PROBLEM-SOLVING AND PLANNING FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: COVID-19

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Submitted to the faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education in the Department of Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University December 2021
Accepted by the School of Education Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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June 17, 2021
PROBLEM-SOLVING AND PLANNING FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: COVID-19

School Improvement Plans (SIPs) are comprehensive plans schools use to identify priority goals and strategies for continuous improvement. Although SIPs continue to be the primary driver for school improvement across the country, there is little research focused on how school leaders lead the process of creating a SIP. This case study investigated how expert school leaders engage in problem-solving and planning for the purpose of developing a SIP that leads to improved outcomes for all students. Data was collected from school improvement documentation, interviews with school leaders, and observation of SIP meetings. Triangulated data was clustered and analyzed to develop a logic model. Results revealed several suggestions related to how expert school leaders should engage in problem-solving and planning for the purpose of SIP development. Implications and recommendations for future research are discussed in an effort to further the conversation about best practices in leading school improvement efforts.
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Introduction

The United States has increased its focus on school performance as evidenced through the initial passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002 and subsequent passage of Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. ESSA requires schools in need of improvement to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to inform the implementation of a School Improvement Plan (SIP) (U. S. Department of Education, 2019). School Improvement Plans (SIPs) are comprehensive plans schools use to identify priority goals and strategies for continuous improvement. Further, some state departments of education maintain a higher level of oversight than federal legislation requirements for school improvement, including the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). For example, according to Indiana Code 20-31-4-6(5) and 511 IAC 6.1-1-4(1)(J), “...all public schools, including charter schools, and state-accredited non-public schools must complete a school improvement plan with input from a committee of individuals interested in the school” (Indiana Department of Education, 2018). More specifically, the IDOE moves beyond federal legislation of only low-performing schools and schools that have a disproportionately low performance of specific subgroups of students to mandating all public, charter, and state-accredited non-public schools participate in the SIP process, regardless of school performance.

Although SIPs continue to be used as the primary driver for school improvement, recent research from VanGronigen and Meyers (2019) show, “...how little we know about school improvement planning processes in general. Despite a recent uptick in research on SIPs (e.g. Caputo & Rastelli, 2014; Huber & Conway, 2015; Strunk et al., 2016; VanGronigen & Meyers,
in press), there is a worldwide dearth of research on plan development and quality, plan enactment and plan relationship to organizational and academic outcomes” (p. 275). The purpose of this research is to learn more about the problem-solving and planning process of school leaders during SIP creation.

**Impact of COVID-19**

With some estimates suggesting upwards of 80% of school-aged children globally were impacted by COVID-19, the unprecedented pandemic will have a lasting impact on schools across the world (Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Specifically, in the United States, schools closed for a sustained period of time in the spring of 2020 (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020). The majority of schools closed for five months and all standardized, state-mandated assessments were cancelled (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Northwest Education Association (NWEA) projects these closures will, “...result in substantially lower achievement levels for students” (2020, p. 1). With these bleak projections, school improvement problem-solving and planning is more important than ever. School and district leaders are going to be faced with challenges and barriers never seen before as they prepare to meet immediate and long-term needs of students (Lancker & Parolin, 2020).
Note. This graph shows projected learning loss of students' mathematics proficiency, represented by the RIT score, due to forced school closure in March 2020. Figure is reprinted from the Northwest Education Association (2020).
Literature Review

According to an analysis of SIPs across the United States since the passage of NCLB, Duke, Carr, and Sterrett (2012) suggest three broad goals for school improvement are present: (1) increasing student achievement, (2) closing achievement gaps, and (3) improving high school graduation rates. In short, schools are striving to improve learning for all students while preparing students to be college, career, and citizenship ready upon graduation.

The COVID-19 pandemic inherently prioritizes the need for schools to focus on these broad goals. Specifically, NWEA (2020) predicts more significant learning loss in math than reading yet estimates the majority of students will come with less than 50% of typical gains and some being more than a year behind (p. 1). During traditional, extended school breaks such as summer, the skill gap in math and reading widens between students of higher and lower socioeconomic status (Lancker & Parolin, 2020). The extended school closures due to COVID-19 will only widen the skill gaps in academics between groups of students based on their socioeconomic status (Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

School Leaders

School leaders are frequently charged with leading improvement efforts. VanGronigen and Meyers (2017) investigated topics and trends related to turnaround initiatives led by school leaders through short-cycle improvement plans. Over a time span of five years, 194 schools from forty districts across twelve states participated in the study with content analysis of short cycle plans. They found that school leaders, typically a principal, lead these improvement efforts
and priority areas are achievement, data, and instruction. Also, the study shows that over one
fifth of the priority areas in SIPs did not align with best practices in literature related to
turnaround efforts led by a school leader (VanGronigen & Meyers, 2017). Their results are
important because it shows school leaders guide the improvement process and the critical need
for them to identify priority areas to focus on what will have the greatest impact.

In leading improvement efforts, school leaders often face problems and adversities in
pursuit of achieving the three broad goals of schools in the United States. Duke, Tucker,
Salmonowicz, and Levy (2007) categorize these problems into five categories:

- (a) student achievement and conduct,
- (b) school programs and organization,
- (c) school personnel,
- (d) the school system, and
- (e) the local community (p. 7)

Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, and Levy (2007) investigated how these problems are perceived by
school leaders from similar circumstances; in this case, all of the school leaders found
themselves leading low-performing schools in high-poverty communities. Nineteen school
leaders from public elementary and middle schools participated in the study that involved
multiple data sources. These sources were used to better understand how school leaders act as
diagnosticians to identify and describe perceived challenges during problem-solving and
planning for school improvement. They found that there were similarities between perceived
challenges and conditions of school leaders from high poverty, low-performing schools (Duke et
al., 2007). These findings are important for understanding that a school leader often leads the
process of diagnosing problems and high poverty, low performance schools face many of the
same challenges. The study also identified the need to learn more about how school leaders reach the accurate diagnosis of school problems.

A crisis is an example of a rare problem that could face a school leader. Recently, crises in schools have impacted isolated school(s) and could cause brief school closures (Gainey, 2010). For example, a school could close for a period of weeks due to extreme weather like a hurricane (Gainey, 2010). This type of crisis only impacts schools in the geographical area impacted by the hurricane. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that has impacted all schools. School leaders are and will be forced to problem-solve and plan during a time of uncertainty with a lack of current data or knowledge of what school will look like in the future (Viner et al., 2020).

**Problem-Solving**

Problems can either be well or ill-structured (Barrows, 2000). Well-structured problems typically have a simple solution path based on given information (Jonassen, 2000). Ill-structured problems are complex and do not have a simple or single solution path (Barrows, 2000). School leaders are faced increasingly with more ill-structured problems during the school improvement process (Mintrop, & Zumpe, 2019). Mintrop and Zumpe (2019) investigated how school leaders solve ill-structured problems by examining leaders from three separate public schools who participated in the same leadership course. Three school leaders participated in the study that involved prolonged interviews, written papers, observations during problem-solving, and individual coaching sessions to inform a deeper understanding of how an expert school leader thinks and processes information. They found that the school leaders engaged in similar steps
when problem-solving for school improvement. Mintrop and Zumpe (2019) discovered that, “The main steps are defining and framing initial problems, seeking evidence from their organizations, consulting the professional knowledge base, understanding the problem, understanding the change process, formulating goals and desired states, and designing an intervention” (p. 312). Their results are important for understanding that an expert problem-solver engages in a similar process regardless of the type of problem or context.

In a similar study, Leithwood and Steinbach (1993) investigated the process of a school leader facilitating collaborative problem-solving and planning in the context of school improvement. Twelve schools across three school districts in Canada participated in the study that focused on patterns of school leader practice during problem-solving and planning of SIP implementation. School leaders participated in semi-structured interviews that included listening to a recording of a school improvement team meeting to create an understanding of how school leaders facilitate a collaborative, solution-oriented meeting. They found differences amongst novice and expert school leaders in leading collaborative problem-solving. More specifically, Leithwood and Steinbach (1993) note differences, “...were most evident in the (a) purposes, (b) skills and knowledge and (c) dispositions that principals brought to the process” (p. 24). In other words, expert school leaders are more likely to place problems within the context of the school purpose and demonstrate stronger domain-specific skills and knowledge; consequently, these types of leaders are able to make meetings more productive given the nature of their disposition (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1993). These results are important for understanding the difference between an expert and novice school leader and how experience impacts the effectiveness of
problem-solving for school improvement. It also highlights the need to study expert leaders more closely to understand their thinking and processes.

During problem-solving, school leaders can be influenced by different variables internally and externally of the school. There are several different theories about how school leaders process influence from different variables. According to Lindblom (1959), school leaders struggle with value conflicts and disagreements with stakeholders when problem-solving to make decisions. Lindblom (1959) describes the process of constant comparison of perspectives or ideas of stakeholders as “muddling through.” In comparison, Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) describe the phenomena of a school leader leading problem-solving as a “garbage can”. This means problems and solutions are decoupled (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). Influence from stakeholders, policies, or practices cause school leaders to see certain problems only or select a solution with no relationship to a problem (Cohen et al., 1972). In contrast, Ballantine and Spade (2007) claim collaborative problem-solving or research has the potential to not impact the actions of school leaders. Rather, school leaders will typically act according to public expectations instead of effectiveness (Ballantine & Spade, 2007). The one constant in all theories is the presence and possible influence of many variables on school leaders. School leaders can be influenced by stakeholders, practices, pressures, and policies (Lindblom, 1959; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019; Cohen et al., 1972; Ballantine & Spade, 2007). There is a need to know more about how an expert school leader processes the influence of such variables.
Planning for School Improvement

Once the problem is identified and analyzed, planning for school improvement begins. Planning includes selection of a solution or intervention to solve the problem. A solution, in the context of school improvement, is a program, practice, design, or methodology (Fishman, Penuel, Allen, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2013; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). SIPs continue to be the primary driver used by school leaders across the United States to solve school-wide problems and plan for improvement. Even during this time of crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic, the IDOE is still requiring schools to submit their plans on their normal submission date of October 9, 2020 (Indiana Department of Education, 2020). This highlights the critical need of SIPs to be used as a driver for school improvement—even during or after a period of crisis.

A quality SIP leads to improved academic performance (Fernandez, 2011). Fernandez (2011) empirically examined the effectiveness of SIPs within schools in the fifth largest school district in the United States. Three hundred and three schools from urban, suburban, and rural communities participated in the study that involved grading SIPs using a consistent rubric and comparing the grade to standardized assessment results while considering other variables like race, poverty level, and the population of students receiving special education services being held in control. Results of this research showed a positive relationship between quality SIPs and academic performance. The SIP was positively associated with school improvement as evidenced through the improvement of standardized test scores. However, this is only one research study and does not have the capability to account for all explanations of improved academic performance. The research by Fernandez (2011) shows that a quality SIP improves
performance of the student or that a quality SIP is just a feature of a school that shows improved performance. Furthermore, it does not tell us how the quality SIP was created (Fernandez, 2011). A better understanding of how quality SIPs are created would support school leaders in creation of SIPs that lead to improved academic performance of students.

**Supporting School Leaders with Problem-Solving and Planning**

To achieve the three broad based goals, (1) increasing student achievement, (2) decreasing achievement gaps, and (3) increasing graduation rates, school leaders need to engage in a problem-solving process that does not reflect their typical daily routine (Duke et al., 2012). Lunenburg (2010) summarizes the school leader’s typical daily routine as fragmented, rapid fire with half of the activities lasting less than ten minutes. According to Mintrop and Zumpe (2019) these ill-structured problems facing school leaders highlight, “...the competition between different logics of action that imposes different ways of reasoning...” on school leaders (p. 298). In short, ill-structured problems facing schools that impact their overall school performance takes more than ten minutes to solve and require school leaders to use a different problem-solving process. There are several strategies being implemented across the country and to varying degrees to support school leaders in problem-solving for school improvement.

