-care and mindfulness through asynchronous wellness days, while principals should consider designate wellness or quiet areas for students in school buildings, allowing them to decompress. Additionally, schools should build community partnerships to create connections outside of the school building for students needing mental health supports.

Implication 5

Departments of Education and school divisions should reconsider and reimagine high school attendance accountability standards to align with the post-COVID-19 educational programming. Finding 5 identified tardiness, class cutting, and lack of attendance as frequent concerns post-COVID-19 (Table 10). Departments of Education and school divisions should reconsider and reimagine high school attendance accountability standards to align with the post-COVID-19 educational programming. DOE should examine the validity of attendance seat hours to explore competency-based learning structures in the virtual setting, real-world learning experiences to include internships and externships, and college and career-based programming. While returning to the school building may be the best option for most students, creating opportunities outside the schoolhouse walls supports a culture of learning based on different modalities of individual students.

Implication 6

School divisions and principals should consider developing authentic mentoring programs that are strategic in mentor/mentee pairings, ideally in proximity, with the connection between the pair lasting for multiple years. Finding 6 found that 38% of the

study's participants perceived that the current professional development on the school discipline process is not pertinent to their professional practice (Table 12). When asked how they learned how to process student discipline, 100% of the participants indicated they learned from other administrators on their administrative teams or from other staff members (Table 12). School divisions and principals should consider developing authentic mentoring programs that are strategic in mentor/mentee pairings, ideally in proximity, with the connection between the pair lasting for multiple years. School divisions should be strategic in purposefully matching well-trained mentors with novice mentees based on similar personality types, creating open lines of communication, and shadowing opportunities. Additionally, school divisions should utilize the mentoring programs as a professional development opportunity for new assistant principals to learn the student discipline process from a veteran administrator in real-time. The learning opportunity would include ongoing school division-developed supports, such as interactive training sessions and interactive video sequences that could be viewed asynchronously.

Suggestions for Future Studies

As researchers continue to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, several suggestions for future research are warranted. The researcher suggests replicating this study in the elementary and middle school settings to determine findings in a broader educational setting. Secondly, the researcher suggests a quantitative study to analyze the rates of high school discipline dispositions pre-COVID-19 to the post-COVID-19 setting for closer analysis in determining the needed response to negative student behaviors through examination of specific student discipline disposition codes. Moreover, additional research should be based on the influence of social media as the catalyst for negative student behaviors and mental health issues. Lastly, future research should focus on the leadership trauma of high school assistant principals.

Although trauma was not mentioned as a reflection of their experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, trauma was mentioned by the assistant principals in this study as an area of concern for all other school stakeholders. Assistant principals lead as servant leaders, and a closer examination of their self-awareness is warranted.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to identify assistant principals' perceptions of their roles in school leadership, their experiences with student discipline in the public school setting pre- and post-COVID-19, and the professional learning they were provided to navigate the student discipline process. Previous research revealed that assistant principals were crucial to the daily functioning of schools and positive student outcomes; however, there was little understanding of why the role is significant, especially with student discipline. While several factors influence the responsibilities of the assistant principal, there were also gaps in the literature specific to their role as educational leaders and the effects of COVID-19 on their leadership capacity.

The findings of this study were consistent with the research presented in the literature review. This study revealed that assistant principals perceived changes in their leadership capacity post-COVID-19. This qualitative study revealed that while high school assistant principals have many roles, they are their schools' first responders, adjusting when they are called into action. Assistant principals prioritized instructional leadership before the pandemic; however, post-COVID-19, student behavior changes caused school leaders to focus on processing school discipline over instructional leadership. This research found that student behaviors changed the educational landscape post-COVID-19, highlighting areas of concern for student well-being, such as physical aggression, substance abuse, lack of attendance, and mental health concerns. Assistant principals reflected positive outcomes after the COVID-19 pandemic

as they adjusted their professional practice as empathetic leaders fostering positive relationships with school stakeholders. Finally, assistant principals reflected on professional development opportunities and shared that they want authentic, actionable, collaborative, and interactive learning, specifically in the student discipline process.

Personal Reflections

Reflecting on my personal experiences conducting this research, the struggles, growing pains, celebrations, and most of all, the relationships, I realize I have found my purpose as a social researcher to investigate the human element in collective problem solving. In developing the topic for this research study, I knew that I wanted to delve into school culture, the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on learning. As I began to look deeper into the research, it became apparent that assistant principals are the gatekeepers of culture, as they are masters of creating relationships, drivers of visions, and purveyors of strong tier-one instruction. I shifted my focus to assistant principals and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their leadership and the effects on their relationships with students. Anecdotally, the assistant principals in this study had very similar and very different experiences leading through the pandemic. Of notice throughout the qualitative interviews was the selfless determination of each participant. All were strong in their resolve to support teachers, students, and colleagues without mentioning their traumas or needs. Assistant principals are true servant leaders.

