

Nothing and Everything:
The Relationship of Indiana's A-F School Grading System and Self-Efficacy in
Elementary Principals

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Nothing and Everything:

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The purpose of this research study was to determine how elementary principals view the Indiana A-F school letter grading system and the extent to which that system, if at all, impacts principals' self-efficacy. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with three elementary principals from southern Indiana, with each principal participating in four interviews lasting a total of approximately seven hours. Principals voiced widespread skepticism of the Indiana A-F school grading system, viewing it as a poor measure of school quality. Each participant reported experiencing a significant strain on their self-efficacy due to the letter grading system, though the strain was temporary. Principals reported that the A-F school grading system has the capacity to inflict deep stress and pain on school leaders. Findings suggest a need for Indiana policymakers to revisit the accountability system and create new school quality metrics that fully capture the many responsibilities placed on schools.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the broadest sense, education policy attempts to employ systems to increase student achievement. Among the many accountability systems that have been used to help schools evolve and improve are the use of school letter grading systems. In this system, schools are “graded” on variables and are given letter grades in the same way students are, with policymakers hoping to improve school performance and provide the public a clear, easy to understand assessment of a school’s quality. Florida began assigning K-12 schools letter grades as far back as 1999. New York City Public schools followed suit in 2007 during the Michael Bloomberg administration. The states of Arizona, Oklahoma and Louisiana introduced school letter grades in 2011. Alabama’s school letter grading system began in 2012. Ohio and Mississippi began using a school letter grading system in 2013. At the time of this writing, nearly 20 states and other localities also employ school-grading systems (National School Boards Association, 2020; Reimann, Lee, & Donahue, 2004; Rouse, Hannaway, Goldhaber, & Figlio, 2007).

These same state education systems have been impacted in terms of instructional practices, curriculum, and the role of teachers and principals. Figlio and Lucas (2004) found that school letter grades can even affect housing prices within a community. A-F school grading systems have strived to improve overall school performance and have had meaningful effects, including improved student performance, on schools in states that employ such letter grade measures (Champion, 2012; Sodoma & Else, 2009). As leaders of schools, principals may also be impacted by A-F systems in a variety of ways. Little is known about the ways this evaluation system shapes leader practices, including their daily schedules, school improvement initiatives, a greater focus on the variables on which

school grades are based, and their own conclusions about what is required to improve the overall quality of their schools.

Unquestionably, the day to day work of school administrators is complex and varied. Administrators' responsibilities include school improvement efforts, data analysis, teacher evaluation, parent communications and concerns, mediating staff conflicts, compliance with district, state, and federal demands, and countless other tasks. Administrators carry certain pre-existing attitudes and perspectives into their first years. Organizational theory, however, suggests that employees' work can impact the employees themselves, their world view, and even self-image (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). School principals, like all human beings, "produce meaning in both their collective and their individual lives, continually attaching significance to things that are happening to them. Actions are explained by intentions, and events are explained by causal relationships" (Czarniawska, 2008, p. 38). As such, while principals can surely influence the educational system surrounding them, they are also likely influenced and shaped by that very system. This interaction shapes not just principals' work, but the degree to which they feel they effectively exercise their leadership.

It is this nuanced relationship between school principals' self-efficacy and school grading systems that is the heart of this study. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 71). One would speculate that the better a school's grade, the better a school principal would not only feel about the letter grading system, but even about his/her own self-image and sense of professional efficacy. But this speculation is tempered with emerging research suggesting that

educators have skepticism – and in some cases, hostility – towards school letter grading systems (Finnigan & Gross, 2009; Howe & Murray, 2015; Shipps & White, 2009). As such, research into these issues can help to reveal principal attitudes about accountability systems and how accountability measures such as school letter grading systems can impact school principals on intimate, psychological, and emotional levels.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Indiana elementary school principals perceive Indiana’s A-F school grading system and how that grading system, if at all, impacts the ways these principals view their self-efficacy. There are far-reaching implications for this research which could not only help university administrative programs to better prepare applicants emotionally for the strains of leading at-risk schools (i.e. schools with a disproportionate percentage of students whose circumstances threaten their ability to academically succeed), but could also help current principals cope with the many sources of stress that A-F accountability systems place on school leaders.

Background of Indiana School Accountability Systems

The A-F school letter school letter grading system, launched in 2010 (Indiana Department of Education “P.L. 221”, 2012), was part of a larger school reform agenda implemented in Indiana just after the 2008 reelection of Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels to a second term in office. Months later, when Tony Bennett became the State Superintendent of Education, Indiana’s educational landscape saw changes in how education was assessed and delivered to students. Hoosier teachers would undergo a new, rigorous, performance-based evaluation system, RISE, whose final product would label a teacher with a one through four numerical ranking. Indiana third graders would take

IREAD, a 70-minute assessment which would result in an automatic retention for students who could not pass it. Policymakers in Indiana hoped these reforms would increase student achievement and school quality.

Perhaps most consequentially, schools would receive published “letter grades” in the tradition of A-F school grades designed to define in the simplest terms the quality of an Indiana school. This type of accountability measure in Indiana was not new. As far back as 1987, legislative mandates for performance-based accountability systems in Indiana have been implemented. Indiana Governor Robert Orr initiated Indiana’s “A+ program,” which added days to the school year, school accreditation based on performance, and statewide testing of Indiana students (Hiller, DiTommaso, & Plucker, 2012). Later accountability measures included descriptive categories for schools, such as “Exemplary Progress,” “Commendable Progress,” “Academic Progress,” “Academic Watch,” and “Academic Probation” (Hiller, DiTommaso, & Plucker, 2012, p. 3).

In 2010, these academic categories were replaced by school letter grades. These letter grades constitute the final assessment of a school’s overall quality. In Utah, for instance, the birth of school letter grades was conceived in an effort to “establish a clear and easily understandable evaluation of Utah schools” (Utah Accountability, 2016, p. 11), allowing citizens a clear understanding of a school’s quality. The framework of letter grades is easily accessible and understood by most adults because of their own school experience. In this regard, school letter grading systems provide the public a more understandable judgment of a school’s quality than other accountability systems that place seemingly ambiguous labels such as “commendable” or “academic watch” to schools (Hiller, DiTommaso, & Plucker, 2012, p. 3).

The first administration of school-grading in Indiana came in 2011, when the state released grades for over 1,830 Indiana K-12 schools (see Table 1).

Table 1

Distribution of Indiana School Letter Grades

Letter Grade	# and % of Indiana schools receiving this grade in 2011	# and % of Indiana schools receiving this grade in 2013	# and % of Indiana schools receiving this grade in 2016
A	776 (42%)	806 (45%)	358 (20%)
B	164 (9%)	380 (21%)	738 (41%)
C	533 (29%)	329 (18%)	438 (24%)
D	253 (14%)	189 (10%)	169 (9%)
F	111 (6%)	101 (6%)	104 (6%)

Interestingly, two schools receiving A’s in 2012 dropped to F’s in 2013. Eight schools rose from an F in 2012 to an A in 2013. There was also a significant decrease in the number of “A” schools from 2013 to 2016. This could be attributed to the 2015 transition to much more rigorous standards and statewide performance tests.

The Context of the State of Indiana

The politically conservative nature of the state of Indiana is well known. Until President Obama carried the state in the 2008 election (which he lost by a wide margin in 2012), the last Democrat to carry the state in a presidential election was President Lyndon Johnson in 1964. While the state had a mixture of Democratic and Republican governors from the 1960’s through 2005, the state has been led by Republican governors, including

current Vice President Mike Pence, for the last 15 years. The conservative bent of the state also appears in its education policy. “If this is an end to public education as we know it,” remarked Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels prior to the legislative session of 2009, “I say thank goodness. We need to end it as we know it and move on” (Howey, 2009).

It is worth noting that as the state has remade the educational accountability system with a conservative tilt, the Indiana Department of Education provides little explanation of the rationale for the A-F system or meaningful descriptions of what constitutes an “A” school a “B” school, and so forth. Its web site offers a history of the state’s accountability system and notes that the move to a letter grading system “aimed to separate adequate yearly progress (“AYP”) from state accountability; revise the criteria used to place schools in accountability categories; and assign categories based on an A-F grading system” (Indiana Department of Education “History”). While the department web site includes quantitative calculation formulas used to determine how letter grades are numerically calculated (Indiana Department of Education, “How to Calculate,” 2020), it includes no qualitative rubric or description of what an “A” school might look like to the public at large. We do know, however, that the state holds considerable power over local schools and districts, and that the letter grading system is a significant, looming reality for all schools.

There is certainly no shortage of research studies on school accountability of the myriad of ways in which accountability system impact schools, students, and educators (Cook-Harvey & Stosich, 2016; Deming, Cohodes, Jennings, & Jencks, 2016; Feng, Figlio, & Sass, 2018; Hanushek, 2019). Researchers and educators are still learning about

the full ramifications of school grading systems. But thus far, researchers have yet to significantly study the way that A-F systems may alter the self-efficacy of principals in any part of the country, much less in Indiana. Given the apparent mixed findings of those studies that have looked at school letter grades, the way that principals' self-efficacy and sense of self-worth might be influenced by them remains, at best, unclear.

All of these dynamics land on the desk of school principals. There are, as always, many stakeholders to represent, and the use of school letter grades has probably intensified this pressure for some principals. The question, then, is how A-F school grading systems impact the ways principals feel about themselves and their own professional and personal abilities.

Research Questions

This proposed study seeks to answer two primary questions regarding the impact of Indiana's A-F school grading system on the self-efficacy of school principals:

1. How do elementary school principals view the Indiana school letter grading system?
2. How does the letter grading system, if at all, influence elementary principals' self-efficacy?

This study employs qualitative methods, using web-based and face to face interviews with three Indiana elementary school principals. Participants represent diverse schools relative to gender, school letter grade, school demographics, location, and school size.

My intention is to select participants whose recent school letter grade was either an “A,” an “F,” or changed at least one letter grade during their tenure.

Significance

A study of this nature offers significant contributions to elements of the Indiana A-F school grading system that have as yet been largely unconsidered and can serve to better prepare educators contemplating careers as school principals. While the day to day work of principals certainly involves expertise and skill in curriculum, instruction, communication, budgets, personnel management, and numerous other responsibilities, a growing body of research shows that administrative practice can have a significant impact on a principal’s psychological and emotional state and even impact the choice to leave or remain in an administrative position (Elliott, Isaacs, & Chugani, 2010; Feng, Figlio, & Sass, 2018; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Mahfouz, 2018; Sodoma & Else, 2009; Theoharis, 2007; Winter, Rhinehart, Bjork, & Keedy, 2007). The high rate of burnout and leaving the principalship in the nation’s most impoverished, violent, and low-achieving schools is well documented (Combs, Edmonson, & Jackson, 2009).

With the increasing presence of A-F school grading systems, though, current and future principals will likely face public perceptions and judgments about the quality of their schools that their predecessors likely did not. Even within a school, teachers may view a letter grade as a reflection not just of student achievement, but as a reflection of their own personal and professional capacity and worth. Parents, as well as superintendents and board members, may very well put enormous value in these grades, as it is a rare parent who feels comfortable with the idea of their child attending a school

that receives an “F” grade. Likewise, particularly in affluent communities, the pressure to have their schools receive “A” grades may prove to be intense as communities hope to point to their local schools as a source of pride.

As such, this study offers a chance to develop a better understanding of the psychological impacts of A-F school grading systems on school leaders and subsequently may allow those entering the school principalship to do so with a better understanding of how to operationally and emotionally thrive in a job that can be both uplifting and draining.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The strains and pressures of the school principalship are well known both to researchers and practicing administrators (Consiglio, 2009; Theoharis, 2007; West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010; Whitaker, 2003). Numerous practicing administrators speak of the significant fulfillment and sense of personal accomplishment they feel through their roles as school administrators (Sodoma & Else, 2009; Winter, Rhinehart, Bjork, & Keedy, 2007). There is something distinctive, however, about school letter grades that might add uniquely personal challenges for principals of low-achieving schools versus their peers in high performing schools. As the founders of some letter grading systems have argued, school letter grades are easily understood by virtually anyone who has ever been a student (Utah State Board of Education, 2016).