*Job-Embedded Professional Learning.* A strategy that supports school leaders in problem-solving is job-embedded professional learning provided by an external support such as a higher education program (Mintrop, 2016; Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Job-embedded professional learning focuses on learning and improving within the context of the school
One successful implementation of job-embedded professional learning is the Leadership for Educational Equity Program (LEEP) at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). LEEP focuses on school leaders using design-based thinking to solve ill-structured problems. Through this program, school leaders are provided specific, job-embedded learning through coaching focused on using high-leverage processes to solve problems of practice (Mintrop, 2016). Example of the problems of practice include: improving family and school relationships, improving adolescent literacy, and closing the achievement gap between students of low and high social-economic status (Mintrop, 2016). Problems of practices are selected by the school leaders who are leading the school improvement process. Professional learning is individualized and purposeful because it is driven by the needs identified by the school leader.

Another example of job embedded professional learning is the University School Turnaround Program (USTP). Schools partner with a university to develop three short-term SIP cycles per school year (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Short-term SIP cycles reflect a shift from the typical annual SIP cycle (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). Short-term SIP cycles represent using a design-based approach to school improvement by using several rapid prototyping cycles throughout one school year (Mintrop, 2016). The university that partners with each school not only serves as a support and coach to the school leader, but progress monitors implementation of each cycle. Demonstrated results of USTP are development of more authentic SIPS and increase in student performance as measured by the internal metrics (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019). The
additional support of an external partner provides critical professional learning, guidance, and accountability to the school leader during the problem-solving process of school improvement.

**Networked Communities.** Another strategy that supports school leaders in problem-solving is the creation of networked communities (Bryk et al., 2015). Networked communities focus on learning and implementing at a quicker pace through the convergence of pedagogy and practice (Bryk et al., 2015). Networked communities bring stakeholder groups together with a common focus-school improvement.

One example of a networked community is design-based implementation research (DBIR). DBIR is an approach to school improvement that involves bringing educational researchers and practitioners together to solve persistent problems through the use of a collaborative design process (Fishman et al., 2013). DBIR represents the partnership between research and practice and stems from past practice of research including: evaluation research, community-based participatory research, implementation research, and design-based research (Fishman et al., 2013). According to Fishman et al. (2013), DBIR aims to solve problems of practice by adhering to these principles:

1. In DBIR, teams form around a focus on persistent problems of practice from multiple stakeholders’ perspectives
2. To improve practice, teams commit to iterative, collaborative design
3. As a strategy for promoting quality in the research and development process, teams develop theory and knowledge related to both classroom learning and implementation through systematic inquiry
4. Design-based implementation research is concerned with developing capacity for sustaining change in systems (p. 142-43)

A few examples of successful DBIR include: scaling professional development that impacts instructional practice, implementing a discourse driven pedagogy in math and science, and how
district office staff can support implementation of intervention systems (Fishman et al., 2013). DBIR represents the convergence of pedagogy and practices that promotes the use of the design process development of systems to solve schools’ most complex problems.

**School Improvement Plans (SIPs) Resources.** SIP protocols and professional development resources can support school leaders in problem-solving. Development of an effective SIP depends on the school leaders having a high level of problem-solving capability and understanding of design-based thinking (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). SIPs not only support the school leader in problem-solving, but make the process clear and understood by a wide range of stakeholders.

An example from the field is the template and guide provided by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) for a school’s comprehensive needs analysis (CNA) and SIP (Indiana Department of Education, 2018). The template is what the school leader completes and the guide provides information about each phase of the CNA and SIP. The IDOE SIP template uses Deming’s model: “Plan Do Study Act” cycle (Bryk et al., 2015). This model convenes a group of stakeholders with the school leader to determine needs, specific practices to implement that address the needs, and explicit progress monitoring procedures to measure impact (Bryk et al., 2015). During the root cause analysis of the problem-solving process, the guide from the IDOE provides an explanation of what a root cause is and a structure to use when determining the root cause—“The Five Whys”. In addition, there is a template with an organizer to insert each statement about the root cause (Indiana Department of Education, 2018). The IDOE template and guide are comprehensive and complex, thus the IDOE provides additional support to school leaders.
IDOE provides several self-paced, digital learning opportunities for school leaders to learn how to use the components of the CNA and SIP templates effectively. The training opportunities are housed within a free Moodle Course (Indiana Department of Education, 2019). The Moodle Course includes pre-recorded webinars, informational handouts, examples of exemplar plans, and access to a resource hub with links to helpful information such as culturally responsive teaching, school climate, and multi-tier system of support (Indiana Department of Education, 2019). These learning opportunities are robust, but require a school leader to know how and when to access the content then transfer the new learning to practice. Despite the implementation of strategies to support school leaders in problem-solving to create a SIP there is a lack of research regarding the effectiveness of SIPS and the problem-solving process of the school leader.

**SIP Implementation**

Problem-solving is the first step in school improvement, however, one of the most integral steps is the actual implementation of the SIP. Strunk, Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, and Duque (2015) state, “Rather, unless school improvement planning is accompanied by true commitment to change and resources to enable such change, planning has been found to lead less to reform and more to compliance activities” (Levine & Leibert, 1987; Mintrop, MacLellan & Quintero, 2001; p. 6). This assertion highlights the need to know about the problem-solving process of the school leader. If the planning process is associated with compliance, it may not lead to meaningful change. However, if the school leader is invested in the problem-solving and believes
the solutions will work, the SIP is more likely to be implemented with fidelity and lead to true improvement.

Once a plan is created, school leaders need to have the capacity to adjust and refine the plan for implementation at their school. Due to the increased focus on school performance, there are more solutions and interventions that have been researched and verified through control trials (Fishman et al., 2013). However, the solutions and interventions shared in the research do not usually specify who, where, or the environment the solution works (Means & Penuel, 2005). Barriers that prevent these researched and verified school improvement solution or intervention from being successful in another school include need to scale-up, lack of relevance to practitioners, and human resources mismatch (Fishman et al., 2013; Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Mintrop, & Zumpe, 2019). School leaders need to not only understand the solutions, but be able to adjust and refine based on their school. Even with needed adjustment and refinements, the solution or intervention is not guaranteed to be successful because the changes could negatively impact the effect of the methodology and pedagogy the solution or intervention was based upon.

Strunk, Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, and Duque (2015) investigated quality SIPs and associated ease of implementation with key outcomes. 206 SIPs were scored separately by five different researchers and of those plans, 77 implementation practices with key outcomes were analyzed. To gain a better understanding of practices, policies, and perspectives that impact school improvement planning, the study involved multiple stakeholders and data sources including surveys, interviews, rating/grading of SIPs, and observations. Strunk et al. (2015), found the plan quality was impacted by motivation of school leaders and teams, tensions between labor management groups and schools, and experience of the school leader. However,
the quality of plans were not impacted by the support received from the district or other partners. Also, they found previous growth and achievement in academic performance of a school did not have any correlation with plan quality. Finally, Strunk et al. (2015), discovered the quality of plans were positively associated with ease of implementation, increased teacher collaboration, and improved climate and culture of schools. Their results are important for understanding that the quality of a SIP matters. Also, the quality of a SIP is impacted by stakeholder views, state and local policies, existing practices, and current pressures. The experience and motivation of the school leader increases plan quality more so than previous performance of the school or support from outside the school such as a district or partner.

Completing all components of a SIP does not guarantee it is of quality. Research conducted by Myers and VanGronigen (2019) focused on the quality of SIPS and frequency of satisficing behaviors. Satisficing behaviors are defined by Myers and VanGronigen (2019) as actions by the school leader in completing the SIP that represent completion of a task for compliance instead of authentic engagement in the plan development and implementation. Myers and VanGronigen (2019) analyzed SIPS from schools engaging in short term cycles of school improvement problem-solving and planning. Over 364 short term plans were analyzed. There was no triangulation of data, the researchers only relied upon data from the SIP. Only eighteen of the 364 plans reviewed showed no evidence of satisficing behaviors. Satisficing behaviors were similar during the beginning of the year, mid-year, and end of year cycle. There was also evidence of consistency amongst schools from the same district. Most of the plans focused on test scores and did not plan for time of implementation. The study conducted by Myers and VanGronigen (2019) shows a possible lack of authentic problem-solving and planning during the
creation of a SIP. In addition, the study did not explore how the SIP was created or why the satisfying behaviors occurred. This is important because it highlights the need to know more about the school leader’s process of problem-solving and planning to better understand why satisfying behaviors occur. A deeper understanding could help support school leaders in developing more authentic SIPs that do not include satisfying behaviors, thus leading to improved outcomes for students.

**Leading During a Crisis**

Similar to the lack of research about SIP development and implementation, there is a lack of research related to leading during and after a crisis. School leaders have not faced this magnitude of a crisis since the Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19 (Chowell & Mizumoto, 2020). The majority of publications and research about reopening schools internationally focus on safety and health (Melnick et al., 2020). There is a lack of coverage and resources related to planning for meeting the varied academic needs of students when they return to school. NWEA (2020) identifies one of the most effective ways to mitigate negative academic impact of school closures due to COVID-19 is through effective school planning and prioritization (p. 3). School and district leaders need to know the best ways to prioritize, problem-solve, and plan for school improvement. During a crisis, mistakes can be catastrophic and time is critical.

The requirement to complete and submit a SIP is the only unifying action of all schools in need of improvement across the country. The consensus across reviews of literature is that SIPs are weak and there is a lack of qualitative research completed focused on problem-solving as well as planning (Meyers & VanGronigen, 2019; Bryk et al., 2015; Mintro & Zumpe, 2019). This
case study will contribute to a better understanding of the problem-solving and planning process of a school leader that produces positive outcomes and supports schools in getting back on track after a crisis.

Method

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this case study was to describe and interpret how expert school leaders engage in problem-solving and planning for the purpose of developing a SIP that leads to improved outcomes for all students. This research will contribute to a better understanding of best practices in leading school improvement efforts. Additionally, this study investigated the types of instructional interventions or solutions that were selected as a result of problem-solving and planning. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do school leaders describe the problems their school faces and how do they explain their problem-solving and planning processes?
2. How do school leaders consider stakeholder views, state and local policies, existing practices, and current pressures during the problem-solving and planning processes that lead to school improvement?
3. What instructional interventions are selected from the application of this problem-solving and planning process?
**Research Design**

The qualitative approach that was utilized to shed light on these research questions was a case study. According to Robert Yin (2018), a case study, “...investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 13). The phenomenon this study investigated was the problem-solving and planning process of school leaders that led to creation of a SIP. In addition, Yin (2018) argues a case study is appropriate when the research questions are asking “why” or “how” about contemporary events that a researcher cannot control (p. 13). The case study method was appropriate because I had little to no control over this contemporary phenomenon and the research questions sought to understand how school leaders engage in the problem-solving and planning process.

**Sampling Plan**

School leaders were purposefully selected to help learn about the problem-solving and planning processes. The following criteria was used in the selection process of school leaders:

a. Lead a public school with three or more grade levels.

b. Lead the SIP development and implementation at the school.

c. Submit a SIP annually to the IDOE.

d. Lead a school that has (under their leadership) earned a school letter grade significantly higher than comparable schools based on demographics and size.

e. Use the comprehensive needs assessment (CNA) and SIP template provided by the IDOE.
According to Yin (2018), one way to justify a single case study method is if the case represents an unusual or extreme phenomenon. Ultimately, I am informing how leaders undertake and implement school improvement at a time when public school leaders are held accountable for student performance on standardized, high-stakes testing and expected to lead the SIP development and implementation.