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Appendix A: Study Interview Protocol

IRB 22-879

Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

Introduction: Thank you for meeting with me today. I am interested in learning about assistant principals' perceptions regarding their experiences with leadership as it relates to student discipline in public schools pre- and post-COVID pandemic. Research tells us that assistant principals are critical figures in the day-to-day operations of schools, using their leadership capacity in daily interactions with teachers and students. One of the primary responsibilities of an assistant principal is that of a disciplinarian. The questions I will ask you now will explore your experiences with the discipline process before and after the pandemic.

The information you share will help me understand your role as an assistant principal in processing student discipline, your interactions with students, teachers, and parents during this process, and explore support or professional learning needs for assistant principals before, during, and after the pandemic.

To focus on your experiences, our interview will last 45 minutes to one hour. Please let me know if you feel uncomfortable with any questions or need to take a break, as we can stop anytime.

What questions do you have before we begin?

Please check that you changed your screen name to the pseudonym of your choice while in the waiting room to preserve anonymity during the interview.

Do I have your consent to record and begin the interview? (Thank the participant)

Questions to ask	Annotations for the researcher
To begin the interview, can you tell me how long you have been in the role of an assistant principal? <i>(Thank you.)</i>	
How would you define your role as an assistant principal in school leadership?	

How has your leadership style changed due to the COVID-19?	
What are the top three responsibilities that consumed most of your time as an assistant principal before the COVID-19 pandemic?	
Share with me an example of how your responsibilities as an assistant principal may have changed after the COVID-19 pandemic.	
Tell me about your experiences with student discipline before the pandemic.	
What types of discipline referrals were you processing most frequently before the Covid-19 pandemic?	
Did student discipline referrals increase, decrease, or stay the same after the pandemic?	
What types of discipline referrals are you processing most frequently in the post-pandemic setting?	
Some people would say there is no difference in students' behavior before and after the pandemic. What would you say to them?	
Describe in one word your role as an assistant principal navigating the pandemic as a school leader.	
Describe to me how you learned to navigate the student discipline process when you started your position as an assistant principal.	
What professional development was provided to you after you started your position as an assistant principal?	

After the pandemic, if you could design the ideal professional development for assistant principals managing the student discipline process, what elements would you include? Why?	
This concludes all the interview questions. Is there anything you would like to add that I may not have asked you?	

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate the valuable time and energy you bring to the research study.

If I have questions after transcribing the interview, may I contact you for clarification? I will send you a transcribed copy of the interview for your approval to ensure your perceptions are documented accurately.

Please feel free to contact me if you have additional questions.

Appendix B: Participant Invitation to Review Transcript Email

IRB 22-879

Subject: Transcript Verification: High School Assistant Principals' Perceptions of Leadership as it Relates to School Discipline in Public Schools Pre- and post-COVID pandemic

Dear _____,

Thank you for allowing me to interview you about my research study on the experiences as an assistant principal and the student discipline process before, during, and after the pandemic. I am grateful for your unique insight that will contribute to the support of administrators in your role.

Attached you will find the transcription of your answers to the questions asked during the interview. Please use this secure [link](#) to access your transcript. You will find a folder labeled with the pseudonym you created during the interview. Please review the transcript to validate your intent and meaning. Also, feel free to add additional information that you feel is relevant to your questions.

If you need to clarify, revise, or adjust an answer, there is a comment column to the right of the dialogue in the transcript. If no changes are necessary, please indicate your satisfaction with the interview transcript by using the comment button that no changes are needed. Once you have confirmed your satisfaction with the interview transcript with me, all identifiers will be destroyed, and the study data will be stored in a secure file for 3 years following the study closure.

Thank you for participating and for your leadership,

All the best,

Sincerely,
Corrin Bács
Ed.D. Candidate

Appendix C: Research Log

Bács Research Log

Spring 2023 Goal:

1. By late January of the spring 2023 semester, I will have collected all data necessary for my study, coded the data, analyzed the data, and have a draft of chapter 4.

Timeline to Achieve Goal:

1. Data Collection: Begin November, 2022 and have data collected by the end of December, 2022
2. Coding and Analyzing: Coding and analyzing will be ongoing throughout the data collection process.
3. Chapter 4 Draft: A draft of Chapter 4 will be completed at the end of January, 2023.
4. Dissertation Defense: March, 2023

Date	Activity	Time	Description	Reflection

Appendix D: CITI Program Certification



Completion Date 23-Jan-2022
Expiration Date 22-Jan-2025
Record ID 38386183

This is to certify that:

Corrin Bács

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)



Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?we596c9c7-da14-42d3-947d-8c51384b5b90-38386183

Appendix E: IRB Approval



**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>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 18, 2022
TO: Jodie Lynn Brinkmann, Corey Bacs
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE: High School Assistant Principals' Perceptions of Leadership as it Relates to School Discipline in Public Schools Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic
IRB NUMBER: 22-879

Effective November 18, 2022, 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: **November 18, 2022**

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.