Parents and community members may not fully understand complex quantitative measurements and ambiguous rhetorical descriptions of school quality, but they certainly understand the basic meaning of a letter grade and easily, if not accurately, translate it into a judgment of a school's quality. For instance, some research finds that accountability systems can reveal differences in how different segments of the school community judge the overall quality of the school. Whitesell (2015) studied New York City's school grading system and found a sharp distinction between parent and student attitudes towards the school letter grades. Parents, Whitesell found, expressed favorable attitudes towards the system, but the study revealed that the letter grading system "worsens student perceptions" of their schools (p. 4). Missing here is any discussion of how school principals in New York City perceived the overall efficacy and meaning of the letter grade system. Given the sharp difference in how parents and students viewed

the letter grading system, one speculates that building principals would face a stout challenge in operating within and supporting a system that has such varying degrees of favorability among stakeholders. This challenge itself increases the likelihood that principals, irrespective of their own attitudes, might be viewed negatively by at least one significant part of their educational community. The fact that school letter grades are publicized at the state and local levels and are widely understood and consumed by the public allow for quick and easy judgments of schools and their leaders. This public judgment can expose principals in ways that other sources of administrative work may not.

This review of literature will be divided into two sections. The first will provide an overview of studies of self-efficacy theory, the relationship between principal self-efficacy and school performance, and variables shaping principals' self-efficacy. The second section will explore principals' reaction to accountability systems, and the effects of A-F grading systems on school performance and how principals make sense of those effects.

Theory of Self-Efficacy

This proposed study seeks to determine the impact of Indiana's A-F school grading system may have on principal self-efficacy. Thus, a review of existing research of self-efficacy and its application to the principalship is necessary. The research on self-efficacy yields not only an understanding of how self-efficacy is created, but also how it can change. Consequently, an overview of self-efficacy studies and the forces that shape

principals' self-efficacy are fundamental in assessing the ways that the A-F system might impact a school principal's sense of self-efficacy.

Bandura Self-Efficacy Work. Bandura (1977), a renowned and seminal researcher of self-efficacy, argued that humans with high levels of self-confidence and belief in their own capabilities are more likely to perform at higher levels, both professionally and personally. They were willing to take on tasks perceived to be more difficult and challenging. So strong was the influence of self-efficacy that it can not only “have directive influence on choice of activities and settings,” (p. 194) but can also “determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences” (p. 194). Thus, irrespective of the intensity, any measure of self-efficacy in a person can lead that human to live up (or down) to his/her own expectation.

Bandura's later work on self-efficacy focused extensively on the behaviors of those with high and low self-efficacy. His 1994 study found that those with diminished views of their own abilities will,

shy away from difficult tasks which they view as personal threats. They have low aspirations and weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. They slacken their efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties. They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks. Because they view insufficient performance as deficient

aptitude it does not require much failure for them to lose faith in their capabilities.

They fall easy victim to stress and depression. (p. 71)

In essence, self-efficacy is not merely the consequence of our work; it can act to shape what work we choose to do.

Bandura argued that self-efficacy has four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic and emotional states. Mastery experiences are those experiences in which people attempt difficult tasks and either succeed or fail at them. Depending on their level of success, humans use these experiences to increase or lessen their self-efficacy. In vicarious experiences, people watch the successes or failures of others with ability levels similar to their own and subsequently make a judgment about their own ability to complete a task. Social persuasion refers to the experience of others persuading us that we have high or low levels of ability. Finally, somatic and emotional states cause us to view our own abilities through an emotional (rather than intellectual or rationale) lens. Essentially, Bandura theorized that self-efficacy is shaped by internal and external events and perceptions.

Rodriguez (2000) noted that a “healthy self” (p. 361) is dependent on multiple factors, but a common theme is that a human being with a healthy self has “an uncanny sense of self-awareness... His self-perceptions are congruent with reality, precluding a need to defend a faulty self-theory” (p. 361). In other words, leaders who see themselves as high quality, talented leaders, will suffer if the true nature of his/her personal traits impede his/her leadership abilities. For a principal, then, self-awareness is critical. Principals must know their strengths and weaknesses and must find ways of

supplementing their positives and coping with their struggles. A critical question is whether a school letter grade impacts a principal's sense of self-efficacy and what that impact reveals.

Whether or not Bandura's work can be fully applied to the school principalship is questionable. Some researchers have raised objections to self-efficacy theory, arguing that Bandura's self-efficacy instrument is not reliable and that Bandura's efforts to make distinct self-efficacy and desired outcomes are unclear (Eastman & Marzillier, 1984). Others have argued that a person's willingness to engage or avoid a particular behavior may not necessarily be related to self-efficacy, but other environmental factors that may be present (Biglan, 1987). Beyond that, the nature of the principalship is not merely singular, individual exercise. Rather, a growing body of research suggests the role of the principal is to build collaborative teams and harness the power of teachers to actualize school improvement (Fullan, 1997; Fullan, 2007). Self-efficacy theory may have some limitations in its application to the work of school principals, but education researchers have applied the theory in this context (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2007).

Forces Shaping Principal Self-Efficacy

Studies immediately following Bandura's initial work in the 1970's found that self-efficacy was malleable (Berry 1987; Schunk, 1981) in all areas of a person's life, with educational settings being especially apt for changes in self-efficacy. Bandura (1981) notes that school settings in particular can be damaging for students, as "there are a number of school practices that, for the less talented or ill prepared, tend to convert instructional experiences... into inefficacy" (p. 214). Ouweneel and Schaufeli (2013) find

that self-efficacy in students can not only change over time, but can raise or lower their own levels of academic achievement. Three years later, Yoo (2016) observed that teacher self-efficacy can increase through effective professional development. Similarly, Fischman (2018) found a positive correlation between principal self-efficacy and district led professional development on teacher evaluation. Clearly, self-efficacy and attitudes towards the self for school principals, as in the rest of population, are subject to change.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) came to the conclusion that researchers had yet to make an instrument which could reliably and validly measure a principal's sense of self-efficacy. This meta-analysis did, however, conclude that "principals' behavior is influenced by their internal thoughts and beliefs, but these beliefs are shaped by elements – including other individuals – in the environment" (p. 582). Three years later, however, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2007) studied over 550 Virginia school principals and began to isolate some of the sources of principal self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis found that neither a school's student demographics, principal gender nor race, years of experience, or grade level had any significant correlation to principals' self-efficacy. It is important to note, however, that only three percent of principals in this study led schools with a free and reduced lunch rate of over 80%. Rather, the variable these authors found most predictive of a principal's sense of self-efficacy was the building-level support and relationships immediately surrounding the principal. Principals tended to indicate that their perceptions of their effectiveness is partially related to the support they receive from "important others in their schools and school districts" (p. 112). Tschannen-Moren and Gareis's 2007 work did not consider accountability systems as a variable, leaving unanswered the question of how

accountability mandates and their consequent public pressures might impact principals' self-efficacy.

Principal Self-Efficacy and High Performing Schools

The application of self-efficacy theory to the modern school principalship lends a potential understanding to principal morale, performance, and even career choices.

Bandura's theory would suggest that principals with a high degree of self-efficacy would likely be high-performing in spite of the well-documented stress of the principalship.

They would work hard with a deep conviction that they can well serve a school community, whereas principals with low self-efficacy would veer away from necessary work responsibilities. Decades later, this finding was reinforced with Versland's (2013) discovery that low self-efficacy in a school principal leading to negative consequences on student and school performance.

Prior to the prevalence of accountability systems, principals in high performing schools were found to "have confidence in their ability to take action and influence situations" (Chase & Kane, 1983, p. 15). Johnson and Asera (1999) studied high performing, high-poverty schools and found that a central component of each was a principal's enduring self-confidence. In the face of obstacles and stress, principals "persisted... because they believed in themselves" (p. 22), and largely because of this confidence, during times of adversity, "school leaders did not stop trying to improve their schools" (p. ix).

In fact, Pajeras (1997) argued that "strong self-efficacy beliefs enhance human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways" (p. 7). Persons with high levels

of self-efficacy and self-confidence have the opportunity to find profound rewards and feelings of accomplishments in tasks that others might find threatening or frustrating. Relative to school letter grades, then, it is possible to extrapolate and suggest that the quality of the school letter grade could enhance principals' confidence and lead to improved performance throughout the array of principal responsibilities.

Elliott, Isaacs, and Chugani (2010) found a correlation between high principal self-efficacy and effective professional development activities for teachers, which further elevated school performance. Principals with feelings of self-confidence "use their wisdom and professional experience to provide development activities that directly relate to the needs of each individual teacher" (p. 136). Principal self-identity, self-efficacy, and self-confidence are not merely a matter of well-being and emotional stability; they are tangibly connected to student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

In essence, the application of Bandura's self-efficacy theory to school principals suggests that the outcome of principal's work can be significantly impacted by a principal's sense of self-efficacy. Put more directly, the stakeholders surrounding a school – students, staff, and parents -- can and likely will be directly impacted by a principal's level of self-efficacy. This can serve as an advantage or an impediment to a school depending on its principal's level of self-efficacy. The potential pressure of publicized letter grades need not be a burden to principals and self-efficacy. Rather, principals who view accountability systems as an opportunity to excel can find that school letter grades can enhance their self-efficacy.

Principals and Accountability Systems

Much of the work surrounding school accountability has centered on the immediate and direct results regarding student achievement. The advent of No Child Left Behind put student achievement and performance on standardized tests at the forefront of accountability systems. What has largely been missing in studies concerning school-grading systems are the ways that principals react to and internalize them. Much research exists regarding potential stresses of accountability systems on educators (Feng, Figlio, & Sass, 2018; Finigan & Gross, 2009; Kubow & Debard, 2000; Milanski, 2000; Torres, Zellner, & Erlandson, 2008), and some research exists describing how school principals view and internalize some of their professional responsibilities (Combs, Edmonson, & Jackson, 2009; Fischman, 2018; Fullan, 2007; Theoharis, 2007; West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). Accountability systems have also shaped principal and staff morale and job satisfaction.

Principal and Staff Morale. Studies emerged in the early 2000's showing the effects of accountability measures like school letter grades on the morale of teachers (Finigan & Gross, 2009; Kubow & Debard, 2000; Milanski, 2000; Torres, Zellner, & Erlandson, 2008), with much of the research showing that teacher responses to proficiency testing and accountability ratings included “excessive stress, increased teacher workload, and (an) adverse effect on morale” (Kubow & Debard, p. 19). In fact, high-pressure accountability systems like school letter grades have been viewed by school principals as “failing to generate enough convincing positive outcomes to gain and maintain commitment and confidence from school leaders” (Torres, Zellner, & Erlandson, 2008, p. 6), therefore eroding both principal and teacher morale.

In the midst of these studies, Fullan (2007) warned that the changing nature of education and accountability systems could have negative consequences for the principalship and the emotional welfare of school principals. Fullan (2007) advocated for educational change but has proven to be deeply critical of accountability systems such as the Indiana A-F school grade model. Why is it, Fullan asked, that most school reformers at local, state, and federal levels accept the importance of the principal's role in school performance yet so often cripple principals rather than empower them? Fullan attributed this failure to many things, citing a reliance on the "adoption" of accountability policies rather than the integral work of "capacity building" (p. 239). He argues that emerging accountability systems are leading to expectations and responsibilities in the modern principalship that cannot be realized and, therefore, sets principals up for inevitable failure.

What is left largely unexplored in Fullan's work are the ultimate personal and professional effects of a reality whose causes Fullan describes. Fullan does cite earlier studies indicating that accountability models and their correspondent demands on the school principal have led school principals to doubt their own effectiveness (Fullan, 1997) and even feel "guilt" at their inability to fulfill the responsibilities to which they have been assigned (Duke, 1988).

Burnout and Emotional Struggle. Studies following Fullan, however, more fully explored the negative consequences of accountability he forecast. School leadership in at-risk settings, for instance, was found to be exceptionally challenging, with principals often citing burnout and frustrations connected to accountability systems as a reason to change schools or even leave the profession (Combs, Edmonson, & Jackson, 2009).