**Site Selection, Participants, and Context**

The selected site was a traditional public middle school in a large urban, midwestern city of approximately 150,000 residents. The middle school served approximately 500 students total from sixth through eighth grade. Diversity of the school was represented by the following percentage ranges of races: 35-40% Black/African American, 40-45% Hispanic students, 5-10% Multiracial, and 10-15% White. Around 80% of students in the school were economically disadvantaged, 25% of students were English Language Learners, and just under 20% of the students had a disability. The school received a state and federal rating of an F for three years of IDOE reporting and performed well below state average. The school was designated as in need of comprehensive support by the ESSA evaluation system and was at risk of being taken over by the IDOE or closed.

To avoid potential state intervention, the superintendent of the district recruited and hired a principal with a successful history of leading school turnaround efforts. The Principal, Kory Newman, assumed this position in the middle of the 2019-20 academic school year. In order to maintain participant anonymity, the principal will be called Kory Newman. Kory Newman was a male with over 20 years of experience in education which included 12 years serving as a school
leader and almost 3 years as a district administrator. Both schools he led previously, consistently earned a school letter grade significantly higher than comparable schools based on key demographics and size. Kory Newman has won local, regional, and state awards including recognition for being selected as principal of the year. He serves on the board of multiple community charitable foundations and is finishing his doctorate in educational leadership. There are three additional assistant principals who were recruited and hired at the same time period. Each assistant principal has their masters degree in educational leadership and have served in this district for over five years. One Assistant Principal, Matt Buchs (pseudonym used here to maintain anonymity), has served with Kory Newman at two of the three schools he led. He contributed to the turnaround efforts led by Kory Newman at these specific schools. Another Assistant Principal, Barb Hickle (pseudonyms used here to maintain anonymity), served as a teacher under Kory Newman before transitioning to administration. Barb Hickle also served as a district instructional coach when Kory Newman served at the district level.

This selected school site provided an opportunity to learn about many of the complex problems schools across the United States are facing including the need to increase academic performance while meeting the needs of a diverse student population. The study investigated a school leadership team as they led school improvement efforts in new building leadership roles. Previously, they assumed their positions during the middle of the academic school year, thus inheriting an already developed SIP, and two months into their tenure the school closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study provided an unique opportunity to learn how effective turnaround school leaders describe problems the school faces, problem-solves, and plan for improvement.
Data Sources

Multiple sources were used to collect data to improve the quality of the case study. The multiple sources of data included documentation, interviews, and observation. Table 1 provides an outline of the types of data sources and research questions addressed through analysis of the data.

*Table 1*

**Data Sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>RQ</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Documentation| 1, 3 | ● IDOE School Improvement Plan (SIP)  
             |      | ● IDOE School Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA)  
             |      | ● School Improvement Plans (SIP) created by the school leadership team |
| Interviews   | 1, 2, 3 | ● Prolonged case study interviews with the school leader(s) (Yin, 2018, p. 119) |
| Observation  | 1, 2, 3 | ● Selected school improvement team meetings                                |

The study began in July 2020 as the leadership team developed the SIP for implementation during the 2020-21 academic school year. From July to November 2020, the single case study was conducted in the following order as shown in Table 2.

*Table 2*

**Timeline of Case Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>July 2020</th>
<th>August 2020</th>
<th>September 2020</th>
<th>October 2020</th>
<th>November 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Interview</td>
<td>-Document</td>
<td>-Interview 2</td>
<td>-Observation</td>
<td>-Interview 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Document Analysis. SIPs are submitted to the IDOE and are required to be posted on the school website (Indiana Department of Education, 2018). Each school leader must ensure the plans are accessible to all stakeholders. Since this school was designated as in need of comprehensive support by the ESSA evaluation system, it was required to complete and submit the CNA as well (Indiana Department of Education, 2018). To learn more about how the school leaders described their problems and explain why interventions were selected, the SIP and CNA were analyzed using the developed codebook. These documents also served as an opportunity to determine if there were any differences between what was discussed at the school improvement team meetings or interviews and the actual submitted SIP and CNA to meet state and federal requirements.

There were three SIPs used by the school during this case study. Document one was the initial plan created by Kory Newman. Document two was an update to document one and is the plan used by the school leadership team. Document three was the plan submitted to the IDOE. The following method, based on the work of Creswell (2004), was used to analyze the SIPs:

1. Read the documents.
2. Divide into segments of information based on each response.
3. Label the segments with codes from the codebook. Segments can be assigned multiple codes.
4. Reduce repetition of codes.
5. Develop themes from the codes.
**Interview Data Analysis.** Interviews were conducted with Principal Kory Newman and Assistant Principal Barb Hickle throughout the case study. The interviews allowed for in-depth analysis of the problems facing the school, problem-solving and planning processes, and types of experiences that prepared the school leaders to lead such processes. Interviews (see Appendix A) used a semi-structured approach (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The topics and types of questions were determined in advance. However, during the interview process, I did change the sequence and language of the questions (Fraenkel et al., 2012). This type of flexibility allowed the interview to be more natural which encouraged both school leaders to share more.

During the interviews, Kory Newman and Barb Hickle were asked to describe the problems the school faced and their problem-solving processes. Also, the interviews focused on what types of experiences prepared them to solve such problems. After the interviews were conducted, the following method, based on the work of Creswell (2004), was used to analyze:

1. Record the interview.
2. Transcribe the interview.
3. Read the interview.
4. Divide into segments of information based on each response.
5. Label the segments with codes from the codebook. Segments can be assigned multiple codes.
6. Reduce repetition of codes.
7. Develop themes from the codes.

**Observation.** To learn more about the problem-solving and planning process, observations occurred during school improvement team meetings. Observations occurred at several school improvement team meetings to support adjustment of the researcher’s presence and to observe problem-solving and planning during all phases of SIP development and implementation. This process helped me unpack the case and phenomenon trying to be observed.
The observation method (see Appendix B) was nonparticipant with only Principal Kory Newman knowing the background of me, the researcher, to minimize the impact of my presence (Fraenkel et al., 2012). After the observations were conducted, the following method, based on the work of Creswell (2004), was used to analyze:

1. Divide the meeting into increments of five minutes.
2. Tally the codes observed during the increments. Increments can be assigned multiple codes.
3. Reduce repetition of codes.
4. Develop themes from the codes.

**Data Analysis: Phase 1**

The case study focused on complex problems and processes. To capture the multi-dimensional nature of this data, a pre-developed codebook was used to analyze and triangulate findings. The first step in creating the codebook was drawing from a rubric that has been used to score and evaluate SIPS. The rubric (see Appendix C) selected was created by Stephen White and Raymond Smith of the Leadership and Learning Center (Fernandez, 2011). This rubric captured the multiple dimensions of the school improvement process including how causes of problems need to be tied directly to the goals and the need to plan for implementation to include an evidence-based intervention (Fernandez, 2011).

I selected the indicators from the rubric that aligned with the research questions for use in the codebook. The rubric had 17 indicators with a broad focus, and selecting the ones related to the research questions narrowed the case study to allow for a more in depth analysis. The indicators selected were *inquiry process*, *master plan design*, *research-based strategies*, and *evaluation process*. These indicators were combined to make three categories of codes: (1) inquiry process, (2) problem-solving, (3) master plan design. The problem-solving category was
created because the focus of two of the research questions was to learn more about the problem-solving process which includes brainstorming solutions to address the problems discovered during the inquiry process. The rubric was created to evaluate completed SIPs compared to this case study which is seeking to learn more about the problem-solving process of a school leader during the development of a SIP. This process includes brainstorming which could lead to conflict or strategic moves to build consensus. This type of process would not be captured in a SIP document.

After the categories were created, codes were generated from the indicators of the rubric and codes used by Mintrop and Zumpe (2019) during a qualitative case study focused on school leader problem-solving. Mintrop and Zumpe (2019) studied a group of school leaders during the initial problem-solving phase of school improvement. Codes used by Mintrop and Zumpe (2019) included framing of the problem. For example, a school leader may frame a problem in a way that leads to the selection of a preferred intervention or strategy of the school leader. This can lead to wasted time and resources if there is investment in an intervention or strategy that does not work. Table 3 shows the codes and how they surfaced during collection of the data.

Table 3

Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Possible Indicators and Examples from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Process (RQ 1, 2)</td>
<td>ID: Identifying the problem.</td>
<td>[when a school leader is reflecting on the data and other information in the interview or in team meetings]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>For example, document three stated, “The students enrolled at the school have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem-Solving (RQ 1, 2)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Describe:</strong> Describing the problem.</td>
<td>demonstrated a consistent passing rate in the 20% range in English/Language Arts. &quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frame:</strong> Framing the problem.</td>
<td>![how a school leader describes the problem and what information is shared during an interview or team meeting]</td>
<td>For example, Kory stated during interview two, “...we had a lot of support staff in the building, a lot of support staff in the building that was, um, kinda used to doing things because they had been working at the school for 15 years, 20 years, everything from paras to secretaries. And so they're really going to be stuck in their way, a lot of paper. It's a lot of the way that we do that and they've gotten real comfortable.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analyze:</strong> Analyzing variable data related to the problems facing the school.</td>
<td>![when a school leader looks at multiple sources of data like socioeconomic status and variables that are related to the problem]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Root Cause:</strong> Determining the root cause of the problems facing the school.</td>
<td>![when a school leader goes through the five why process to isolate the root cause of the problem in a team meeting or identified in the SIP]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perspective:</strong> Prioritizing perspectives of stakeholders.</td>
<td>![when a school leader seeks, shares, or prioritizes a perspective of different stakeholders during a team meeting or interview]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection:</strong> Selection of solutions or research-based strategies.</td>
<td>![discussion about possible solutions or strategies that could be implemented to solve the problem during a meeting, described in the SIP, or interview]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For example, Kory stated during interview three, “So in terms of our interventions, one of the focuses that we’ve been trying to do is get our teachers to understand that, you know, I want you to be an expert at scaffolding for your children, all of your children in your classroom.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict: Conflict that emerges during the brainstorming.</th>
<th>[disagreement that emerges during a team meeting or shared during an interview]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal: Goal creating and setting for school improvement.</td>
<td>[determining goals and metrics to measure impact of school improvement during a team meeting, interview, or stated in the SIP]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example in document three it identified a goal: “Benchmark 1: By Sept. 15, 80% of teachers will have a common understanding of why restorative practices are being implemented. 80% of the teachers at the school will be able to verbally express an understanding of the purpose of restorative practices implementation. They will also be well-versed in the negative implications of exclusionary discipline practices, particularly the harmful impact they have on students of color and at-risk youth.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Master Plan Design (RQ 2, 3)</th>
<th>Planning: Implementation plan development.</th>
<th>[specific steps identified to achieve implementation of the plan in a meeting, interview, or SIP]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>For example, during observation four the school leaders discussed how they would create partner teacher system to ensure new teachers are familiar with the expected teaching practices and ready to follow guidelines established</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis: Phase 2

Data was triangulated in order to create a convergence of evidence for the purposes of developing themes across the data (see Figure 2). Triangulation of data ensured that the findings of the case study were supported by more than one data source.

Figure 2

Convergence of Evidence
To support the collection and analysis of data, a case study database was created with all data and the research report. The case study database included documents collected and transcriptions created throughout the problem-solving process and SIP development. The database also included notes from observations, interviews, and document analysis. Information in the database was combined and organized according to category. Data was clustered together to create themes. Themes were initially created through information gathered during the interview then triangulated with information from the observations and document analysis. Themes were integrated to create a logic model.

There are five main analytic techniques that a researcher can employ when conducting a case study. According to Yin (2018), the analytic techniques are: “...(1) pattern matching, (2) explanation building, (3) time-series analysis, (4) logic models, and (5) cross-case synthesis” (p. 175). The analytic technique used for this case study was the individual logic model. The purpose of the logic model is to show how a complex process occurs over a period of time (Yin, 2018). For this case study, the logic model shows how problem-solving and planning occurs during the SIP development through the three categories of the code book. School improvement is a complex phenomenon that occurs over a period of time and generalizations about the school leader(s) can be categorized through the inquiry process, problem-solving, and master plan design. The convergence of data from multiple sources made these generalizations stronger.