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Appendix F: School Division Application to Conduct Research

Application to Conduct Research or Distribute Surveys
Planning, Innovation, and Accountability - Office of Research and Evaluation

Identifying Information

Last Name

First Name

Street Address

City State Zip Code

Telephone Number Email Address

Introduction to the Project

Title of the Research Project

Sponsoring Institution

Proposed Research Start Date Proposed Research End Date

Has this study been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB)?

Yes, it has been fully reviewed and approved.

Please attach the IRB approval notification to this application.

Date of IRB approval:

No, review is pending. Evidence of IRB review may be submitted at a later date but must be received prior to initiating the study.

Expected date of IRB approval:

No, this study is exempt from IRB approval. If this study is exempt from IRB approval, please provide the rationale.

No, this research is not affiliated with a university and is not governed by an IRB.

Please select the purpose of the proposal from the following:

Dissertation Research

Independent Research

Graduate Class Requirement/Paper

Grant-Related Research

Master's Thesis

Appendix G: Request to Participate in Research Study

IRB 22-879

Subject Line: XXXXX Approved Research: High School Assistant Principals' Perceptions of Leadership as it Relates to School Discipline in Public Schools Pre- and post-COVID pandemic

Dear Assistant Principals,

My name is Corrin Bács, and I am a doctoral candidate pursuing an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. I am conducting a research study to examine assistant principals' perceptions of their leadership experiences with the school discipline process pre- and post-COVID pandemic. I am seeking your willingness and permission to participate in my study. Your contribution will assist me with my degree requirements and allow you to communicate your views and highlight best practices.

Participants in this study must meet the following criteria:

- served as a high school assistant principal for a minimum of one year before (2018-19 school year) and after the pandemic (2021-22 school year); and
- processed student discipline during this time.

The activities for this research study will include a virtual interview lasting 45 to 60 minutes and an opportunity to review the interview transcript. The interview is recorded via audio and video using the Zoom virtual conferencing platform. You will choose a pseudonym to use as your name to protect your identity throughout the research process. In addition, any identifying information will not be included in the published study or appear on any recordings or documents. After transcribing the interview, a copy of the transcript will be shared with you to review in a secure Google folder labeled with your pseudonym. I asked that once you have reviewed your transcript, you accept the transcript as is or make clarifications of your answers within a given timeframe. Once you have confirmed the transcript, all identifier information will be destroyed for the data to remain completely anonymous. After the study, all notes and recordings will be stored on a USB drive, kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office, and destroyed after one year. All study data will be stored for 3 years following the study closure. Your participation in the current study is voluntary, and you may decide to stop participation at any point without prejudice or consequence.

If you wish to discuss any aspects of the current study, please contact me at (757) 323-1496 or email me at corrin.bacs@vbschools.com or coreybacs@vt.edu. You may also contact my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Jodie Brinkmann, at (804) 626-7288 or by email at jlbrinkmann@vt.edu. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me by phone or email so we can schedule a time for the interview.

Sincerely,

Corrin Bács
Ed.D. Candidate

Appendix H: Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study



Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jodie Brinkmann

jlbrinkmann@vt.edu

Other Investigator: Corrin M. Bács

coreybacs@vt.edu

IRB# and Title of Study: IRB #22-879
High School Assistant Principals' Perceptions of Leadership as it Relates to School Discipline in Public Schools Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions. I am a student at Virginia Tech working on a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy, and I am conducting this research as part of my coursework.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?

I am interested in learning about assistant principals' perceptions of leadership as it relates to school discipline before and after the Covid-19 pandemic and the professional development they need to navigate the process. If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in an interview via Zoom. I will provide the interview questions associated with your experiences with student discipline before and after the Covid-19 pandemic before the interview. The study should take approximately 45 minutes of your time, and a further 30-45 minutes will be needed to review your interview transcript. 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 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. Your interview will be recorded using Zoom to help the researcher transcribe the interviews, but as soon as you verify your transcript, all video/audio recordings will be deleted. Your identity and responses will be kept anonymous, and you will be asked to select your pseudonym before we begin the interview. The researcher will keep any data collected during this research study confidential, and only the researcher will associate data with participant identity. This information will be kept in a separate secured location, will not be shared, and will be destroyed within one year after collection. A final copy of the dissertation will also be available for your review.

WHO CAN I TALK TO?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, don't hesitate to get in touch with me at coreybacs@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because you participate 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).