Theoharis (2007) points out that principals who endeavor to bring social justice reforms to schools often face resistance, a resistance that, in part, stems from state and federal accountability measures such as school letter grades. What ends up happening to principals in this kind of context is described by Theoharis as “a personal toll” and “a persistent sense of discouragement” (p. 242). The language associated with the professional challenges highlighted in Theoharis’s study is jarring. Principals in Theoharis’s study tether these negative emotional feelings of reduced self-worth to the demands of accountability measures. Such feelings suggest more than a heavy negative impact on professional responsibilities or personal well-being; they may suggest that a principal’s own sense of self-efficacy is impacted and perhaps shaped by external accountability measures like school letter grades.

This sense of personal and professional failure is echoed in other studies of accountability systems. West, Peck, and Reitzug (2010) describe the pressures associated with state and federal accountability as “relentless” (p. 238). Interestingly, principals in this study reported a heightened sense of pressure that accompanies the public release of accountability scores and letter grades. Researchers studying everything from accountability systems to reading instruction have noted that when their discussions turned to public accountability and the pressures associated with it, numerous principals became visibly upset, emotional, and tearful (Theoharis, 2007; West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). At a minimum, this evidence suggests that accountability systems like A-F school grading systems can impose a heavy and even punishing burden on school principals.

Similarly, the use of accountability systems such as school letter grades has been shown to increase feelings of isolation in school principals, both in their personal and

professional lives. In Georgia, for instance, a state which administers an A-F school grading system, a study of high school principals found a direct correlation between the state accountability system and feelings of isolation in the school (Howard & Mallory, 2008). In this qualitative study, this isolation stemmed from numerous sources: time demands, a constant public pressure that accompanies a feeling of being “on the clock” at all times, the role of being the sole decision-maker, and an occasional lack of support from central office personnel. Given that the principals in this study cite negative feelings, one speculates as to whether these feelings of isolation may also elicit feelings of reduced self-efficacy.

One principal in Howard and Malloy’s (2008) research described a sense of “don’t look at me...I’m not going to expose my weaknesses” (p. 20). Another participant described feelings of exhaustion and indicated that responding to the pressures of accountability leaves principals feeling that they can no longer be effective. The authors observed that “the common theme among the participants was that they expected to be held accountable for their schools... but they did not like being held accountable without the power to control the things for which they would be held accountable” (p. 14). One principal reported that accountability left her feeling overwhelming stress and powerless to confront variables she felt she could not control. Howard and Mallory observed that a principal’s loss of self-confidence and effectiveness in the face of the stresses of accountability can leave principals feeling “a diminished sense of meaningfulness” (p. 9). The findings in this work point to more than a correlation between principal self-efficacy and accountability systems; rather, they point to a causal relationship between the two.

Emotional States and School Performance. There are broader implications to these findings than solely a principal's emotional state. Rather, the principal's emotional state has been found to play a pivotal role in the performance of the school community around him/her. Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010), for instance, note the critical role a principal plays in revitalizing the "rational, *emotional* (emphasis added), organizational and community conditions" (p. 254) necessary to lead a school to outstanding performance. Some of these studies were done prior to the widespread use of school letter grading systems; thus, the advent of school letter grading systems may have compounded the negative feelings cited by Howard and Malloy (2008).

Further research found that accountability measures such as school letter grades can influence which schools principals choose to lead. Loeb, Kalogrides, and Horng (2010) also learned that "schools serving many, low-income, non-white, and low-achieving students have principals who have less experience and less education" than do affluent schools (p. 205). There are likely numerous reasons for this, but it is likely that the prospect of facing accountability sanctions, including low letter grades, might make more affluent, high performing schools an attractive destination for principals who wish to maintain professional viability. Interestingly, a study one year after Loeb, Kalogrides, and Horng found that as principals acquire more experience, they often move to lead more affluent and less at-risk schools (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011). Consequently, the choice to pursue the leadership of schools which are likely to earn high letter grades is not surprising.

Principal Job Satisfaction. Conversely, some research indicates that the effect of accountability on principals is not always negative. Studies have found that this element

of letter-grading systems can act as a positive influence on the school at large and possibly – though not directly articulated – on principal self-efficacy. Champion (2012) completed case studies of four New York City urban schools whose grades rose from “D’s” to “A’s” over the course of three years. Interviews with the schools’ principals revealed that principals found their work responsibilities to be broadened in order to meet the accountability demands of the letter grading system. For example, principals noted that there was not a single driver of improvement in each of the four schools. Rather, principals viewed the improvements as being the result of any number of changes, including “high expectations, collaboration, effective instruction, on-going professional development, analyzing data and the establishment of school-wide systems” (Champion, 2012, p. 1). For principals in these systems, research hints – though does not definitively conclude -- the letter grade became not only a barometer of their school’s success, but their own personal effectiveness.

In a study of Iowa elementary and secondary principals, Sodoma and Else (2009) found that the majority of Iowa school principals reported increased job satisfaction in 2005 than what they reported in 1999. As the researchers note, this finding seems antithetical. After all, at the time of the 2005 survey, Iowa schools had sustained budget cuts that both reduced resources and stalled salary hikes for educators. Sodoma and Else guess that one reason principals express an optimistic view of their professional life is that “one can only speculate that principals feel more responsible for student success” (p. 15). Similarly, Winter, Rhinehart, Bjork, and Keedy (2007) observed that Kentucky school principals reported a moderate level of satisfaction in their current administrative positions which stems from “a sense of achievement I experience” (p. 42). These

conclusions – particular that of Sodoma and Else – are speculative, but they may point to an avenue for accountability measures to act as a source of job satisfaction rather than strain.

Egley and Jones (2005) found that in Florida, an early participant in the use of school letter grades, the preponderance of school principals in nearly half of the state's school districts reported “that they have adjusted to the demands of Florida's test-based accountability movement” (p. 76). These principals have reported increased levels of job satisfaction, a finding which may support Sodoma and Else's (2009) surmise that accountability measures can be seen as a positive challenge yielding feelings of achievement and success for school principals.

In essence, existing research has found fairly consistently that accountability systems do, in fact, have an impact on principal self-efficacy. At times, that impact is powerful, having significant influence on a principal's emotional and psychological life. Interestingly, however, the findings of these studies have been mixed relative to whether the impact of accountability systems has been psychologically positive or negative. Accountability systems have been shown to both elevate and lessen principal self-efficacy. This research, however, has not focused exclusively on school letter grading systems, nor has it attempted to gauge how a change in letter grades may impact principal self-efficacy.

School Performance and School Grading Systems

In order to assess any relationship between principal self-efficacy and the A-F school grading system, it is helpful to understand how school grading systems have

actually impacted schools. There are several reasons for this. First, if a wide body of research showed that a particular accountability measure was an invalid and unreliable measurement of school quality, few principals would accept that accountability measure as a barometer of their own personal effectiveness. Secondly, if a consensus of studies demonstrated that an accountability measure accurately portrayed a school's overall quality, principals would be more likely to internalize and accept that measure as indicative of their own personal effectiveness. Lastly, it seems likely that principals might find credibility in a system that has been shown to have clear positive effects on students and schools. In short, policymakers must understand the relative impacts of A-F grading systems on the school as a whole in order to understand how principals might view those grading systems.

A-F grading systems have been shown to influence both instruction, curricular choices, school climate, and relationships between teachers and administrators (Chang, 2009; Dee, Jacob, Hoxby, & Ladd, 2010; National School Boards Association, 2020); Olsen & Sexton, 2009; Rouse, Hannaway, Goldhaber, & Figlio, 2007). All of these variables are part of a principal's day to day operational practices and can have a significant impact on the way in which principals view their own jobs. Consequently, the impacts of A-F and similar accountability systems on a school's operational practices are an important element of this study and must be assessed.

The subsequent research charting the effectiveness of school-grading systems centers largely on student achievement, instruction, and curriculum. The results of this research have been mixed, with studies showing both advantages and disadvantages of school-grading systems. Little research has been done on how A-F school grading

systems impact principals' sense of self-efficacy or emotional well-being, although there is some research studying the relationship of accountability systems with educator morale. Still, one can speculate about how principals might internalize what we do know about the consequences of A-F school grading systems.

Several studies in the 2000's found a positive correlation between school grading systems and student achievement (Chiang, 2009; Hanushek & Raymond, 2005; Rockoff & Turner, 2010; Rouse, Hannaway, Goldhaber, & Figlio, 2007). A qualitative analysis done by Hanushek and Raymond (2005) indicates that school accountability measures implemented through the 1990's and into the 21st century did, in fact, elevate overall student achievement levels. It is worth noting, however, that accountability measures had no impact on the achievement gap between white and black students. Other studies over the next five years found other positive developments aided by school letter grading systems. Rouse et al (2007) and Chiang (2009) examined Florida's use of school letter grades and found that letter grades not only increased student achievement, but also positively impacted professional development for teachers, instructional time on core areas, and even funding levels. In 2010, Rockoff and Turner found that in New York City, the release of letter grades for schools in 2007 resulted in a marked increase in achievement scores, notably in math (Rockoff & Turner, 2010). Other accountability systems have revealed mixed results, with no impact on reading achievement and varied levels of impact on math scores (Gross, Booker, & Goldhaber, 2009). On balance, there is a lack of broad research exploring any relationship between accountability systems and principal success or failure.

Further impacting instructional practice is the rise of time spent on test-taking skills rather than critical or creative-thinking, or even subject area content. Dee et. al. (2010) reported that numerous studies suggest the use of school letter grades and other accountability measures have spiked the number of hours teachers spend teaching students test taking skills. For instance, in schools subject to accountability measures such as letter grades, “roughly 36 percent of elementary teachers reported spending more than 30 hours per year on test preparation, compared with only 12 percent of teachers in states where tests had few consequences for schools” (p. 180). Olsen and Sexton (2009) find that accountability pressures in one school system had the effect of making instruction more narrow and “routinized” (p. 9), with teachers expected to teach the same material in the same way at the same time.

Other studies, however, have found that the use of letter grades for schools have forced schools to revamp their use of instructional time in positive ways. In Florida, schools receiving a “D” or “F” were found to have altered their schedule to spend more time on the tested areas of math and reading. As a result, test scores rose, indicating an elevation in student achievement that benefits students, the school, and parents (Chiang, 2009). How principals might internalize these changes in instructional practice is unknown and may very well be a matter of individual philosophy.

Nonetheless, broad concerns remain about the impacts and effectiveness of school letter grading systems. Obviously, there are countless viewpoints as to the very purpose of education, with some scholars offering long-standing suggestions for policymakers to take a broader view of what the fundamental purpose of American education actually is (Labaree, 1997). Whether or not letter grading system can support some of these possible

educational is highly questionable. These concerns have the potential to significantly influence the way a principal views his/her own effectiveness and capability as an educational leader. In a 2015 study of every state which uses letter grades to advertise each school's quality, the National Education Policy Center found three systemic problems with school letter grading systems. First, the study found that using a single letter grade to measure school quality is significantly inaccurate given the multitude of performance indicators – attendance rates, class offering for gifted students, etc... -- that are not easily calculated or quantified. Secondly, the study argues that A-F systems are not good policy instruments because they largely “neglect the role of social, cultural, and economic factors outside of schools, as well as the policies, practices, and resources of schools – all of which play a significant role in producing (school) outcomes” (Howe & Murray, 2015, p. 10). Finally, Howe and Murray assert that the school letter grading system impedes or even “undermines” (p. 11) the responsibility of schools to produce citizens who can be constructive and thoughtful participants in a democratic society. The Jeffersonian notion that democracies require well educated citizens is ubiquitous in American history, from the republic's conception to current discussions regarding the very purpose of education (Gutman, 1999; Wagoner, 2004). Yet, Howey and Murray conclude that:

no state A-F system measures directly the educational outcomes required to foster an effective democratic citizenry: civic engagement; the ability to engage with diverse others in authentic deliberation; understanding beliefs to be revisable and indeed revising them in light of contradictory evidence; working to maintain the conditions of

democratic society, and so on. The general educational vision contained in A-F systems neglects—or perhaps even undermines—the desirability of schools to cultivate in students the prerequisite for democratic deliberation: democratic character, which includes the knowledge, abilities, and dispositions needed for effective participation in democratic politics. (p. 11)

In summary, studies have offered mixed findings regarding the impacts of school grading systems on school performance, with some studies showing positive academic gains in students and others showing limited effects. For principals, school performance matters in a professional and personal sense, eliciting feelings of success or failure depending on how the A-F system might benefit or hurt students. As such, with A-F systems possibly impacting test scores, instruction, curriculum, and professional development – all areas that principals are directly responsible for -- one can speculate that school letter grading systems have the capacity to have a direct influence on a principal's emotional state and, in particular, his/her sense of self-efficacy.