**Member Checking**

In order to examine the accuracy of the results from observation and interviews as well as limit researcher bias, member checking was used. Member checking is when information is
returned to the participant to verify the interpretation of the event (Caretta & Pérez, 2019). Member checking occurred informally following observations to validate and confirm interpretation of the event. I would confirm with a school leader(s) the meaning of a statement made during a school improvement meeting through the interview process. I would reference the statement made by a participant then state how I interpreted the statement. After sharing my interpretation, the school leader would be invited to either agree or clarify the meaning of the statement. For example, during an observation Kory stated the need to seek input from a specific stakeholder. During the next interview with Kory, I reviewed the statement he made and shared my interpretation of the statement, specifically this stakeholder represented a particular ethnic group of the school population and he needed to seek approval of the plan from this stakeholder. Kory confirmed this was an accurate interpretation and further elaborated that this stakeholder supports several schools, thus cannot be present during all meetings but approval from him was critical before moving forward with any action. Frequent member checking ensured that my bias was limited and interpretation of the experience was similar to the school leader(s)’ interpretation.

Results

Overview of the Context and Plan

In January of 2020, Principal Kory Newman began his leadership journey at Bethune Middle School (pseudonym used to maintain anonymity). Bethune was plagued with continuous academic challenges most evidenced by six years of failing accountability grades from the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) and in risk of being taken over by the state. Bethune
had dismal performance outcomes for specific subgroups of students including English Language Learners and disproportionately high rates of suspension based on race, socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities. Rather than suffer an IDOE take-over, a seven year intensive process was approved to allow the district to turn around the school. Kory assumed his role knowing there was a short period of time to make a significant and necessary impact. Kory described Bethune as diverse with over 90% of the student population eligible for the Free and Reduced-Priced Lunch Meal Program. In talking about Bethune, he emphasized a rich history in the community; however, the school has been ravaged by low expectations and poor leadership that eradicated a once thriving school community. Subsequently, Kory quickly identified the need to overhaul the ineffective teaching staff while simultaneously addressing the quality of the curriculum and instruction offered at Bethune.

Kory has been recognized at the state and national level for school turnaround work, he is credited by district leaders for turning around two other local middle schools that are still using the strategies and practices implemented under his leadership. He enjoys working directly with students and families following a code of ethics and value statement that guide every aspect of his leadership. Kory states that he believes, “...if you are not getting better continuously, you are getting worse.” He uses this belief to drive and guide his work as a school leader.

In assuming his leadership role at Bethune, Kory’s priority was to, “...stop the bleeding...kind of start a new system, try to establish order and actually create a sense of there is a leader now making decisions and guiding things.” He described his leadership style by stating: “I'm an individual. I make a point early to remind them (other school leaders)...I have 51% of the vote.” Although he seeks input from other leaders, he holds all final decision-making powers.
To “help stop the bleeding,” Kory assembled his school leadership team which included three assistant principals. He explained that he does not want career assistant principals rather he wants to help develop the next generation of instructional leaders. For Kory, he said that one of the most important characteristics in leaders is a focus on making student-centered decisions. When working with teachers, Kory strives to identify each person’s passion and how it can be applied to classroom pedagogy.

The study began in July of 2020 as the leadership team developed a school improvement plan (SIP) for implementation during the 2020-21 academic school year. The following narrative summarizes the key components of the SIP created by the school leadership team. The plan included two sections: Part A and Part B. Part A focused on identification of SMART goals, strategies to support the areas of focus, measures of progress for monitoring goals, and the responsible parties for each actionable item. Part B focused on how shifts will be made during the year due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Part B also identified forward planning for circumstances such as students electing to remain all virtual while others return for in-person learning.

The SMART goals identified in Part A focus on adult and student culture, professional learning, core instruction, intervention, after school enrichment, strong family connections, and school operations. Each goal was disaggregated into shorter-cycle actionable steps or strategies to create an opportunity for small yet incremental milestones while continually making strides toward achieving the larger SMART goal. For professional learning, there were three strategies identified: implementing an instructional coaching model, developing and utilizing specific evaluation protocols, and introducing a professional learning community (PLC) meeting time.
with the end in mind to provide job-embedded support through instructional coaching. Progress monitoring of each goal was measured through multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data. For example, the progress monitoring of adult culture was evaluated through the following: (1) a survey that assesses if staff can articulate the need for continuous improvement, (2) a longitudinal data study demonstrating a decrease in adult and student conflict, and (3) a survey focused on students experience in school. Multiple measures of data enabled the school improvement team to triangulate results and determine if there was adequate progress being made towards the goal. Finally, while Kory was ultimately accountable for the attainment of SIP goals, each member of the school leadership team was assigned a different responsibility.

Part B shifts the focus to how the school will adjust its daily operations and, in return, its SIP goals in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. A large component of Part B reflected an emphasis on blended learning and the identification of lead teachers to support departments in the creation of videos that successfully deliver instruction in the digital environment. Throughout Part A, there are references to adjustments being made because of the pandemic such as the need for a way to develop culture remotely. Although Part B was intentionally created to focus on shifts to be made because of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the majority of the shifts are outlined in Part A of document two and during team meetings.

**Research Question 1: Description of School Challenges and Improvement Process**

The first research question was as follows: How do school leaders describe the challenges their school experiences and is there an established problem-solving and planning process? The two themes that emerged related to this question suggest in this case study: (1) the leaders
focused on problems within their control and (2) the leaders systematically prioritized areas of
focus.

*Focus on problems within their control.* During this case study, school leaders focused
on locus of control relative to the specific needs of students and holistically as a school building.
School leaders framed their conversations to focus solely on challenges they could have an
impact on. Barb Hickle, assistant principal, summarized this idea during an interview by stating,
“So, for me, when I was asked to come to this school, I saw 100% opportunity. So for a school
that historically, um, had been failed. So I don't call this, you know, I wanted to be intentional
about that, a school that has historically been failed, they needed a champion.” The idea that this
school *had been failed* recurred throughout the interviews, observations, and documents for
school improvement. The specific language suggests a belief that the root cause of the school’s
poor performance lies inward toward the opportunities for improvement that exist within the
building.

School leaders quickly identified perceived barriers to student achievement such as
students learning the language of English, the social economic status of students, and lack of
parental involvement; however, school leaders did not spend significant time discussing barriers
or problems they could not control. For example, during the interview with Barb, she described
how many problems the school faced were not related to who or what the children did, rather the
problems were related to adult-centered decisions that impacted students. She stated:

Yes. So I will say structural inequities...something as small as where a capital project
funding was spent and the level of dilapidation of this building. You would constantly see
things like buildings around the district that are receiving upgrades. And at the same time, this building is dilapidated with no upgrades. So these are things that children didn't do.

Barb compared her older and outdated school building to other schools in the district that were prioritized and recently received structural updates as an issue far beyond the reach of the students. She additionally identified issues with academic practices of school staff by saying, “...one of the things that was wrong was the kids jumping straight to remediation and not having access to quality Tier One instruction and being able to access grade level content.” This interview statement was supported and further explained in the SIP submitted to the IDOE. In the SIP it described a problem facing the school as, “At this school there is not an effectively clear plan and a commonly used toolbox of resources to use at the first sign of academic struggle.” The focus on resources and teaching practices were within the school staff’s locus of control.

Another example of focusing on problems within their control was when the school leaders had to problem-solve chronic student absenteeism and plan a systematic way to improve attendance during a meeting. During observation two, Kory stated, “Who is going to own everything? Adult culture, climate is something we need to change immediately.” He went on to further elaborate that culture is what happens when the back of school leaders is turned. Culture was what is happening to children all day, everyday. Participants during this meeting identified that absenteeism of teachers was greater than kids which has a negative implication on student attendance. Document three identified Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) that would be deployed to address chronic student absenteeism. More specifically, document three stated, “The overarching goals of our CR-PBIS committee is to find ways to demonstrate a decrease in behavioral incidents, an increase in student attendance and improved academic
achievement in the school by creating a safe, stable, supportive environment in which students can excel. In reviewing our attendance records, we find our attendance rate has held steadily at 95% over the last year. Our goal is to increase this to 98% collectively.” PBIS was an intervention the staff could use to improve climate, culture, and attendance. By focusing on the adult climate and culture, attendance, and PBIS practices, school leaders developed a way to address chronic absenteeism of students within the control of the staff.

The process of focusing on what the staff can control was further modeled during observation two when school leaders were problem-solving why the response rate of parents and guardians regarding participation in sheltered eLearning was low. The school leaders identified the issue of engagement with students and families, but primarily focused on what the school could do to improve engagement. The school leaders did not find fault with the families even when it could have been attributed to them. Intentional focus on what was within the control of school staff led to efficient problem-solving processes on both a micro-level, the low response rate on the survey, and a macro-level, improving student engagement. The problems discussed during school meetings, interviews, and identified in school improvement documents and meetings were within the control of staff.

**Systematically prioritize areas of focus.** The next theme that emerged relative to research question one reflected school leaders prioritizing areas of focus. During an interview with Barb, she described how the school improvement team initially generated the list of what needed to be improved. She stated Kory started the meeting by saying, “...why don’t you just like, tell me everything that is wrong. We need to start getting it out on the table, like what's wrong and being able to address those.” The team engaged in a session that involved identifying and listing all
problems of the school. Barb further explained, “...being able to have that, um, having that open and honest dialogue and able to put it out there with your team and not just, you know, like not just wallowing in it. Like oh, well they just don't like this. And our latest data is dah, dah, dah, dah...” Barb described moving past the data to just listing everything the school leaders felt was a problem within the school but not spending too much time wallowing in the problems. This shows the emphasis was on identification of the problems within their control but also the prioritization of focus areas.

The process of identifying and listing the problems led to the creation of document one, the first plan for school improvement. However, document one was transitioned to document two based on the guidance from a district administrator. Kory intentionally shifted the team to document two which had components of the original problems identified in document one, but prioritized what problems will be addressed during year one. Problems are prioritized and placed according to domain: culture, academics, and engagement. During another interview with Kory, he described what this transition felt like. He stated, “I felt like we were most impactful for this year one...you know let's do some things well before we try to spread ourselves too thin and end up accomplishing nothing because we weren't focused.” Prioritization was documented through the transition and creation of plans for school improvement. Prioritization allowed school leaders to systematically address problems and not attempt to solve too many at one time.

Throughout the case study, the problem identified as being within the school’s control and a priority for the school improvement team was the quality of teacher instruction. An analysis of interviews, observations, and documents support the idea there was a prevalent focus on the quality of instruction a student receives. Kory described the teacher quality during his first
interview by stating, “But we had to rip the bandaid off of the teacher quality in this building. It was the worst that I have ever been a part of as a teacher or administrator. The teacher quality, probably two thirds of the building was EP (emergency permit). And not necessarily just EP because there's different ones, there's a continuum of EP.” Kory asserted one of the first action steps of the school improvement team was to assess the quality of instruction each teacher provided as the primary contributing factor to the poor performance of students on standardized assessments. Although he identified teachers as being on EP as a root cause for poor performance, the SIP he submitted to the IDOE shows the majority of the staff he hired have emergency permits.

During the first interview with Barb, she supported the idea of needing to improve teacher quality by stating, “And so I noticed that there were, you know, differences in like the quality of teaching and what was happening in the other classrooms.” Document one supported their identified problem of teacher quality by stating, “There are inconsistencies in instructional practices and the quality of instruction and as a result, children at that school have consistently performed well below state and district averages on state testing.” The root cause of poor academic performance was attributed to the quality of instruction students received and prioritized as the main focus area for year one of school improvement.

**Research Question 2: Consideration of Policies, Practices, and Pressures**

The second research question was as follows: How do school leaders consider stakeholder views, state and local policies, existing practices, and current pressures during the problem-solving and planning processes that lead to school improvement? The two themes that
emerged from triangulation of case study data are school leaders: (1) used multiple sources of data during problem-solving and planning and (2) balanced pressures and considerations related to the COVID-19 pandemic with school improvement work.

**Use multiple sources of data when problem-solving.** The first theme from research question two was school leaders use multiple sources of data for input during school improvement. One data source used throughout the case study was input from internal and external stakeholders. Feedback was elicited from school staff and students through the administration of frequent surveys. Surveys served multiple purposes. One example of a staff survey was to help guide the creation of a professional development calendar. During observation three, the school leaders discussed how the results of the staff survey would be used in conjunction with the SIP to create a monthly offering of professional development opportunities. In addition, professional development needs due to COVID-19 such as blended learning, eLearning, and technology integration would impact the creation of the calendar. During observation three, Kory emphasized the importance of staying agile and responding to needs as they arise but not losing sight of the big picture-school improvement. The multiple sources of data would be used to create the calendar by the instructional coaches. Once a draft was created, Kory reviewed, provided feedback, or directed them to get additional stakeholder input. This continuous improvement cycle continued until Kory gave final approval for the professional development calendar.

During this case study, school leaders also recognized the need to seek input from external stakeholders. Kory identified the need to repair and build relationships in order to provide an avenue to elicit meaningful feedback from family and community stakeholders. Kory
described the relationship between the school and community as, “Trust is broken. I mean broken. Parents didn't trust the administration and the school, um, you know, it’s just a bad mix.” Barb further explained why trust was broken in her interview. She stated, “Um, past harm from the staff... We're still repairing relationships with the school and families in the community because our families have been shut out.” Document one summarized this issue as, “…there is a lack of a school community and family partnerships. Trust from students and parents is low.” The school leaders recognized trust was broken, but they also planned for ways to repair this relationship while eliciting important feedback from the community. During the second observation, school leaders discussed how they can start even if they are not in-person or together yet. Barb explained the school leaders would schedule check-in and chats with community members to help measure progress towards goals of the SIP. Kory reinforced the importance of the community by saying, “The community is part of us. We have stewardship with each other. We must build community and give a voice to all in this improvement process.” Kory emphasized trust would not be established overnight, but it cannot be used as an excuse not to collect feedback from external stakeholders. Feedback was consistently collected and became an important data source during the school improvement process.

Another example of the use of multiple data sources was the evaluation plan for the behavior goal of the SIP. Document three described the third SIP goal as, “The overarching goals of our CR-PBIS committee is to find ways to demonstrate a decrease in behavioral incidents, an increase in student attendance and improved academic achievement in the school by creating a safe, stable, supportive environment in which students can excel. In reviewing our attendance records, we find our attendance rate has held steadily at 95% over the last year. Our goal is to
increase this to 98% collectively.” Document three outlined the process to track progress of meeting the goal of a three percent improvement in the school’s student attendance rate. The evaluation process went beyond just tracking the attendance rate. The evaluation process included use of student and staff surveys, student work completion data, and the number of participants in PBIS rewards. Although the goal was simple, to improve the attendance rate, school leaders would use multiple sources of data from internal stakeholders to elicit input and track progress towards this goal with a clear process in place to determine if the goal is actually met.

**Balance pressures and considerations.** The second theme of research question two was school leaders balanced pressures and considerations related to the COVID-19 pandemic with school improvement work. School leaders had to consider the impact of COVID-19 on problem-solving, planning, and implementation of the SIP. During the first observation, the team briefly started a discussion about what it would like with students in the classroom for this first day of school. Assistant principals listed ideas about how the school could organize students by grouping them in cohorts. This discussion lasted for a few minutes then Kory stated, “Teachers will switch, not kids. Think about kids in school. We need to discuss. This is what we don't know…like time frame, teachers, kids, schedules, core subjects. I don't feel like we can. I don't want to put time in. Not worth it.” Kory identified it was not worth their time or effort to brainstorm how the start of school would look because it had not even been determined if students would return in-person yet. Rather, he returned the group of school leaders’ focus to the school improvement process and plan by providing a reason not to problem-solve right now.

Additionally, there was a specific section in document two, Part B (Figure 5) for
adjusting school improvement planning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, instead of documenting their adjustments due to operation of a school during a global pandemic in Part B, the majority of all adjustments are listed in Part A. The school improvement team briefly discussed how each intervention would be adjusted due to pressures from COVID-19. For example, distance learning was added to the domains focused on Mathematics and English Language Arts/Reading instruction. The team identified the need for expert core teachers to provide models of lessons and professional learning to intentionally focus on delivery of blended learning. Instead of considering pressure from COVID-19 separately, considerations were embedded through the specific domains of the school improvement process.

Figure 5

Part B of Document Two: School Strategy Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic/Concrete Actions (Column C from Part A) (add more rows as is necessary; one row for each action)</th>
<th>Family has elected to engage in 100% remote learning (revamped eLearning or packets/materials) OR we have to close physical school again and engage in remote learning</th>
<th>Family has elected to send child to school following a hybrid model with reduced classes to accommodate social distancing (every M/W, or T/TH, Friday AM or PM) and remote learning when not physically in school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop a unified space for Staff Professional learning opportunities to be organized to allow synchronous as well as asynchronous engagement (eg)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Restorative justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• 27 Equitable Classroom Practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Blended Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model and facilitate a protocol for productive content level PLCs</td>
<td>Model and facilitate a protocol for productive content level PLC that happen virtually</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This screenshot shows a table created intended for a school improvement team to use to document the concrete actions that would be taken to accommodate for different scenarios due to COVID-19.

Next, throughout the case study data was collected and examined with additional reference to the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Document three stated, “The
declining attendance trend was possibly a result of school performance and lack of accountability in the past. Currently, COVID-19 has created issues with attendance as well as attendance monitoring.” When determining the reason for chronic absenteeism, document three identified possible causes-school performance and lack of accountability. However, the root cause analysis was taken one step further by describing additional persistent issues because of COVID-19. Not only is attendance data impacted by COVID-19, school leaders also had to consider if pressures of COVID-19 would impact academic data. Barb stated during observation one, “How are we going to conduct assessments? I am good at using tools. But I am questioning reliability.” Kory furthered her thinking process by stating, “Early morning Sunday school to take assessment? Think about considerations related to bringing students in. Are we going to bus the kids in? How many at a time?” Kory acknowledged the issue related to distance testing. However, he illustrated the need to accept virtual, distance testing by painting a picture of the process of bringing in all students for testing. This picture painted by Kory caused the team to realize they would have to accept the impact of remote test proctoring because it was not worth the time and effort to get all students in the school for the diagnostic assessment, the test. Throughout the case study, there were many opportunities for school leaders to ruminate about the pressures of the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, Kory ensured the team did not spend too much time or effort to address unknowns related to COVID-19 pressures. Only when it was appropriate and needed did the team integrate considerations for COVID-19 in the school improvement process.
Research Question 3: Selection of Interventions for School Improvement

Research question three was: “What instructional interventions are selected from the application of the problem-solving and planning process?” Three themes emerged that answer this question. The themes were (1) multiple interventions were selected to solve a problem, (2) prior experiences and successes of a school leader impact selection of interventions, and (3) school leaders use comprehensive measurement practices to monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions.

Select multiple interventions to solve a problem. The first theme in planning reflected an intentional effort to develop a multi-faceted school improvement strategy. The team identified reading proficiency as a focus area in document two via the following SMART goal: “By Dec. 15th, 70% of students will demonstrate growth in Reading as measured by their Lexile reading score. Subgroup (A) Students who scored under 200 on their pre-test will increase their score by at least 20% Subgroup (B) Students who scored between 201 - 500 on their pre-test will increase their score by at least 10%. Subgroup (C) Students who scored 501 or greater on their pre-test will increase their score by at least 5%.” The purpose of the goal was to incrementally increase the reading Lexile of students overall while simultaneously targeting specific subgroups. Document one identified a list of intervention strategies that could be used to improve reading Lexiles of students. The varying methodologies outlined in document one included, “Graphic organizers, differentiated strategies, comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, literacy-based strategies, and a unified early alert structure.” Beyond document one, document three elaborated on the specific comprehension monitoring strategy that would be used while
also describing various close reading strategies. Utilizing these varying methodologies was supported by research from Fisher and Frey cited throughout the document. Kory further justified all of the mentioned practices as having an impact on reading proficiency by stating, “You know, they're starting to get some clarity around what vocabulary is, is, you know, important and how we're exposing kids to, to, um, you know, the type of texts. How are we selecting the texts that we want to use?” In this last statement, Kory alluded to the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in the purposeful selection of texts. He stressed the need for teacher clarity in what content is taught to students and why. At least eight different interventions are being implemented systematically through the SIP to improve reading proficiency via the student Lexiles.

Another example of a focus area with more than one improvement strategy was parent/guardian/family engagement. During an interview, Barb described the engagement problem during an interview by stating, “There are ways that our families here in the west side and in our school in particular, um, their voices have been silent.” Barb painted the picture of people’s voices needing to be heard. Much like the approach towards increasing reading proficiency, multiple strategies were selected to address the issue of engagement. Document two identified the strategies as, “Establishing community building circles [restorative justice understanding], community cafe discussions, a staff book study, a parent teacher organization. [One could] host family-friendly events, and in September, students and families will take a survey and list clubs, intramurals, and social events of interest.” Document three revealed details about the practices that would be deployed to increase engagement including robo-type phone calls, text messaging, and individual classroom messaging through educational technology.
platforms such as School Messenger. Document three also elaborated on when personalized phone calls from staff were appropriate, noting it was not reasonable to expect these types of contacts to be regular for all students.

The multiple strategies to improve engagement was actionized when the school improvement team faced a problem during observation four. The problem was a low response rate on the sheltered eLearning survey. In an efficient manner, the team developed a multi-pronged approach to improve the response rate on the survey in the future. Kory framed the work the team needed to do by establishing the deadline was Thursday and there was no room for excuses. Barb led the team in creating an action plan designed to reach more families. The plan included: (1) creating multiple waves of communication through social media and automated calls, (2) eliciting the help of the community peace builders, (3) providing time in the schedule for teachers to make personalized phone calls, (4) developing a system to identify who are the key people that are checking in on progress, and (5) making home visits when needed with the support of the community. This systemic and multi-faceted approach to increase the response rate represents the process that is taken to address each identified problem in the plan for school improvement.

Prior experiences and successes of school leaders impact selection of interventions.

The second theme related to research question three was how prior experiences and successes of a school leader impact the selection of future intervention strategies for current school improvement efforts. One example was the implementation of daily exit slips as an intervention strategy. During the first interview, Kory referenced his experience with the specific strategy noting his belief that exit slips lead to students receiving more targeted instruction. Kory
stated, “They get retaught the material and I've had a lot of success with that over the last, uh, last two years, especially while at my previous school, it works phenomenally well. And so a version of that is what we're going to be doing here.” He further elaborated on the unified early alert structure by stating, “And so what I've done over the last few years is find a way to make exit tickets, you know, those formative assessments and math and language arts make them matter. And so what we're going to be doing is using that information from those exit tickets that happened in math and language arts.” For context, Matt Buchs, an assistant principal, shared the exit slip tracking document used at Kory’s prior school with the school leaders during the first observation. The team discussed how the exit slips could be adopted, improved, and used for the current school. Document one stated, “Students will receive instruction based on frequent and timely formative and summative assessments. Students will continually receive timely feedback assisting them in knowing strengths and weaknesses.” Exit slips that lead to a specific instructional group with targeted instruction was an intervention documented throughout each version of the school improvement plan.