Summary

On balance, the research regarding a principal's psychological response to the reception of a school letter grade is extremely limited, with most existing studies looking at generalized accountability systems rather than A-F school letter grading systems. Because letter grades are so familiar and deeply embedded into the educational consciousness of most Americans, the A-F systems represent a unique dynamic

confronting school administrators. The matrimony of A-F school grading systems and the widely reported shortage of quality school principals warrants an in-depth study of how the A-F school grading system may be impacting practicing school principals.

What research does exist, however, is mixed, with some studies suggesting that school letter grades can serve to boost the self-efficacy of principals, while others conclude that A-F systems represent a painful threat to the emotional well-being of school administrators. What is certain, though, is that the nature of the principalship and its stability in the United States is changing. One study found that nearly 25% of American schools have a new principal each year, with nearly 50% of American school principals leaving their schools prior to completion of their third year of service (School Leaders Network, 2014). Further, there is considerable evidence that the U.S. education system is facing a shortage of qualified principals (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010; Maxwell, 2014). While there are likely numerous reasons why schools struggle to find qualified candidates for open principal positions, it would behoove researchers, policymakers, parents, teachers, and superintendents to better understand the dynamics that cause principal turnover, as well as conditions that allow quality principals to stay and flourish in their current schools. As the sense of self-efficacy and emotional well-being play documented roles in principal success and career choices, more research is needed in understanding the role A-F systems play on the self-efficacy and well-being of school leaders.

As we have seen, some studies have found a correlation between accountability systems and principal self-efficacy. The school performance that accountability systems measure, however, seems to have the capacity to either lift principal self-efficacy or

lower it. Given that Bandura and others have shown that one's level of self-efficacy can, in fact, change, there remain important unanswered questions about the ways in which school letter grading systems can impact or change school principals' sense of self-efficacy. First, little research has been done examining the ways that school principals view or emotionally absorb school letter grading systems. Researchers do not yet understand if a principal of a school that is consistently receiving poor letter grades might develop a lower sense of self-efficacy than a principal whose school consistently receives high letter grades. Further deserving study is the question of whether the principal of a school whose school grade changes significantly – perhaps two letter grades, from a D to a B, an A to a C, and the like -- feels any change in his/her self-efficacy. These are the key questions which my study seeks to answer.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

While much attention has been paid to the quantitative instructional and curricular impacts of letter grading systems like the one the state of Indiana employs, little has been devoted to both the views and responses of school principals to the letter grading system. To date, no study has examined the ways in which letter grading systems influence, if at all, how principals view themselves, their sense of self-efficacy, and their professional and personal identities. This dissertation seeks to answer those questions by studying the impact of Indiana's A-F school grading system on the self-efficacy of Indiana elementary school principals.

This qualitative study employs personal interviews of three Indiana elementary public school principals. While a broad, state-wide quantitative study could help to establish whether or not there is a widespread impact of the A-F school grading system on principal self-efficacy in the state of Indiana, a qualitative study can do much to fill in missing pieces of understanding that a quantitative survey cannot. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) argue that “qualitative and quantitative researchers are concerned with the individual's point of view. However, qualitative investigators think they can get closer to the actor's perspective by detailed interviewing and observation” (p. 19). In undertaking this work, my hope was to understand how principals view the A-F Indiana school grading system, their own self-efficacy, and the way it may be impacted by the school grading system. My methods included a semi-structured interview process, one which began with pre-planned questions and then allowed for some flexibility with follow-up questions for the principals I interviewed.

Without question, a study of only three principals cannot be expected to be applied to a broader community. Patton (1990), however, points out that there is no magic number relative to sample size so long as participants are selected purposefully, as this study does. This study, in fact, does not particularly attempt to generalize any potential findings to the larger group of elementary school principals in Indiana, though it is entirely possible that what we learn from these three participants may, in fact, be commonly experienced by other principals. Rather, this work seeks to understand on a deep and even personal level principals' perceptions about how the letter grading system might influence their self-efficacy. By focusing on three principals, it will allow for an in-depth study on their perceptions, experiences, and emotional reactions in a far more candid and complex way than a broad quantitative survey might. The experiences of even a small number of principals can allow for insights and growth among other principals who are subject to school letter grading systems. If appropriate, further studies can be undertaken to understand how widespread a particular experience connected to the A-F system might be. Creswell (2013) supported the merits of small qualitative studies and pointed out that they are intended to explore individual persons or subjects, rather than seeking to generalize findings to a broader community. The interviews I conducted with participants were specifically designed to achieve the outcome Creswell describes. While my study involved only three participants, the numerous and rigorous interviews with each participant deeply explored the few rather than superficially covering the many.

Research Questions

This study explored and answered the following research questions:

1. How do selected elementary school principals view the Indiana school letter grading system?
2. How does the letter grading system, if at all, influence selected elementary principals' self-efficacy?

Methods

Research Context

During the course of 2018 and 2019, I completed an extensive analysis of the Indiana Department of Education's A-F School Grade database (School and Corporation Data Reports, 2017). A total of 1,088 Indiana public elementary schools received letter grades in the Indiana A-F school letter grading system. The 2017 letter grade distribution for these schools was as follows (see Table 2):

- A: 288 schools (26.4%)
- B: 331 schools (30.4%)
- C: 285 schools (26.2%)
- D: 119 schools (10.9%)
- F: 65 schools (6.0%)

Table 2:
School Grade Changes From 2016-2017

Grade	Number/Percent Schools	Number/Percent Schools	Percent Change
	2016	2017	
A	266 (24.6%)	288 (26.4%)	+1.8%
B	401 (37.0%)	331 (30.4%)	-6.6%
C	261 (24.1%)	285 (26.2%)	+2.1%

D	105 (9.7%)	119 (10.9%)	+1.2%
F	50 (4.6%)	65 (6.0%)	+1.4%

It was helpful to examine each school's letter grade in 2016 and 2017 to determine the frequency and nature of grade changes from one year to the next. For instance, 171 of 266 elementary public schools which received A's in 2016 also received an A in 2017. Thus, if a school received an A in 2016, it had a 64% of receiving an A in 2017. 33 out of 50 which received an F in 2016 also received an F in 2017. Consequently, if a school received an F in 2016, it had a 66% chance of receiving an F in 2017.

We must acknowledge that a one year change is not necessarily a trend. Still, these statistics provided several pieces of information regarding the likelihood of a school changing or maintaining its letter grade from one year to the next. This had a direct impact on how I chose to select some participants and eliminate others.

For example, these statistical findings tell us that schools which received an F or an A have nearly the same chances of repeating their grade from 2016 to 2017. In the ideal world, policymakers would likely want to see F schools have a greater chance of improving their grades. But this is not the case. Again, this is only a one year change, so we should temper our interpretations of this. Nonetheless, based on this data, schools – and principals -- who earn an F are statistically not likely to change their grade the following year. Likewise, A schools have reasonably good chance of maintaining their A grade.

Given the persistence of the F grades – the reality that only a third of F schools were able to raise their grades from 2016 to 2017 -- we might conclude that improving the performance of an F school is a challenging task that could come to bear on the self-efficacy of school principals. After all, only three of 50 schools raised their grades from an F in 2016 to an A in 2017. Only six schools of the 50 were able to raise their grades two letters or more. Similarly, of the 266 schools receiving A's in 2016, only 15 dropped their letter grades two grades or more. Not one of the 266 schools with A's in 2016 received an F in 2017. (In fact, including all schools in Indiana – middle, high, and non-public, only one school out of more than 2,000 went from an A to an F from 2016 to 2017. Across the state, only around 5.5% of schools earn F grades. But once earning an F grade, a school's chances of changing that grade from 2016 to 2017 were, statistically speaking, not good.

In short, the seeming intractability of both A and F grades led me to conclude that among my participants should be at least one principal with a long series of A grades, along with one principal with a long series of F grades.

Participants

Given the strong correlation of school letter grades and the socioeconomic demographics of the school population, it was imperative to select case study participants with diverse backgrounds, locations, and professional contexts. My intent was to create a small participant list of Indiana elementary school principals:

1. Whose schools mostly received “A” grades in the last five years
2. Whose schools mostly received “F” grades in the last five years

3. Whose school letter grade rose in at least one school year in the last five years
4. Whose school letter grade lowered in at least one school year in the last five years

In addition, I sought principals who worked in affluent areas and areas of significant poverty, as other analyses have shown strong connections between the poverty level of Indiana schools and their A-F grades (Di Carlo, 2012; Hinnefeld, 2013). These groupings gave birth to a study comprised of one principal who had repeated A grades, one who had repeated F grades, and one whose grades had been C's and D's. In order to determine how a change in letter grades might impact self-efficacy, I sought to include in this study principals whose schools had experienced any change in letter grades in the previous five years. In some cases, I found that principals were able to speak to long-standing success and a change in letter grades. For example, principals whose grades had fallen from an A to a B, or risen from an F to a D, could speak to the ways that a change in their school's letter grade had influenced their sense of self-efficacy.

For several reasons, I chose to omit middle and high school principals from this study. First, the metric for high school letter grades in Indiana is significantly different than the one for elementary and middle schools. For example, graduation rate and career and college readiness are parts of the calculus for high school letter grades. These variables, of course, are not attached to the metric governing elementary school grades. The rationale for omission of middle school principals was largely a pedagogical one. Elementary students are largely with the same teacher for the vast majority of the day, whereas middle school students spend the day generally moving from one subject and teacher to another. Consequently, a principal may rightfully view his/her middle school's

or high school's letter grade as being shaped by only a small portion of his/her school's teachers, whereas an elementary school could be said to have had its grade impacted by the majority of the certified staff. After all, the strong majority of elementary teachers teach math and language arts. The uniformity of this study was best maintained by restricting the participants to elementary school principals.

I also chose to only examine public elementary schools, eliminating private and parochial schools from my study. My rationale for doing this was rooted in the reality that while public schools cannot choose their students, private and parochial schools can, thus having a profound impact on a school's overall performance and letter grade, which I hypothesize could have an impact on a principal's self-efficacy. For example, among all traditional public schools in Indiana, 27% received A's in 2017, whereas 45% of all non public schools in Indiana received A's. While the cause of this gap is subject to robust discussion, this study's purposes were better served by focusing only on public schools.

Recruitment

I analyzed the nearly 1,100 Indiana public schools who received letters grades in 2017 and chose from these schools principals who represented the diversity necessary to address my two research questions. Prior to beginning this study, I registered with and sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. Once I identified the candidates I saw as ideal participants for this study, I attempted to contact them via telephone and email, described the purpose and methods of my study, assured them of my adherence to confidentiality and research ethics, and asked for their participation in my study. After assessing all the relevant

demographic and letter grade data, I contacted twelve principals with the understanding that several would likely not respond. I ideally hoped for three to five principals to participate. Three principals agreed to participate in the study. I offer detailed descriptions of each of these participants in chapter four, but the diversity of contexts and experiences of these three principals allowed for a well-rounded discussion of the research questions of this study.

Final Participant Selection and Background

Participants were selected after analyzing schools' grades for all Indiana public elementary schools for the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and 2017-2018 school years. Three elementary school principals agreed to participate in the study. The three principals were interviewed by the researcher four times each for a total of approximately seven hours per participant. Additionally, the researcher had preliminary conversations with each principal overviewing the purpose of the study, protections for participants, and gathering basic information about the participant, such as age, length of time in education, and other personal and professional details.

The three principals in the study represent schools whose grades and context are diverse. One participant leads a National Blue Ribbon school whose letter grades have all been A's with the exception of the 2017-2018 year, when it slipped to a B. Another principal led a school with nearly 100% poverty which had received F grades every year the Indiana A-F system had been in existence. The third principal led schools whose last four grades were C's. One school is urban and a minority-majority school, one is an 85% white suburban school with approximately 50% of students receiving free and reduced

lunches, and the rural National Blue Ribbon has a student population that is 95% white. Two of the participants are female, and one participant is male. Principals in this study have years of experience as a school principal ranging from seven to twenty years.