Another example of the impact of previous experiences and successes was evidenced by the focus on adult culture as the first domain of focus for school improvement. Adult culture in document two encompassed SMART goals of restorative justice, PBIS, and staff culture. The process of using PBIS to address adult culture was discussed during the second observation. Matt shared how a PBIS digital application would be used to track and monitor how staff were engaging with families and if there was any correlation in the subsequent behavior observed. Matt used the PBIS digital application at a previous school he served as an assistant principal and instructional coach.
Finally, during the third interview, Kory shared why culture is important and worth the team’s improvement efforts. He said:

And, um, I’ve experienced buildings and schools where the culture is off balance. And when in my opinion, when the culture is off balance. When adults are more focused on, you know, adult sanctioned items. When adults are more focused on, you know, their wellbeing, um, and their happiness. When the kids are not performing, the kids are kind of left to fend for themselves.

Kory created a powerful visual of students fending for themselves while adults seem not to care. This process of identifying adult culture as a problem followed by targeted planning was further evidence that, oftentimes, what is familiar is commonly used time and time again, regardless of the leader or specific workplace.

*Use comprehensive measurement practices to monitor and evaluate impact of interventions.* The final theme related to research question three was school leaders use comprehensive measurement practices to monitor and evaluate impact of interventions. Comprehensive means it was ongoing, relied on multiple sources of data, and used specific quantitative data. During the second interview, Kory described how the team monitored their goals,

So, we have that set into our calendar where that happens on a revolving schedule so that we never lose sight of those [goals]. Um, so I try, that's something that we try to do so that the goals are always staying alive and we know what's happening.

Kory identified the need to schedule pre-determined times to look at all sources of data to measure progress toward a goal ultimately informing the impact of the intervention. Also, during
this interview, Kory identified multiple ways the reading and mathematics goals would be monitored. The multiple ways included: diagnostic assessments administered three times a year, walk-throughs using a common tool amongst school leaders and instructional coaches, formative assessments, and surveys to stakeholders.

The theme of using comprehensive measurement practices was further supported during observation four. School leaders discussed the idea of using multiple measures of data as they reviewed the work that needed to be done prior to the start of the school year for students. School leaders collaboratively determined the type and frequency of the observations as well as the tool to provide timely and targeted feedback about instruction to teachers. Also, the team of school leaders stressed the importance of triangulating the data gathered through the observations with data from formative and diagnostic assessments. This represented the importance of monitoring progress of interventions with multiple sources of data.

Finally, document analyses supported the theme of using multiple sources of data when monitoring and evaluating the impact of interventions. Document two outlined the use of multiple ways to monitor and evaluate goals for improvement in mathematics instruction. It stated: “Math: By Oct.15, 2020, all math teachers will be united and trained on the Ready Math curriculum. By Oct. 25, walkthrough forms will indicate that 100% of math teachers are: aligned on standards, aligned on use of Exit Tickets, and using scaffolding techniques discussed in PLC meetings.” To measure the effectiveness of mathematics instruction, multiple measures were deployed to evaluate progress. Also, document one showed the school improvement team used the following sources for evaluation: weekly data/exit ticket, i-Ready formative diagnostic
assessment, FOCUS results, letter grades, and classroom walk-through observations with a common tool used by school leaders.

Discussion

The primary goal for this case study was to learn more about how expert school leaders engage in problem-solving and planning for the purpose of developing a SIP that leads to improved outcomes for all students. This research was intended to help fill a gap in qualitative research focused on school improvement. The following section discusses implications for practice, limitations, and recommendations for additional research in an effort to further the conversation about best practices in leading school improvement efforts.

Implications for Practice

Upon completion of my case study, there were several implications related to how expert school leaders should engage in problem-solving and planning for the purpose of SIP development. The implications are: (1) create SIP goals that are clear and understood by all stakeholders, (2) develop and use a consistent decision-making process, (3) use a multi-prong approach to solve ill-structured problems, and (4) respond to a crisis using the school improvement process.

Create clear, understandable SIP goals. The first implication for practice was to ensure SIP goals are simple and understood by all stakeholders. SIP goals of the case study were clear to all stakeholders and the school leaders intentionally used the goals during problem-solving and planning. One of the evaluation metrics for SIP goals in this case study was the ability of all
school staff to not only state the goal of the SIP but explain why it is important. School leaders ensured staff were grounded in their purpose. This supports the finding of Strunk et al. (2015). Strunk et al. (2015) discovered the quality of plans were positively associated with ease of implementation, increased teacher collaboration, and improved climate and culture of schools. Sometimes SIP goals can become lengthy and abstract when you add in commonly used education jargon such as differentiation or student engagement. Even if the goal represents what the school needs to focus on, if staff do not understand the goal there will likely be no impact. By ensuring clarity in understanding and revisiting the goals often, school leaders in this case study improved the ease of implementation and climate of the school, which was an identified need and focus.

Additionally, the SIP goals were the lens in which tasks were viewed. Even when engaging in managerial tasks related to COVID-19, school leaders returned to their SIP to intentionally ensure alignment. Weekly meetings of the leadership team were balanced between SIP implementation and reacting to needs that arose due to COVID-19. During these meetings, Principal Kory Newman would strategically prioritize and allocate time for different agenda items related to the SIP and COVID-19. When and as needed, he would explicitly stop the meeting and move the leadership team in a different direction. If the SIP goals were not clear, this type of process would not have been possible. The leadership actions of planning and prioritization represent what NWEA (2020) identified as one of the most effective ways to mitigate negative academic impact of school closures due to COVID-19. It is very easy during a crisis to focus attention on things that are beyond the control of the school leaders. While operating a school in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders could easily focus
on things such as will the health department require students to wear masks or will our students get their COVID-19 vaccine. However, all of these are beyond the control of the school leaders and time spent wallowing or wondering is wasted. SIP goals encouraged the school leaders of this case study to focus less on the unknowns due to COVID-19 and more on strategically moving forward with school improvement.

Develop and use a consistent decision-making process. The second implication for practice was to ensure the right people are leading the school improvement process. School leaders' experience and paradigms influence the process of school improvement. Kory provided an efficient and effective model of decision-making within a paradigm of continuous improvement. As seen in the study by Leithwood and Steinbach (1993), expert school leaders are more likely to place problems within the context of the school purpose and demonstrate stronger domain-specific skills and knowledge. Consequently, these types of leaders are able to make meetings more productive given the nature of their disposition. Kory had an established decision-making process that made his school improvement meetings efficient and effective. There was no confusion about how a decision was going to be reached even when there were differing opinions of people at the meeting. This allowed the free exchange of information and welcomed diverse opinions because ultimately the team knew Kory was going to make the decision. His pursuit of continuous improvement was seen throughout the case study and was reinforced by the identified hierarchy of decision-making.

It can be reasonably inferred that if Kory was not there leading meetings in this manner the meetings would not have been as productive and there would have been instances of unproductive wallowing in data beyond the control of school staff. As examined in the literature
review, there are many theories of how school leaders work through different variables and influences like stakeholders, practices, pressures, and policies (Lindblom, 1959; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019; Cohen et al., 1972; Ballantine & Spade, 2007). At the time of the case study, there were the typical variables and influences impacting the school improvement process, but also the new variable: a global pandemic.

What was important in this case study was not how Kory worked through the variables and influences, but that his decision-making process was consistent and clear to his school leadership team. There were instances where Kory muddled through problems (Lindblom, 1959) or he decoupled problems from solutions like a garbage can (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). However, the same process for making a decision was executed by Kory every time whether it was hiring a new teacher or creating a sheltered eLearning plan because of COVID-19. With time at a premium in responding to the needs of students (Northwest Education Association, 2020), a decision-making process within a defined paradigm of continuous improvement was essential. Teams can become bogged down by a constant flow of data and divergent opinions of those on the school improvement team. This can manifest in teams working extremely slow or only doing surface level work because members are afraid that their opinion or stance will offend another member. Time away from students is always at a premium in schools, thus it must be used efficiently and effectively to yield the best outcomes. If it is not used in this way, there may be a lack of willingness to participate on teams such as school improvement because it is viewed as not impactful.

Related to use of time, it should also be noted that the majority of the work of school improvement was not documented in the official template required for submission to the IDOE.
However, Kory and his leadership team had to take time to meet the mandate of the IDOE and submit the plan as required. The majority of school improvement problem-solving and planning was documented in plans generated by Kory in consultation with district-level administrators. The document where information was documented was clear, to the point, and digestible for all stakeholders compared to the IDOE template which was long—more than fifty pages, repetitive, and used complex educational jargon. In several of the studies in the review of literature, the SIP that was considered and analyzed was the one submitted to the state education department. For example, Myers and VanGronigen (2019) discovered there was not authentic engagement in the improvement process and identified satisficing behaviors in SIPS. However, Myers and VanGronigen (2019) analyzed SIPS that were submitted to the state department. If the SIP in this case study was included, the analysis of this SIP would yield similar results to their study most likely. However, this would not be due to the presence of satisficing behaviors or not authentic engagement, rather it would be due to the fact Kory used a different template and process to lead school improvement that was not submitted to the state department. How many other SIPS submitted to the state department are mere acts of compliance? And how much time was and is wasted by school leaders in meeting this requirement?

**Use a multi-prong approach to solve ill-structured problems.** The third implication for practice was to use an ongoing, multi-pronged approach to address ill-structured problems related to school improvement. Described in the literature review, schools are faced with increasingly more complex or ill-structured problems (Mintrop and Zumpe, 2019). In this case study, school leaders faced ill-structured problems like failing student achievement for a prolonged period of time, not engaged stakeholders, a school culture that was not student
centered or conducive to student learning, and negative impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In order to solve these problems, school leaders from the case study selected multiple interventions. The problem-solving and selection of these interventions by the school leaders followed the main steps identified by Mintrop and Zumpe (2019). However, in planning an intervention, the school leadership team in this case study used multiple programs, practices, or people that represent multiple types of interventions. For example, to solve the problem of consistently failing Reading/ELA scores there were seven interventions either discussed or documented. This trend of using multiple interventions to address problems continued for all problem areas identified in the SIP.

Due to the time period of the case study, implementation of the interventions was not studied. The problems were great at Bethune, however, school leaders must balance the need for improvement with the amount of change school staff can handle. As supported by the findings of Strunk et al. (2015), plan implementation was impacted by motivation of school staff and tensions between administration and teachers. Requiring school staff to change too much at one time could impact the quality and implementation of the plan. Staff could quickly reject change due to the sheer magnitude not because they disagree with the changes. This type of rejection could lead to a low staff morale, tension with the labor union, or a high burnout rate of staff. Also, by starting with so many interventions it can quickly become difficult to determine what interventions worked and did not which can potentially negatively impact school improvement planning in subsequent years.

In addition to multiple interventions being used, there were multiple ways to measure progress within incremental time periods. These multiple measurements represent short cycles to
measure progress towards meeting the SIP goal. Each goal had intermittent points to check progress with more than one measure. This shifts the focus away from just guessing if what you are doing has an impact or not. It also allows for a more clear picture of progress. For example, surveys, data from the student information system such as attendance, behavior reports, and participation in PBIS were used to track progress towards the behavior/social-emotional goal. As noted by Barrows (2000), ill-structured problems are complex and do not have a simple or single solution path. Multiple interventions and progress monitoring types represent a way school leaders solve these types of ill-structured problems, essentially not depending on one solution to solve the problem or not putting all your eggs in one basket.

**Respond to a crisis using the school improvement process.** The final implication for practice was to use the school improvement process to plan and prioritize when responding to a crisis. As emphasized by Lancker and Parolin (2020), school leaders were faced with challenges and decisions often never seen before when responding to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. School leaders in this case study used the same process to solve problems identified in the SIP as they used to solve problems that occurred because of the crisis, like a low response rate to a sheltered eLearning survey or how to implement new health guidelines to mitigate the spread of the virus. Their process of responding to the crisis occurred at an accelerated rate compared to school improvement due to the nature and immediate need of crisis related problems. Nonetheless, the process used was the same as school improvement with stages including inquiry, problem-solving, and planning. By using the school improvement process, school leaders were able to focus on the actual issues at hand instead of learning a new way to problem-solve and plan. Using an already developed process, freed up cognitive space for the
school leaders to attend to the most important information. If a process was not in place, school leaders could have risked not knowing how to approach these new types of problems created by a global pandemic. Response time is critical when responding to a crisis and this is one way school leaders can be more efficient and effective.

At times, the schools leaders in the case study identified root causes based on analysis from the SIP rather than examining new data. As shared in the results, the school leaders determined the reason there was a low response rate to the eLearning survey was due to actions by the staff at the school with no review or analysis of new data. Due to time constraints, the school leaders made an assumption about what was the root cause of the low response rate by using the root causes identified in the SIP. This type of assumption helped expedite problem-solving and planning. However, school leaders should use a process of making assumptions with caution. It is critical during problem-solving that school leaders determine the root cause to ensure the intervention designed addresses the actual problem (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). School leaders are human and run the risk of developing bias. They can start to develop assumptions like how their staff think or the way a student would respond to something that may be completely inaccurate. The school improvement process provides an effective framework to respond to a crisis, but when using this process, school leaders need to use current data related to the problem.

Limitations

There were several limitations of this case study. The first limitation was the time period of the case study. The research was based on a bound period of time. School improvement is a
continuous process. There were several references by the school leaders about experiences and incidents that were beyond the bound time period of this case study. Barb shared during an interview, school leaders listed problems and ideas to address problems during an informal meeting in the spring of 2020. This meeting was essential in the development of the initial plan for school improvement, however, it was well before the case study started in the summer of 2020. A case study over an extended period of time may yield more information and new insights about the school improvement process.

In addition, data studied during the case study relied on direct observation, interviews, and documentation provided by the school leaders. As identified by Kory, adult culture is what happens behind closed doors when principals are not present. This case study focused specifically on school leaders, thus the scope did not include data beyond the leadership team of principals and instructional coaches. Observation of staff meetings, working sessions with staff groups, and a typical day could yield more information especially about adult and student culture or conflict that arose during the school improvement process.

Finally, the school improvement team for this case study consisted of only school leaders and instructional coaches that were hired to come in and improve or change the failing school. In problem-solving and planning for school improvement, one critical step is to understand the need for change and identification of the change process (Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). Each of the leaders in this case study were hired because of their belief and understanding that change needed to occur. In subsequent years this team will include teachers, social workers, school counselors, and community members. Some of these members may not believe or see the need
for change. The case study was limited to only studying a school improvement team of school leaders that believed there was a need for change.

**Recommendations for Research**

The first recommendation for further research would be to conduct additional case studies on school improvement processes over an extended period of time. School improvement seems to be a continuous process, over an extended period of time. This case study was based on a bound period of time. Additional case studies for longer periods of time may yield more information and new insights. Also, expert school leaders appear to constantly engage in the school improvement process whether formally or not. It may be beneficial to ask school leaders to journal over time as a way to learn how school problems are observed over a period of time and what influences this process. Expert school leaders are constantly engaging in the continuous improvement process but the majority of this process is internal. A journal would make their thinking visible.

The second recommendation is to compare outcomes of schools with different SIP processes. Currently, the IDOE requires schools to submit a plan every three years. However, Myers and VanGronigen (2019) analyzed SIPs from schools engaging in short term cycles (submitting plans for shorter periods of time) of school improvement. They found schools who did short cycles engaged in more authentic school improvement processes and there were less examples of satisficing behaviors. Kory and his leadership demonstrated a process more similar to a short term cycle rather than the long term planning required by the IDOE. A periodic submission to measure progress may yield different results compared to the three year
submission process. It appears from this study the leaders view school improvement as ongoing and it was not considered complete with the submission of a plan to the IDOE. It would be purposeful to learn more about the different methods of school improvement cycles by comparing outcomes from schools with different cycles. Research would help determine if length of submission cycles impact outcomes of school improvement.

The third recommendation for further research is to study what happens when school improvement moves beyond the core leadership team to the implementation phase. During this case study, school leaders briefly described some conflict and pushback that occurred during the early implementation of the improvement strategies. It would be beneficial to learn about how problems are framed and strategies explained to different groups of stakeholders and in different contexts. During the case study there were many examples of framing problems in specific ways, briefly sharing an experience from the past that relates to the present conversation. Does this type of framing continue beyond the school improvement leadership team? It would be beneficial to learn more about what other practices emerge during the sharing and implementation of the SIP.

During the last observation, school leaders described the process of forming a teacher leadership group. This group would help support and guide the implementation of the SIP. Studying a broad based team could yield more information about how school leaders consider stakeholder views and how different perspectives impact problem-solving and planning processes. It would also be helpful to compare school improvement meetings with and without teacher representation. It could be determined if there are changes in the conversation dependent on who is present.
Conclusion

School improvement is more important than ever. At the conclusion of this case study, a vaccine was created for COVID-19 and schools across the United States were embarking on the process of fully reopening. Multiple legislative acts were passed with the intent to provide financial relief and support schools in addressing learning loss caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. These funds are in addition to the normal funding provided to the schools at the local and state levels, basically funds to do and purchase beyond a typical school year.

In order for the funds to truly make an impact as intended, school leaders must engage in focused problem-solving and strategic planning to ensure efforts are targeted and lead to the intended outcomes. School leaders must take purposeful action to address lingering learning loss and intensified needs due to disruptions to the learning process because of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Stakes are high and time is limited.
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Appendices

Appendix A Interview Protocols

Initial Interview
A semi-structured interview protocol will be used to learn more about the problem-solving and planning process of the school leader (Creswell, 2004). The school leader will be asked to describe problems, discuss the problem-solving process, and share information about the implementation plan (Leithwood, Steinbach, & Dart, 1993).

School Leader Background Information
1. Tell me about your experience in education.
2. Why did you become a school leader?
3. How would you describe your values as your school leader?

School Background Information
4. Tell me about your school.
5. What makes your school unique?

Problems Facing School
6. What problems are facing your school?
7. Why do these problems exist?

Problem-Solving
8. How do you typically solve problems facing your school?
9. What barriers exist that prevent your school from solving their problems?
10. Share an example of a problem that has been successfully solved.

Interviews Following Observation

Reflection on Action
1. What happened during this meeting?
2. What was the goal of this meeting?
3. How did the meeting go? How do you know?

Analysis
4. Why did you focus on ________?
5. Show artifact. What did you notice when you looked at ________?
6. Repeat statements or actions. Why did you do/say this?

Reflection for Action
7. What are the next steps?
8. How do you know these are the next steps?

Final Interview

SIP
1. What interventions or strategies were selected for your SIP? Why were they selected?
2. What conflict arose when creating your SIP? How did you solve or work through these conflicts?

Next Steps
3. What resources will be mobilized to implement your SIP?
4. How will you evaluate the effectiveness of your SIP?

Impact
5. What impact will your SIP have on your schools? Explain. How do you know it will have that impact?

Appendix B Observation Protocol

The observation will be nonparticipant with only the principals knowing the background of the researcher to minimize the impact of the researcher’s presence (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The observer will sit in a location that poses the least disruption to the process of the group with an iPad and journal.

I will be looking for dimensions of problem-solving and planning of school improvement pre-identified in the codebook. The meeting will be divided into increments of five minutes. Codes observed during the segments will be tallied on the iPad through a Google Form that allows multiple submissions (see Figure 3). The responses in the Google Form will be transferred automatically to a Google Sheet through the Google Suite. A new Google Form will be used for each team meeting to ensure data is grouped appropriately.

In addition to the tallying of the codes, the researcher will use a journal to write anecdotal notes that are interesting or relevant to what the research questions are seeking to answer. A journal will be used rather than a device because teachers and principals associate typing during an observation with evaluation of performance.

Figure 3
Observation of School Improvement Meetings

Note. This figure is a screenshot of the first question of the Google Form that will be used during the observation. This question will branch to the pre-developed codes from the codebook to select. To see the full Google Form, go to: https://forms.gle/CZCnTrQVNdqhXW6J9.

Appendix C Rubric for Assessing Schools’ Plans for Rapid Improvement

VanGronigen, Meyers, & Hitt (2017) developed rubric for assessing schools’ plans for improvement (p. 2).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Domain</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overarching Vision</td>
<td>The principal leads the school leadership team and school community in urgently developing stated aims and objectives that establish how the school will be different once its turnaround is complete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Turnaround Vision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities and Progress Measures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Priorities</td>
<td>The school principal identifies two to four high-leverage priorities that will help to quickly remove current barriers to change and provide the foundation for advanced work and further improvements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Process Outcomes</td>
<td>The results assumed once priorities are successfully addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Progress Indicators</td>
<td>Measures that gauge progress toward improved outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Action Steps</td>
<td>The list of critical, high-leverage action steps that must be taken in order to achieve a process outcome, and subsequently, a priority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. School Context</td>
<td>The set of circumstances, facts, and nuances to a school and within its environment that requires customization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Root Cause Analysis</td>
<td>An approach to problem solving used for identifying foundational faults or the “why(s)” of problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Sequencing</td>
<td>The arrangement of priorities, process outcomes, and action steps in particular orders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Schedule/Timeline</td>
<td>The schedule of critical events and procedures to be completed within the plan’s designated time period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Alignment</td>
<td>The proper coordination or relation of the various components of the plan (e.g., priorities align with the turnaround vision).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Directly Responsible Individual(s)</td>
<td>The person or people charged with completing action steps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Supports</td>
<td>The obtainable materials and resources (human and capital) identified as important to conduct the turnaround.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. This figure is a screenshot of the rubric (VanGronigen, Meyers, & Hitt, 2017).
Caitlin Stockell Curriculum Vitae

**Education:**  Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  
2009  
**B.S. in Elementary Education**  
**B.S. in Special Education**  
Dual Degree Cumulative GPA: 3.91 and 4.0  

Grand Canyon University, Phoenix, AZ  
2012  
**Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction**  
GPA: 3.8  

University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA  
2013  
**Doctorate Level Certification Comprehensive Literacy Model:**  
**Comprehensive Intervention Model Coach**  
21 Doctoral Credits GPA: 4.0  

Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  
2022  
**Ed.D in Instructional Systems Technology**  
GPA: 4.0  

**Professional Certifications:**  
Google Certified Educator Level 1 and Level 2  
Indiana, Elementary/Primary/Intermediate Special Education Mild/Moderate Intervention  
Indiana, Elementary/Primary/Intermediate Generalist (Classroom Teacher)  
Indiana, Reading Specialist K-12  
Indiana, District Curriculum and Instruction Administrator License  
Iowa, K-6 Teacher Elementary Classroom  
Iowa, K-8 Instructional Strategist 1: Mild/Moderate  
Iowa, K-8 Reading Endorsement  
Illinois, Kindergarten through Grade Nine Classroom Teacher  
UNI: Instructional Coaching Certificate
Professional Experience:
**Director of Teaching and Learning**
Mishawaka, IN 2018-Present