To protect the anonymity of all participants, all participants' names have been changed. This is also true of the names of all schools and school corporations. In full disclosure, it should be noted that the researcher and one of the participants were colleagues in the same school district at one point in their respective careers).

Summary of Participant Background and School Context

Table 3

Overview of Study Participants

	Stephanie Weinzapfel	Steven Nicholas	Valerie Cregg
Age	53	54	45
Gender	Female	Male	Female
Years In Current Position	6	3 (16 years at previous school)	1 (7 years at previous school)
Total Years In Education	28	32	24
Current School Context	Rural	Suburban	Urban
Current Student Population	258	952	697
Free/Reduced %	29.7%	49.4%	52.5%
Historical Grades Of School(s) Led By Principal	B (2018) A (2017) A (2016) A (2015) A (2014)	C (2018) C (2017) C (2016) C (2015) C (2014)	F (2018) F (2017) F (2016) F (2015) F (2014)

Stephanie Weinzapfel. Stephanie Weinzapfel is the principal of Garden Elementary, a rural elementary school in southern Indiana. The school serves

approximately 255 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. 30% of Garden Elementary's students receive free or reduced price meals. It is part of the Metropolitan School District of Bluffton, whose total student population is approximately 2,000 students. Along with Garden Elementary, the district has two other elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Of Garden Elementary's 255 students, 95% are white, 2% are Hispanic, and 3% are multi-racial. Ms. Weinzapfel has served as the principal of Garden Elementary School for six years.

Garden Elementary has experienced significant historical success academically. In 2015, the school was named a National Blue Ribbon School, one of only eight Indiana schools to receive this distinction, for its high performance on the ISTEP, Indiana's state accountability test. The school received A letter grades in every year of the A-F grading system except for 2017-2018, when the school received a B. It is the only school in the MSD of Bluffton one of very few southern Indiana schools to be named a National Blue Ribbon school. Weinzapfel noted that the reception of this honor also served to increase a level of pressure to perform, pointing out that "knowing the school is a National Blue Ribbon School, the expectation is that you'll have an A... You need to keep getting the A's because you're a National Blue Ribbon School" (S. Weinzapfel, personal communication, January 13, 2020).

Weinzapfel has served in public education for 28 years. She was an elementary teacher, as was her mother, for eight years before she entered school administration as an assistant principal. She served as an assistant principal for three years before she was hired as a principal at Oakton Elementary. After three years as the Oakton principal, she was transferred to Scotland Elementary, a K-5 school of nearly 950 students, where she

served as principal for nine years. In 2014, she came to the MSD of Bluffton to assume the principalship at Garden Elementary. She is 53 years old.

A native of southern Indiana, Ms. Weinzapfel attended the University of Southern Indiana for her undergraduate degree in education and later attended Indiana State University for her masters and school administration programs. Her teaching career began at an urban school in southern Indiana, where she taught everything from music, kindergarten, 5th grade social studies, gifted and talented, and other subjects as needed by the school. “I was just so thrilled to get hired my first year... because teaching jobs were hard to come by it seemed like at that time in life” (S. Weinzapfel, personal communication, January 13, 2020).

Weinzapfel described significant changes in the manner and impact of the accountability systems – including the Indiana A-F school grading system -- she has worked under as an Indiana educator. The accountability system, she noted, has changed to become both more formal and more impactful for educators:

We never went over scores back in those days, in the early part of my career. You would get your class list, you would see how your students scored. The principal might meet with the teachers and say, “Here are your scores.” But it was not anything like it is now. No letter grades reported to the public, no school rankings. It had nothing to do with school rankings...

(The principalship) has changed drastically, not just with assessment and the school grading system, but society changes. Children changing, parents changing, communities changing. And then, also...the autonomy of each school. Teachers’ autonomy. More like top-down... It’s drastically changed... There are so many

demands made and the demands are much greater than they used to be. Year five (of her principalship) and year twenty, much greater demands with what's expected. (S. Weinzapfel, personal communication, January 13, 2020).

Nonetheless, Weinzapfel spoke openly of her affection for education and her plans to remain in an administrative role for the remainder of her career. When asked if she could go back and lead her professional life again, she indicated she would still choose to be a principal. She talked about her love for children and teaching and her belief that life as a principal affords educators a chance to impact more students. "I'll see (former) students now and they will recognize me, which I think is great that I'm still recognizable after all these years. They'll say things that let me know that they remember me and that I made a difference. That makes you feel like you did something right" (S. Weinzapfel, personal communication, January 13, 2020).

Steven Nicholas. Steven Nicholas is in his third year as the principal of Wright Elementary in Clarksburg Community Schools Corporation, a large urban school district in southern Indiana. The school serves just over 950 students, 85% of whom are white. 7% are multi-racial, 4% are African-American, and 2% are Hispanic. Once an affluent school with poverty rates of less than 20%, the school has undergone a gradual increase in poverty, with 49% of students now qualifying for free and reduced price lunches. While the school received A grades from 2011 to 2015, Wright Elementary has received C grades each school year since 2015-2016. The Clarksburg Community Schools Corporation serves over 20,000 students.

Nicholas grew up in the American south, describing a childhood in which he moved numerous times. As a result, he experienced a variety of school settings, both in different towns and even different states. “I quickly learned,” he said, “the importance of looking forward” (S. Nicholas, personal communication, February 7, 2020). He pointed out that his frequent moves went on to prepare him well for changes in his career, including changes he sought and those he did not.

A 32 year public educator, Nicholas traced his interest in education back to his father’s career as a building and central office administrator:

I got to go hear (my dad) a few times at the beginning of school years. In a couple of school systems, they called him to come and do an opening speech or talk to their administrator at the back-to-school meeting... Really, the thing I noticed, the respect he had garnered with them. Obviously, as his kid, being proud of him, but also thinking, ‘I would like to leave a little bit of that kind of legacy...’ (S. Nicholas, personal communication, February 7, 2020).

Mr. Nicholas is 54 years old. The vast majority of Nicholas’s years as a school principal were prior to his principalship at Wright. He served for 16 years at the principal of Westwood Elementary school in the same school district as Wright. Westwood Elementary is a school of approximately 370 students, 60% of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch prices. In 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, the first two years of the Indiana A-F grading system, the school earned D’s. In 2013-2014, the school’s grade improved to a C and remained at that level until Mr. Nicholas transferred to Wright in the summer of 2017.

Nicholas describes his approach to the principalship as being one of servant leadership, indicating that some of the moments in which he has felt most fulfilled in his position or when he has had interactions with students, teachers, and parents that left him feeling like his work and made a positive difference in their lives. It is largely for this reason that he indicated that if he could go back in time and relive his life, he would still choose to be a principal:

I will say that as much as the expectations have changed for the job, I still enjoy what I do. The base calling of what I have felt in my life for this particular occupation, that's still not changed, regardless of whether you succeed necessarily as a school and getting the right letter grade or not. The core of wanting to make a difference in people's lives, and in this case, the difference of lives of kids and their families, that drive is still there. That awe and that excitement about having that opportunity is still there. And occasionally you'll get, if you're not careful in this profession, you'll forget about that kind of thing. And you have to figure out some ways to kind of get back to some of those basics on occasion. Otherwise, you'll lose that awe and then you really will think, "Why am I in this?" (S. Nicholas, personal communication, February 7, 2020).

Valerie Cregg. Valerie Cregg is in her 24th year as a public educator. While she is only in her sixth month as the principal of Cedar Ridge Elementary School, she spent the previous seven years as the principal of Anniston Elementary School, a K-8 urban school in southern Indiana school. Anniston's student population is just over 400 students, with 93% of its students qualifying for free and reduced lunches. 43% of Anniston's students

are African-American, 25% are white, 15% are multi-racial, 12% are Hispanic, and approximately 4% are native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. The school is one of over 35 schools in the Clarksburg Community Schools Corporation, the same corporation where Steven Nicholas works as a school principal. She is 45 years old.

Anniston Elementary has faced intense accountability struggles. The school has received an F grade every year since the Indiana A-F system came into existence in the 2011-2012 school year, including the seven years Cregg served as Anniston's principal. Cregg notes the school's immense cultural and economic challenges, citing the fact that nearly 100% of the students live in poverty. On her first day as the principal of Anniston, one parent came to the school and physically assaulted a student. Another parent came to the school and demanded to see Cregg, telling her, "I am on house arrest, but you have a pedophile who comes to your school every day, and if he's here today, I'm going to shoot him dead on this lawn" (V. Cregg, personal communication, January 15, 2020). One of the things that most stood out to her about Anniston during her first year there, she said, "was the number of times chairs were thrown during the day or a desk was flipped over..." (V. Cregg, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

A native of Clarksburg, Ms. Cregg spent ten years as a high school English teacher, seven as a central office administrator, and seven as an elementary school principal. She describes herself as a child of "working class folks" with a childhood where her needs were met though luxury items were scarce:

In my house, we always had staple items. You may not have loved what there was to eat, but there was food to eat. We could always pay our heat bill... But it also

meant you weren't going to go to the movie. You weren't going to go out to dinner (V. Cregg, personal communication, January 15, 2020).

Unlike Mr. Nicholas and Ms. Weinzapfel, neither of her parents were educators. It was one of her own teachers, Ms. Cregg noted, who she described as “my mentor, the reason I went into teaching,” influenced her to go into education:

When I was in eighth grade, I was on her student council and was the president..., and she said, ‘You’re going to go really far in your life/ you’re going to accomplish a lot more than that I am, because you have that gift of being able to bring people around you on board.’ At the time, you’re 13, you don’t even know what that means. I just thought, ‘OK, whatever’ (V. Cregg, personal communication, January 15, 2020).

Consent and Confidentiality

Upon receiving verbal consent for participation, I mailed each participant an informed consent letter. Throughout the study, I practiced the highest standard of research ethics and IRB guidelines. Prior to each interview, I sought and received permission of each participant to audio record that interview so that it might be converted into a transcription. None of the research participants, nor the school districts where they worked, were identified. I used pseudonyms for the principals and the schools they lead. Care was taken to describe participants and their location with sufficient generality necessary to preserve their anonymity (See Appendix A).

Risks and Benefits

This study posed no implicit or inherent risks to its participants. As their participation was both voluntary and confidential, there was no risk of personal or professional harm to them. I recognized that the fundamental purpose of my study called on the participants to discuss parts of their professional life that may have caused them stress, strain, or disappointment. However, participants had complete control over the interviews and subsequently were free to answer questions however they chose. They were also free to not disclose any feelings or opinions they wished to. Finally, the letter of informed consent each participant received reminded them that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time they wished without suffering any harm or negative consequence as a result of withdrawal.

At the conclusion of their final interviews, participants received a \$100 gift card as compensation for participating in the study. Beyond that, though, participation in this study offered some benefit to its participants. It allowed them to share their own experiences and thoughts. In one case, one of the participants concluded our discussion by describing the conversations as therapeutic. The insights of these principals, I hope, might also contribute to a better understanding not only of the Indiana A-F school grading system, but the way that some principals view the system and how they are impacted by it.

Data Collection

This study is largely concerned with the inner world and self-efficacy of principals and how their self-efficacy may be shaped by the school letter grading system.

As such, this personal information came to light not through statistical analysis, but rather, through videoconference face-to-face personal interviews. Consequently, as Mertens (2010) pointed out, as the researcher, I was “the instrument for collecting data” and all but certainly had “an impact on the study’s data and interpretation” (p. 249). As the researcher and interviewer, I took care not to inject my own perceptions and beliefs about the A-F system, but as Bogden and Biklen (2011) observe, “the interviewer must be reassuring and supportive” (p. 103) in order for participants to feel comfortable and trusting enough that they can share their insights and, on occasion, even vulnerable feelings.

Just as I worked to avoid inserting my thoughts about the A-F system during the principal interviews, so I sought to keep private my own feelings about the school grading system, school accountability models, and the occasional emotions that they bring to the surface. As much as anything, I did this as a guardrail against my own potential biases. I did not want to reveal anything to interview subjects that might cause them to obscure their own truth and instead offer me what they thought I might want to agree with. However, it is undeniable that in framing my rationale for this study to the participants, I acknowledged that I had been an Indiana principal and had led schools that had received grades ranging from an A to a D. As such, as I explained to the participants, I felt an empathy to some of the reactions and feelings they shared with me.

This acknowledgement had the net effect of helping to build a rapport with the participants and establishing credibility as a researcher and educator. Bogden and Biklen (2011) point to the potency of embracing these kinds of feelings in qualitative research and the interview process:

Here, we approach the topic of feelings in a different light – – for the positive impact on research. Feelings are important vehicle for establishing rapport in for gauging subject’s perspectives and are not something to repress. Rather, if treated correctly, they can be an important aid in doing qualitative research (p. 101).

As such, I began each interview with small talk and often times briefly discussed professional experiences that my participants and I shared as principals. My sense was that early on in the interviews process, our shared feelings and experience helped to establish a rapport and contributed to what one participant described as a therapeutic interview experience.

Interviews

In late 2019, I identified and secured three Indiana elementary school principals for participation in this study. The study involved an introductory meeting followed by four conversations with each participant. Each of the four interviews concentrated on one particular component of the study. The first interview centered on factual information about the participant’s professional and personal background, current school context, and general thoughts about the Indiana A-F school grading system. The second interview explored participants’ views of the Indiana school letter grading system. The third interview discussed how the letter grading system influences, if at all, elementary principals’ self-efficacy. The fourth and final interview focused on how potential changes in their schools’ letter grades might impact their levels of self-efficacy.

All interviews were done via videoconference, recorded with participant permission, and later transcribed by a third party. (See Appendices B, C, & D). Participants were mailed an initial draft of this study to ensure the accuracy of its findings.

Data Analysis

Each of the videoconference interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researcher during the first two months of 2020. At the conclusion of the data collection phase of this study, nearly 21 hours of audio recordings and more than 250 pages of transcribed pages remained to be deciphered and organized into a meaningful analysis of what participants had revealed in their interviews. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) offer a metaphor in support and explanation of coding, imagining a gym crowded with countless toys that an organizer must separate into logical piles. Such was the initial condition of my data.

Creswell (2013) describes the critical nature of coding, describing it as an integral method of data analysis in a qualitative study:

The process of coding is central to qualitative research. It involves making sense of the text collected from interviews, observations, and documents. Coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code. We think about “winnowing” the data here; not all information is used in a qualitative study, and some may be discarded. (p. 190)

On the other hand, Corbin and Strauss (2015) note that “there is nothing magical about our analytical strategies” (p. 89) and that qualitative researchers must develop their own processes for coding and organizing the data they glean from qualitative approaches such as personal interviews. On the other hand, Bogdan and Biklen (2011) offer more specific codes for interview-based studies, including “Subjects’ Ways of Thinking about People and Objects” (p. 175). This code, like the interview itself, is designed to “develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (p. 103).

The coding system I used reflected both the principles of both Bogdan and Biklen (2011) and Corbin and Strauss (2015), in that I began with some codes in mind and evolved my thinking as I further analyzed the interview transcripts. I began the pre-interview process by establishing the following a priori code labels:

1. Perception of the A-F Indiana grading system (PIGS)
2. Emotional reaction(s) to their school’s most recent letter grade (MRLG)
3. Emotional reaction(s) to changes in their school’s letter grade (CSLG)
4. Participant perceptions of their self-efficacy (PSE)
5. Impact on self-efficacy participants attribute to school letter grade (SEASG)

During the transcription and data analysis portion of this study, each section of participant interviews was given one – and sometimes two -- of the preset labels. For instance, it became apparent that for two of my participants, their perception of the school

letter grading system was closely aligned with their emotional reactions to the letter grades their school had received. As I analyzed the data, an additional emergent code became apparent: the duration of the emotional reaction participants had to a particular grade. This additional code informed some of my findings, as well as some of the discussion I offer in chapter five.

While there was no single, linear manner of translating my codes into overall themes, a significant driver of my interpretation of the data was the comparison and contrast I found between the codes present from one research participant to another. For example, it became apparent to me that the material I coded regarding the views of the A-F system was remarkably similar among my three participants. These similarities in perceptions that the A-F system was a poor measurement of school quality existed for both the principal whose school had routinely received A grades and the principal whose school had received only F grades. I had previously speculated that my coding might reveal that principals of “A” schools speak far less about the impact their school’s grade had on their self-efficacy than did those principals whose school received “F” grades. Such a finding might have suggested any number of things, but one reasonable interpretation would be that principals of “A” schools make a very different meaning of a school letter grade than might principals of “F” schools. In short, the comparison of data affiliated with a particular code allowed me not only to compare responses among the principals, but also compare their responses to my pre-study hypotheses.

Some of my thematic work involved searching for participant vocabulary which expressed feelings of pleasure or feelings of pain, or perhaps described a feeling or lack of professional fulfillment. The moments in which participants spoke of their self-

efficacy in positive or negative terms was of special interest and importance to this study, as a careful assessment of how their self-efficacy might have been correlated with their school's letter grade was one of the core focal points of this study.

Validity and Reliability

The question of reliability and validity in qualitative research is complex and nuanced. While the terms “reliability” and “validity” are clear staples of quantitative research, their presence in qualitative research – particularly the concept of reliability – is more problematic. The nature of qualitative research is based on the premise that the researchers themselves are the data collectors and thus view their data through the lenses of their own experiences and world views (Mertens, 2010). As such, some researchers argue that the concept of “reliability” in qualitative research is misleading and potentially impossible, as no two researchers are likely to glean the exact same interpretation of an observation or interview. Stenbacka (2001) even argues that “if a qualitative study is discussed with reliability as a criterion, the consequence is rather that the study is no good” (p. 552). However, surely it is critical that for any qualitative study to be relevant and trustworthy, it must have some measure of quality. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that ensuring a study's validity can help to mitigate the possibility that its findings may not always be repeated. “Since there can be no validity without reliability,” they write, “a demonstration of the former [validity] is sufficient to establish the latter [reliability]” (p. 316).

Creswell (2013) also supports the essentialism of validity, noting that “I use the term ‘validation’ to emphasize a process, rather than ‘verification,’ [which has

quantitative overtones]” (p. 207). He describes validation as “an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants” (pp. 206-207). He goes on to suggest eight strategies to maximize validation: 1) prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field; 2) triangulation, “(making) use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories” (p. 207); 3) peer review or debriefing; 4) refining working hypotheses; 5) clarifying researcher bias; 6) member/participant checking; 7) using rich, thick descriptions; and 8) conducting external audits, in which an impartial research expert reviews the research methods and findings to ensure quality.

Creswell (2013) recommends that researchers implement at least two of these strategies in a study; I have used four of these strategies in this study. First, this study is conducted under the oversight of university-level scholars who overview all aspects of this work. Secondly, during the course of this work, I have refined my initial hypotheses on several occasions and used the evolving understandings to even change lines of questioning. For instance, I was very much taken by surprise to learn that the principal of the school that had been highly successful in the A-F system felt not only no sense of satisfaction from it, but rather, saw it as a threat. This piece of data not only contradicted my initial assumptions, but led to the creation of new questions on two later interviews. For instance, I wondered in a return to a good grade would lessen the principal’s perception that the system was threatening. Thirdly, I have acknowledged on multiple occasions in the study my own bias and specifically included questions in the interview protocols that were premised on the possibility that my bias may lead to faulty data.

Finally, I have employed member checking in this study. I have submitted interview transcripts to all three participants and sought their assurance that they are accurate.

Limitations

Any study of the inner workings of the mind and world view of human beings is inherently ambiguous. The notion of self-concept is incredibly difficult to measure or even define; finding its sources are exponentially more difficult. The “self,” as noted by Rodriguez (2000), “has no physical presence (and) cannot be understood by common scientific means...attempts to measure ‘self’ are made by less reliable and valid methods like surveys and case studies, each of which engenders a considerable amount of subjectivity” (p. 355).

The nature of the principalship is incredibly complex, and it is difficult to determine how one phenomenon like A-F grading systems impacts the psychology of a principal. A principal receives feedback from a multitude of sources: the superintendent, parents, teachers, students, board members, community members, local journalists, and countless others – probably including members of his/her own family and circles of friends. Surely each one of the sources has implications for the ways principals think of their professional lives, their roles, and their levels of self-efficacy. While this study sought to isolate letter grades as a possible influence on principal self-efficacy, the complex nature of the principalship made this narrowing difficult.

Further, the small sample size of this study dictates that its results be interpreted with a degree of caution. There are nearly 2,000 schools in Indiana (Indiana Department of Education, 2012), and this qualitative study involved principals of three of those

schools. As such, my sample of participants, though diverse in nature, omitted the vast majority of Indiana's elementary principals, some of whom might hold very different attitudes and beliefs than those expressed by participants in this study.

Researcher Perspective and Bias

As a researcher, I acknowledge that I entered this study with my own set of unique perspectives and potential biases. I am a 52-year-old married male who has been in education 28 years. I have served as both a teacher and a principal. I have led schools of significant poverty and one school of extreme affluence. During my tenure as an elementary school principal, my schools have been subject to the Indiana school grading system and have received grades ranging from A's to D's. As such, I have personally experienced the reflection – sometimes with pride, and sometimes with frustration – that can accompany the receipt of a “good” or “bad” school letter grade. This acknowledgement of potential bias, of course, is an integral part of accepted qualitative research design, and I acknowledge that it likely played a role in the conception and implementation of this study (Hesse-Biber, 2016).

Consequently, I am not merely an educational researcher: I am a principal as well. Though I currently work and reside in northern Virginia, I worked nearly 25 years as an educator in Indiana, the last six of which were under the rules of Indiana's A-F school grading system. It is also fair to note that all my administrative work under the Indiana A-F system was done in schools of high poverty, where each year, a variety of adversities challenged our school's ability to post test scores that would be celebrated in our community. While I was consistently proud of the education we offered students, I

carried some skepticism towards an A-F system I often believed did not reflect the true quality of our school. During the years our school received A grades, I did not particularly take any great pride in a letter grade that was celebrated by my colleagues and superintendent. This skepticism, I am sure, likely plays a role in both my interest in the A-F school grading system and how it may impact my perception of the self-efficacy of those who work under its parameters. While I would like to believe that my analysis of the qualitative data within this study was immune from my own potential biases, I acknowledge that even the questions I posed to the participants, as well as my interpretation of their answers, may have contained some of the very biases I here acknowledge.

Summary

High-quality principals are incredibly important to a school's success. Similarly, one might argue that a high-quality accountability system can play a pivotal role in the progress of a state or nation's education system. In an ideal world, high-quality principals and high-quality accountability systems can be symbiotic, with accountability systems helping to establish educational priorities and school principals helping to implement those systems and actualize their goals. Whether school letter grading systems achieve this ideal is yet to be known, and the importance of making this determination cannot be overstated. It is a sustainable organization which meets its goals while elevating its members, and it is likely a dysfunctional organization which meets (or fails to meet) its goal while jeopardizing its members' sense of self-efficacy and well-being.

Much research exists detailing shortages of high-quality principals (Latterman & Steffes, 2017). While public policy should absolutely ensure that those who lead school buildings are capable and talented, and should act to remove principals who are ineffective, it is also beneficial and arguably necessary for accountability systems to empower and bolster those who effectively administer them. Should accountability systems serve to elevate talented and effective educators, much good can come of them, particularly if school leaders who operate under these systems believe in them and view them as valid and constructive. But should bad systems implicitly punish good educators, there may be a considerable price to pay, both for students and the country as a whole. It is the hope of this study to bring clarity as to how some elementary principals view the Indiana school grading system and the extent to which that system influences – in rewarding or punitive ways – their self-efficacy.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between principal self-efficacy and the Indiana A-F school grading system. Over the course of the study, I interviewed three elementary principals from the southern half of Indiana four times each for a total of approximately seven hours each. All interviews sought to contribute to an understanding of these research questions:

1. How do elementary school principals view the Indiana school letter grading system?
2. How does the letter grading system, if at all, influence elementary principals' self-efficacy?