- Execute the corporation Learning by Design: The Mishawaka Way components as approved by the Board of School Trustees: Curriculum Development and Alignment; Instructional Alignment and Priority Standards; SCM Accountability Plan.
- Work effectively with the SCM Curriculum & Instruction Department and Director of Technology to assess needs, recommend improvement goals, develop appropriate strategies, and facilitate the successful implementation of department improvement plans.
- Serves as a corporation leadership resource to the building principals.
- Coordinates and ensures the effective use of assessment, data, research, and evaluation.
- Leads the creation and execution of the SCM eLearning/Strategy Plan.
- Supervises grant research and grant writing as needed or requested.
- Establishes and maintains effective and efficient procedures for the development of curriculum selection, textbook adoption, and instructional materials.
- Develops, implements, and maintains appropriate summer school instructional programs.
- Provides support to the Director of Technology in executing the SCM Technology Plan and in supervising the corporation’s technology / learning initiatives and staff.
- Works and interacts effectively as a member of the corporation groups/teams.
- Prepares and provides information and reports to the Board of School Trustees as is appropriate and directed by the Superintendent of Schools.
- Coordinate the student teacher program, assigning student teachers with supervising teachers in a manner which best serves education and student learning.
- Coordinate a professional development program that meets school corporation needs.
- Collaborate with corporation stakeholders to create a competency-based learning system that benefits students and the community.
- Evaluate, assess, and lead efforts to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment PK-12.
- Lead SCM efforts to assist school leaders and teachers to effectively use data to guide instructional and organizational decision making.
- Assist building principals and school practitioners to establish Professional Learning Communities capable of securing meaningful, continuous school improvement, instructional collaboration, and increased student achievement.
- Coordinate professional development programming to provide a system of career paths of teacher leadership to ensure the use of best instructional practices by SCM teachers in order to facilitate transformative learning experiences for all students.
- Supervise the skills development of all employees in the operation of educational technology. Build awareness among employees of available resources and the role of technology in the instructional process.
- Evaluate and provide recommendations regarding complementing classroom instruction with educational technology.
- Conducts research about advancements in instruction, technology, and resources to facilitate informed decision-making.
- Assist with development and implementation of summer school instructional programs.
- Supervise the district's applications and use of technology within the instructional curriculum. Build capacity in principals, Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT), Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Leaders, Partners-in-Tech (PIT), and teachers in analyzing common assessments and other relevant district/student achievement data using appropriate technology tools.
- Build capacity for principals, other school leaders, and teachers to use data and technology to improve instruction and personalize learning.
- Provide insight to senior leadership during analysis of programmatic return on investment (ROI).

**Curriculum Integration Specialist**  
**Mishawaka, IN 2017-2018**

- Coordinate professional development programming to provide a system of career paths of teacher leadership to ensure the use of best instructional practices by SCM teachers in order to facilitate transformative learning experiences for all students.
- Promote the expansion of an effective personalized learning environment to school leaders which is student/learning centered.
- Emphasize project and inquiry based learning approaches through “blended learning” and “flipped classroom” environments.
- Demonstrate the crucial role instructional technologies play in education with respect to increasing student access, engagement, and success, to become college, career, and citizenship ready upon graduation.
- Facilitate the broader and deeper understanding of Growth Mindset among SCM teachers and promote learning environments that nurture confidence, engagement, collaboration, communication, perseverance, creativity, and critical thinking in SCM students.
- Supervise the skills development of all employees in the operation of instructional technology. Build awareness among employees of available resources and the role of technology in the instructional process.
- Collaborate with corporation stakeholders to create a competency-based learning system that benefits students and the community.
- Lead SCM efforts to assist school leaders and teachers to effectively use data to guide instructional and organizational decision making.
- Work with School Test Coordinators (STC) to ensure that all student assessments are completed in an efficient and effective manner and in accordance with federal, state and local rules, guidelines, and expectations.
- Manage and direct staff in support of all technology applications to help the district meet goals of the strategic plan.
- Coordinate the planning, support, professional development, and implementation of technology use in teaching/learning for the purpose of improving student learning in all subject areas.
- Plan, implement, direct, and maintain the district's applications and use of technology within the instructional curriculum.
- Evaluate and provide recommendations regarding complementing classroom instruction with educational technology.
- Conducts research about advancements in instruction, technology, and resources to facilitate informed decision-making.

**Exceptional Learners Middle School Teacher**
**Mishawaka, IN 2016-2017**
- Provided high intensity, differentiated instruction to students with and without special needs at the middle school level included two class periods in the alternative school setting,
- Developed and supported an interest for computer coding amongst students including receiving a grant for a robot that is controlled by coding.
- Critical member of the recreation and brainstorming team of the alternative school setting for middle school setting.
- Positively partnered with all stakeholders (family, administration, students, teachers) to provide a high quality, individualized instruction for all students through co-teaching models, consultation, collaborative case conference meetings, teach intervention groups and applied classes.
- Provided professional learning for all core curriculum classroom teachers on how to effectively use the new personalized learning system, Moby Max.
- Developed the ability of students to advocate in an effective and productive manner.
- Participated in the TESA (Teaching Excellence Student Achievement) class that included monthly class sessions focused on best practice and coaching cycles with other teachers monthly-providing/receiving feedback based on observation.
- Directing and instructing a team of instructional aides and paraprofessionals daily with schedule creation, modeling, and collaborative meetings.
- Managed a caseload of 36-38 students with disabilities that included: Autism Spectrum, Emotional Disability, ADHD, Learning Disabilities, Cognitive Disabilities, Downs Syndrome, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Other Health Impairments, Speech and Language Disabilities.
- Head girl’s track coach with a team consisting of over 50 members.
Montessori Instructor in a Multi-Level, Ability Classroom
South Bend, IN 2015-2016
- Integral member of a new magnet program in South Bend Community Schools as a Montessori instructor in a multi-level, ability classroom (a school within a school) at a high needs Intermediate Center.
- Learning Montessori methodology while simultaneously teaching students from grade 4 to 6 with a wide range of abilities including students with academic and behavior instruction education plans (IEPs).
- Providing children an atmosphere that nurtures them to grow and learn to self-direct their learning.
- Creating positive partnerships with all stakeholders through consistent, positive communication.
- Directing and instructing a team of instructional aides and paraprofessionals daily with schedule creation, modeling, and collaborative meetings.
- Developing several student teachers from Indiana University by making my teaching practice public, collaborative lesson planning, and providing constructive feedback.
- Incorporated technology as the primary tool for project based learning.
- Participated in workshops and in-service courses that supported the district's educational programs and goals, while collaborating with the grade level team during weekly meetings and weekly faculty meetings.
- Head track (girls) and cross country coach (boys and girls) of a team with over 80 athletes per team at another magnet program school. Teams won multiple accolades including city championships.

Adjunct Professor for University of Northern Iowa and Comprehensive Instruction Model Coach, Waterloo, IA 2012-2014
- Taught courses on Comprehensive Intervention Model as adjunct faculty online and face to face affiliated with the Richard O. Jacobson Center for Comprehensive Literacy in the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa
- Trained special education, Title One, English as a New Language, and Reading Recovery teachers in interventions
- Actively participated in collaborative problem solving and reflective practice which included professional study groups, peer observations, grade level planning, and weekly team meetings
- Taught one intervention group daily and kept accurate and updated assessment binder that was used in discussions about student data and the assessment wall
- Facilitated intervention team meetings focused on determining effectiveness of current intervention, layering of interventions, and tracking progress within the Response to Intervention Model framework
-Collaborated with district Comprehensive Intervention Model (CIM) coaches, Comprehensive Literacy Model (CLM) coaches, special education coordinator and director, special education instructional coaches, building principals, and district curriculum director
-Conducted monthly coaching cycles (pre-conference, observation, post conference) with interventionists
-Spotlighted student work and shared achievement with all stakeholders including families of children across the district
-Supported instruction, collaboration, and learning through use of technology

Special Education Instructional Coach, Waterloo, IA 2011-2014
-Provided support to teachers that was driven by students’ individual needs according to their disability/ability and lead teachers in functional assessments of academic behaviors to assist them in determining instructional needs for IEP goals
-Implemented IEP coaching that focused on moving beyond compliance to the instructional integrity of the IEP process and assisted in aligning all the necessary components for quality implementation of instruction
-Coordinated curriculum by completing formal and informal inventory of current usage of curriculums, partnered with teachers, coaches, and District representatives to align curriculum to District expectations, and guided teachers to order additional instructional materials to meet the needs of students.
-Assisted teachers in utilizing data from valid assessments to make the best instructional decisions for special education students
-Collaborated with teachers to implement, track, and analyze effectiveness of multiple pilots at all six elementary schools to meet the needs of individual students.
-Facilitated and led weekly professional developments and workshops for general and special education teachers and administrators focused on building positive partnerships as co-teachers, specially designed instruction, IEP integrity, alternate assessment, “Look Fors” in classrooms focused on Marzano’s Art and Science of Teaching, effective collaboration and teamwork, meaningful observations and reflections, special education awareness, strategic selection of supplemental materials to core curriculum, literacy instruction, and Boardmaker.
-Guided the teachers’ role in Core Curriculum in relationship to intensive instruction/intervention for students with IEPs
-Created professional learning communities across the District through the creation of electronic share points, book studies, learning inquiry groups, coordination of attendance at professional learning conferences, peer observations/reflections, and teacher centered meetings focused on selected topics.
-Facilitated productive effective communication between all invested parties: special education teachers, administrators, general education teachers, para-educators, District, families, students, and AEA representatives.
-Continued professional growth through attendance of professional learning conferences: PECS, SPIRE, State of Iowa Special Education Conference, Differentiated Instruction, Dr. Jean: Student Engagement, Partnership for Comprehensive Literacy, monthly specialized and individualized coaching development, and ICASE.

**Third Grade Inclusion Classroom Teacher, Chicago, IL 2009-2011**
-Integral member of the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) turn-around school. The turn-around school, Mary McLeod Bethune School of Excellence, is located in the East Garfield Park community. 100% of the school population is African American with 98.6% of the students receiving free or reduced priced lunch.
-Created a student-centered classroom environment that allowed learners to construct meaning, engage in purposeful learning and build a community.
-Followed a balanced literacy approach to reading including, guided reading, shared reading, reader’s and writer’s workshop, word study, partner reading, and literature circles.
-Improved students’ ability to think, reason, problem solve, and compute mathematically, with real world applications.
-Incorporated technology as the primary tool for project based learning.
-Participated in workshops and in-service courses that supported the district's educational programs and goals, while collaborating with the grade level team during weekly meetings and weekly faculty meetings.
-Developed scope and sequence of math and reading curriculum aligned to Illinois state standards for Academy for Urban School Leadership’s city network.
-Hosted and helped develop several student teachers by making my teaching practice public, collaborative lesson planning, and providing constructive feedback.
-Effectively collaborated with special education teachers, classroom aides, and early intervention specialists.
-Helped to determine interventions, modifications, accommodations, and develop Individual Education Plans (IEP) for school wide population in weekly meetings as member of Bethune’s Response to Intervention Team (RTI).
-Selected and participated as a member of Erikson Institute’s Early Childhood Task Force Team to deepen understanding of developmentally appropriate and rigorous practice in early childhood classrooms.
-Created and developed the first girl’s track and field program and boys' and girls' cross country. Introduced values of teamwork, determination, and resiliency. Girl’s track team won the AUSL conference meet and placed third at Chicago Public Schools’ City Championships.

**Related Experience:**
-Eastside Little League Board Member
-Volunteer Manager for Eastside Little League
- Volunteer Coach for Michiana Soccer Association

**Awards and Honors:**

**Professional**
- PATINS Change Through Commitment Award (2018)
- Exemplar In Innovation (2018)
- National Literacy Conference Presenter (2013)
- Iowa Department of Education Instructional Coaching Initiative Awardee (2014)

**Collegiate**
- Founders Scholar - Indiana University Bloomington
- Academic All-Big Ten
- United States Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association Academic Honoree
- Indiana University Student-Athlete of the Month
- Scholastic Achievement Award
- Exemplary Work Selection School of Education Indiana University