In this chapter, I organize these findings in order of the two research questions this study seeks to explore: the participants' views of the A-F system and the ways, if at all, the Indiana A-F grading system influences principals' self-efficacy. Within each research question, several themes emerged, each of which is discussed in detail.

Principal Views of the Indiana A-F School Grading System

The first question this study sought to explore is how Indiana elementary school principals view the Indiana A-F school grading system. We might suspect that principals' perceptions of the A-F school grading system are binary: they like it or they don't. The findings of this study reveal that this is not the case. Rather, principals offered detailed

and wide-ranging views of the Indiana A-F school grading system. Three major themes of this research question emerged over the course of this study. First, principals spoke at some length about how their current view of the system differs from their initial view of it. Secondly, the principals discussed the extent to which they see their school's letter grade as a valid measure of their school's quality. Finally, all of the participants described in unambiguous and personal terms the system's pronounced capacity to inflict emotional pain on principals and how that pain impacted their belief about how effective they could be as building leaders. Each principal in this study spoke in some measure about the A-F system's potential to cause principals to leave their jobs due to the possible stress and embarrassment of an undesired grade.

Initial and Changing Views of A-F System. All participants recalled their initial introduction to the A-F system as being uneventful and unemotional. Weinzapfel recalled that "It didn't seem real high stakes, the A-F system. It didn't seem like it was going to be that big of a deal or that hard to achieve doing well" (S. Weinzapfel, personal communication, January 18, 2020). Cregg shared that she first heard about the A-F system from her superintendent "talking about it just in the smaller education circles... At the time, my initial thinking was they're trying to make this easy for the public to understand..." (V. Cregg, personal communication, January 22, 2020). Nicholas, too, recalled the switch from previous accountability labels such as "Commendable Progress" to the letter grading system, though he did not recall what year the switch was made. "My first thought...was that it's going to be an easier way for parents to form an opinion about

the school when they see that public letter grade...” (S. Nicholas, personal communication, February 10, 2020).

Nicholas and Gregg added that not only did they feel more or less comfortable with the A-F system, but that they even saw some virtue to it. “I believe the best in everybody, and do I believe that (then Indiana State Superintendent of education) Tony Bennett was trying to do something he thought would bring transparency to education? Sure. I mean, he was doing that.” (V. Gregg, personal communication, January 22, 2020). Nicholas added that he believed – and still does -- that accountability is both necessary and good, and to that end, viewed the system as having some virtue (S. Nicholas, personal communication, February 7, 2020).

However, all three participants reported that their views of the A-F changed considerably over the course of their careers as principals. Cregg argued that what she views as a policy intended to make school quality more transparent for the community instead became something that was weaponized to bring shame and stress to educators:

I think how it played out over time has really harmed the public system in ways that couldn’t have been predetermined in 2015. There were ways that legislators didn’t expect. Well-meaning legislators who are not educators who don’t understand the inner workings of the system made these rules. So has my understanding of it and how I feel about it changed? For sure (personal communication, January 22, 2020).

Weinzapfel concurred with Cregg’s view and noted that “they increased the degree of difficulty to achieve an A. It was not as hard to get an A when (the A-F system)

first started (personal communication, January 18, 2020). Now, she argued, she perceives the A-F system as having moved from something inconsequential to something that she describes as “burdensome,” “much more high stakes,” and “hanging over our heads”:

You’re just always working towards that summative evaluation and performing as well as you can so you can get the A. In school life, it seems like the enjoyment of learning... the experience of just experiencing school as we used to know it and doing those enrichment activities and doing things that might be more fun that certainly would provide kids with a broader background experience, preparing them for what’s to come... Those have gone by the wayside” (personal communication, January 18, 2020)

Nicholas, too, described a shift in his view of the A-F system over the course of his career. However, his view was less skeptical than Weinzapfel’s and Cregg’s. He described himself as being less fearful of the system than he once was, in spite of the fact that his schools have received D’s during two years when he was the principal. “I see it more just as a benchmark for where you are,” he said. He also went on to say that the growth element of the system, which does give schools credit for individual students’ improved performance from 3rd to 4th grade and 4th to 5th grade, is something he likes. However, Nicholas voiced empathy and concern for principals of high poverty schools, stating that those schools often receive lower grades even as the schools’ principals and teachers were working incredibly hard to improve their students’ performance. “It’s a shame that (the letter grade) ends up being what paints the overall picture...because it is

just, to me, not indicative of how hard those people (principals and teachers at high poverty schools) work” (personal communication, February 10, 2020).

It should be noted that all participants drew sharp distinctions between their experiences and views of the A-F grading system and the previous accountability system with descriptors. Each principal made a point of emphasizing the relatable and clear nature of letter grades and the extent to which the public can draw conclusions about what a letter grade means. The previous descriptor system, the principals indicated, was perhaps less inclined to create visceral responses from the public or educators than the letter grade might. Weinzapfel noted that the descriptive categories “were much easier tolerated or accepted... There’s no banners around the school that say, ‘We’re exemplary...’” (personal communication, January 28, 2020). Cregg made a similar observation. “When you’re talking about a category,” she said, “like ‘academic watch,’ it sends a message that you were under the state’s review. But it didn’t say, ‘You’re a failure,’ and an F says, ‘You’re a failure’” (personal communication, February 4, 2020).

A Poor Measure of School or Principal Quality. All three principals participating in this study viewed the Indiana A-F school letter grading system as a poor, inaccurate measure of school or principal quality. Each of them pointed to what they view as flaws with the A-F system and its inability to fully capture numerous characteristics they feel define the quality of schools. On numerous occasions and interviews during this study, all three principals stated that they did not believe that their school’s quality matched the letter grade their school had been given

For those principals whose letter grades changed during their tenure, particularly years in which grades went down, their sense was that neither their school's quality, curriculum, nor instructional practices had especially changed. Weinzapfel, for instance, noted that in the years that Garden Elementary's grade went from an A to a B and then a B to an A, there were no significant instructional or curricular changes that contributed to those grade changes

I do own the grade because it is what it is, I'm not trying to deflect ownership away from myself... But it's just a goofed up system... Every year, I do about the same thing. We look at our score, we look at how the kids did on the standards, we talk about instructional practices..." (personal communication, January 20, 2020).

When asked to identify what she could have done to prevent her school's grade from slipping to a B in 2018, she indicated she could not think of any change that could have prevented the lowered grade:

I don't know what I could have done differently. I think it was just something, you know, how the stock market adjusts itself. I just didn't feel like we did really well one year and it's almost... like a crap shoot. You work really hard and if the kids knock it out of the park, the next year it could be not so good... You just have to hope for the best... In the end, it just something that you can't fix (personal communication, January 18, 2020).

Cregg argued that there are far more qualities of a good school than there are in what determines a school's letter grade, comparing the process of grading a student to grading a school:

When you're (a student) in school and someone gives you a grade, that grade is not purely one test in a class. Your grade is made up of your ability to, in a timely fashion, turn in homework. Your grade is made up of small pictures of your knowledge at a point in time in a short piece of learning, like a quiz. Your grade in a class is determined by your ability to show the teacher how you're interacting with the text, with knowledge, with discussion. It's based on your attendance. It's based on all of these things and your ability to test. Then a portion of your grade in high school is your final, this summative rating of whether or not all your seat time was effective.

When they put the school grade in place, all of those buckets didn't exist... so that's why the grading system doesn't make any sense (personal communication, January 15, 2020).

This sentiment echoed throughout the study. Weinzapfel used the phrase "crap shoot" to describe the system, suggesting that a school's final grade was not necessarily a valid reflection of the work and quality of its teachers, principal, or curriculum (personal communication, January 18, 2020). She went on to characterize the reception of a letter grade as a "gamble," arguing that a school's final letter grade may simply be a measurement of the extent to which students "persevere and how much effort they put forward" (personal communication, January 28, 2020). Nicholas argued that the Indiana

A-F system “does not always do a good job of painting the whole picture of what the school is about and what goes on there” (personal communication, February 10, 2020) and that he recognizes “that there is more to a school than just the academic letter grade” (personal communication, February 13, 2020). He noted that even if his school’s grade went up one year, he “would not be bragging on it... It could easily go down the next year as well” (personal communication, February 7, 2020). Cregg pointed out that one high school’s grade was a C while all of its middle and elementary feeder schools received F’s, and that this disparity was explained not by a difference in quality between the high school and the other schools, but rather, because the high school grading metric includes multiple measures and data points (personal communication, January 15, 2020). Cregg later asserted “I don’t think (the Indiana A-F grading system) matches the quality of the school at all. Is it a reflection of our performance on the state exam? Sure. Is it a reflection of the other achievements that we made? No. Not in any sense” (personal communication, January 22, 2020).

It is perhaps because the principals in this study did not view the A-F system as an accurate measurement of school’s quality that they voiced little to no sense of joy or achievement when their school’s grade went up. When Garden Elementary’s grade returned to an A after dropping to a B a year earlier, Weinzapfel described her own feeling as one of relief rather than joy. Nicholas said that any pride he might feel in an improved grade would be “guarded” and “cautious” (personal communication, February 7, 2020). When his school raised its grade from a D to a C, he indicated that he felt “a sense of relief.” He went on to say that even if his grade would go up to an A or B, “I don’t know that I would have had a great deal of joy getting an A or a B... I wanted us to

get out of that status (priority status) for our teachers and myself and for all our school because I knew we were a better school than what that grade indicated” (personal communication February 10, 2020). Interestingly, Cregg, who led Anniston during its long stretch of F grades, said that improving the grade at Cedar Ridge, her current school, to a B would mean less to her than improving Anniston’s grade to a D (personal communication, February 4, 2020). On the contrary, Weinzapfel indicated that should her school’s grade dramatically drop to a D or F, “I just wouldn’t show up the next day” (personal communication, January 13, 2020). Essentially, principals’ responses suggested that they view a drop in grade as one that sparks negative emotions, but a rise in grades does not lead to emotions of joy or triumph.

Principals went on to argue that in the current A-F system, it is quite possible to have outstanding principals leading schools with F grades, and that it is possible to have poor principals leading schools with A grades:

Both (of those scenarios) are very possible. I think that the socioeconomic status factor is still a strong factor in schools... Issues that come with a low socioeconomic status school, there are so many intangible variables that I don’t know that we totally know how to overcome that... And for the (principals) that are ineffective principals at A schools, again, the socioeconomic status tends to play a factor” (personal communication, February 7, 2020).

Essentially, Nicholas implied that affluent students who come to school ready to learn and test well can mask poor principals and teachers.

Nicholas stated that Wright Elementary's most recent grade is a C, but he does not view himself as a C principal, nor does he view himself as any more or less effective than principals whose schools may have received better or worse grades than Wright:

When I think about the principals of F schools... there are times just from the outside looking in that I have to wonder if I am having to work as hard as what those folks are? Because to me they're so much more disadvantaged and this is going on there with their clientele. It just seems to be a deeper hole to have to crawl out of... (personal communication, February 13, 2020).

Another common theme running through the principal perceptions of the A-F school grading system is their view that it blurs more important, human elements within a school. Principals argued that the A-F system ignores the relationships and care of children that are essential in schools. Nicholas relayed the story of a student who had stopped coming to school. When Nicholas contacted the father to investigate the absences, he learned that the father could not bring his son to school because the family's car had been broken for some time. Nicholas invested time talking to mechanics and raising funds for the family to fix the car, and the student started coming to school again. "I thought to myself, 'Should I have been spending this time in classrooms monitoring what teachers are doing and giving feedback,'" he speculated. "But yet, that one thing, it made a huge difference... And I even remember thinking, 'Wonder if this will make a difference in our test scores,'" acknowledging that this act of student support would not be reflected in Westwood's school grade (personal communication, February 7, 2020).

Cregg and Weinzapfel also made similar observations about school experiences that are not reflected in the Indiana A-F school grading system. Weinzapfel relayed the story of a student whose reward system allowed him to play Uno with the principal for 30 minutes. The student expressed surprise that Weinzapfel would play Uno with him, to which Weinzapfel told him, “Are you kidding me? This has been the best part of my day.” Weinzapfel pointed out that student connections like these do not result in positive points for schools in the A-F system (personal communication, January 13, 2020). Speaking of the reality that the criteria that comprise a school’s letter grade may mean very little to students, Cregg succinctly indicated, “In 20 years, there’s not a child in that building that’s going to say, ‘Ms. Cregg helped me be test-ready’” (personal communication, February 4, 2020).

All the principals in this study indicated they believe a principal only has limited control over his/her school’s letter grade. While principals suggested they felt like they could exert some control over their school’s quality, they all voiced skepticism that they could control the letter grade. Nicholas, for instance, responded to a question about how much he could control the grade by immediately shifting his response to instruction, what grade levels he assigned teachers to teach, and what kind of feedback he provided to teachers. “I remember telling my 4th and 5th grade teachers, ‘Our success or failure really is going to depend on what you can do with these kids... I want to support you as best as I can. You tell me what you think that you need for me here than you think will help in this way.’ He indicated that teachers made a few changes, such as departmentalizing and doing student conferences more (personal communication, February 10, 2020).

Nicholas, however, argued that it was student demographics that influenced the grade even more than teachers or principals. He pointed to his new assignment as the principal of Wright Elementary and noted that as the school's grades have declined from A's to C's in the last seven years, the free and reduced lunch population at the school has increased. A principal may exert influence over the school's programming and instructional quality, but he/she cannot control factors that can inhibit students from learning:

I think the larger number of disadvantaged families that you have in the school, I think that makes it a little harder hurdle to overcome because they're dealing with things outside of school that certainly have a lot greater impact on their education than for kids who come from families that come to school not worried about coming back home and whether they've got electricity on at their house or whether somebody's going to get arrested that night..." (personal communication, February 10, 2020).

Similarly, Weinzapfel pointed to a principal's ability to steer instruction and curriculum, but not control the results of that work. She pointed out that she can have "teachers and support staff look at standards, look at instruction, look at curriculum... I have control over how many extra programs we have taking away instructional minutes... I have control over who teaches what grades, and I have control over staff hiring... But in the end, (the school's grade) is something you just can't fix. I can help, but I really don't have control" (personal communication, January 18, 2020).

Cregg referenced the abundance of research showing that a principal can have considerable effect on a school's quality, and as a result, she said that she felt like a principal could have "a tremendous impact on achievement. A huge one" (personal communication, January 22, 2020). Nonetheless, she acknowledged that Anniston's F grade did not rise during her time there. She pointed to a level of rigor of both Indiana's tests and grading system and argued that it unfairly punishes high poverty schools like Indiana, resulting in schools in disadvantaged areas as having very little control over their letter grades:

Measured against other states' accountability systems, Anniston's data would have risen to a C or B three years ago. So I think we have things built into the (A-F school grading) system to take schools like Anniston and beat them down. I really believe this, and I don't know that I believe that that's intentional. I think that's a function of a system that was created by people that didn't understand what they were doing. Well intentioned, well-meaning. Not knowing that in the midst of this, we're going to bury a school like Anniston.

(State legislators) would not pass the test our elementary students are taking. They have no idea what they're saying they want kids to pass. They haven't even seen it... Coming up through the school system, I took the California Achievement Test of Basic Skills, and then I took ISTEP (Indiana's former state accountability test)... Many, many successful people did not test well on that... I think part of the reason they're successful is because nobody looked at them every year and said, 'You're a failure' (personal communication, January 22, 2020).

Cregg pointed to limited control over the school grade in subsequent discussions, arguing she feels no more control over the school grade at her current context than when she was at Anniston:

A principal is an influencer. I can influence everything that's happening, but I can't make a teacher choose to do the things I want them to do. I can hold them accountable, but I don't even know that I can hold them accountable for results. We're not firing people who aren't passing kids in ILEARN (the current accountability test in Indiana) and teachers know that. If we were, we wouldn't have anyone to teach school" (personal communication, January 29, 2020).

During Cregg's tenure there, Anniston even went so far as to collect school-wide data on a daily basis. Even that level of control did not yield in improvement in the school's grade, reinforcing Cregg's view that principals have little control over the letter grade they receive from the state (V. Cregg, personal communication, February 4, 2020).

Emotional Impact of The A-F Grading System. Perhaps most jarring in the participants' view of the Indiana A-F school grading system is the profound emotional strain they said the system can impose on principals. All of the participants described instances – some over the course of multiple years – in which a poor grade caused anxiety, pain, and even negative influence with their personal and family lives. Nicholas relayed a story about working to prepare for a visit from state officials after Wright Elementary received a D for the second year in a row:

I had been working til 10 or 11 o'clock at night for probably two weeks in a row there just gathering physical evidence...so that (the state officials could come in. And I just remember thinking to myself that I'm ready to chuck it... I remember my wife telling me, "You seem a lot more distant. You seem like your head is somewhere else these days." I remember one of my kids saying, "Dad, you're not going to come read with us?" That's what it was. I was reading before they go to bed. And I said, "No, I can't do it tonight." I said I was just really tired. And they said, "Dad, you were tired last night, too." And I do remember one of my kids asked me, "Dad, are you happy?" That just hit me like a ton of bricks (personal communication, February 13, 2020).

When asked if he believes he would have felt that way had Wright Elementary received a C or higher that year, his reply was immediate. "I certainly wouldn't have felt that way... I certainly wouldn't have stressed and angsted over it as much as I did" (personal communication, February 13, 2020).

Cregg, whose school, Anniston Elementary, received F's every year since the A-F system came into existence, voiced negative views of the A-F system throughout the entirety of all of her interviews during this study. "I'm going to say something deeply, deeply personal..." she said, "but it's at the absolute core of how I feel about the A-F system...It fundamentally eats at the core of every person who was killing themselves to get that data to make that change (in the school's letter grade)" (personal communication, January 15, 2020). During a different interview, Cregg discussed the A-F system and argued that it can impose a significant human cost, both to educators and children. One

year, Anniston was only two students away from escaping F status and moving to a D. “We’re going to dig in... and next year is going to be the year we lift ourselves out of F status.... I felt strongly like this next year was going to be the year...and then next year, our data was worse... I think that was the year I gave up on the A to F system” (personal communication, January 22, 2020). She views that A-F system as “...a waste of money. It’s a waste of resources. And it’s absolutely killing the confidence of public educators across the state” (personal communication, January 29, 2020).

Given the perennial success of Garden Elementary and its long history of A grades, we might expect Stephanie Weinzapfel to view the Indiana A-F school grading system as rewarding and affirming. But she, too, joined Nicholas and Cregg in her view of the system as imposing pain on those who work under it. Rather than joy or fulfillment, Weinzapfel described her attitude towards receiving an A in the system as one of relief (personal communication, January 13, 2020). Even as a principal whose school has received A’s in seven of the last eight school years, Weinzapfel indicated the A-F system is more negative than positive. “It’s one of the parts of the job that you don’t really like. Whenever you achieve the A, you’re like, ‘Yes, good, made it another year. I can live another year.’ It is like a burden” (personal communication, January 18, 2020).

A-F System and Influence On Principal Self-Efficacy

The second question this study sought to explore was how the Indiana A-F school letter grading system, if at all, influences elementary principals’ self-efficacy. Principals in this study held nuanced and complex views of the extent to which the A-F school grading system impacts principal self-efficacy. As they discussed this question, two

major themes underlying the question emerged. First, principals spoke in direct ways about the extent to which the A-F system can influence principal self-efficacy and the ways that it actually has strained their sense of self-efficacy at different points in their career. Within that belief, however, principals expressed the view that their deterioration in self-efficacy was more temporary than permanent.

Each of the principals indicated that their view of the A-F school grading system as a poor measure of school quality helped to mitigate some of the strain on their sense of self-efficacy. Secondly, the principals discussed the extent to which improvements in their schools' letter grades impacted their self-efficacy. All of them also discussed hypothetical changes in their letter grades and how those changes might influence their self-efficacy. None of the principals, even those whose grades had actually improved under the system, indicated that the A-F system had improved their sense of self-efficacy.

Impact on Self-Efficacy of Principals. Specific to the question of whether or not principals felt that the A-F system had influenced their own self-efficacy, the three principals in this study each indicated that the system had caused them to experience some doubts as to whether they were capable of leading their schools effectively. The extent to which their school's letter grade impacted their self-efficacy, however, varied considerably among the three principals.

During the course of the interviews for this study, each principal unmistakably articulated the thought that the A-F system, in spite of their views that it was a poor measure of school and principal quality, had caused them to experience some doubt that they could be effective school principals. Cregg perhaps articulated this most succinctly

in saying “It doesn’t mean anything, and we know it, and yet, it means everything” (personal communication, January 15, 2020). She spoke in vivid terms about her internal reaction to receiving the news that Anniston had received yet another F grade:

When you open up that F and it comes in your email, and you read it in the paper, it’s debilitating. It’s debilitating to you as a person. It’s debilitating to your spirit. It’s disheartening. It’s cold... Every person in this community judges your school off of that. It comes in the paper, and they list them in order, and there you are at the bottom...

So I think the most frustrating thing about the A-F system is that it disheartens your teachers. It changes the trajectories of their careers. It makes people believe there’s a life expectancy on the work at a school like Anniston, because you can only get beaten down every year for a certain period. And I’ll speak very honestly: In my last year at Anniston when we didn’t move that needle...I start looking at myself, and I’m saying –I had this conversation with my assistant principal. I had this conversation with my leadership team. I had this conversation with my boss. Am I the person who can lead this school out of this? (personal communication, January 15, 2020).

Nicholas had a similar reaction to the reception of a D when he was the principal of Westwood Elementary. When asked if the D grade caused him to doubt his own effectiveness as a principal, he indicated that it did:

I kind of equated it a little bit similar to whenever your kids have a failure for whatever reason. And you as a parent, while you’re bummed for your kid, maybe

sometimes you're mad at him, but at some point, the thought creeps in, 'What was my part? Did I have a part in this?' Maybe there was something I should have done along the way that I did not do... In the throes of the moment, it certainly made me feel ineffective... I was not doing a bad job there. There were certainly some things I could have improved on and gotten better on, but I was not doing as bad as that made me feel (personal communication, February 13, 2020).

Interestingly, Weinzapfel, whose school regularly received A grades, made a distinction between the perceived efficacy of the school and her own individual efficacy. When speaking about the 2018 B grade Garden Elementary received, her thoughts went not to how she perceived herself or how others perceived her, but rather, how the community would view the school and its staff:

(I thought) people are going to think poorly of us," she said, "or think we're not doing as good of a job, when you know you do the same and you try to make advancements... What's their opinion going to be now? 'Oh, Garden made a B. It's going down the tubes... My overall concern was not about me personally, but more about the school in general'" (personal communication, January 13, 2020).

Nonetheless, Weinzapfel talked on numerous instances about the pain and fear she felt when the school – a National Blue Ribbon School – went from an A to a B. She went on to describe a feeling of perhaps being judged by the community, that perhaps "she's just not working very hard. Maybe she's not pushing the teachers to do what they need to be doing" (personal communication, January 13, 2020). Her language throughout

the course of the interviews revealed a principal who took on the news of a lowered grade with considerable negative emotion: “depressed,” “embarrassed,” “this cloud and gloom,” “dejected,” “dread,” “devastated,” “dejection,” and “pressure” (personal communications, January 13, 2020; January 18, 2020; January 21, 2020; January 28, 2020).

While all of the principals in this study expressed, to some degree or another, feelings of self-doubt caused by the A-F system, there is evidence to suggest that the principals’ view of the A-F system as a poor measure of school quality helps to insulate them from internalizing poor grades and, thus, entirely depleting their own self-efficacy. Cregg, for instance, attributed the long streak of F grades at Anniston Elementary not to her leadership or abilities, but rather to “F status being a moving target all the time” and that state education policymakers set the cut scores for ISTEP to ensure that a certain percentage of students fail the exam. “To me, that just doesn’t make any sense” (personal communication, January 29, 2020). She relayed a story about the state board of education visiting Anniston Elementary and walking away deeply impressed by the school in spite of its F grade. “Every member (of the state board) that was present said, ‘This is not an F school. If this is what we’re calling an F school, we’re making a mistake’” (personal communication, January 15, 2020).

For Cregg, then, the reception of the F grades was painful and frustrating, but it did not erode her confidence to excel in all the other components of the principalship:

So, it’s like a recipe. You have all these parts of your job. ILEARN (the Indiana state accountability assessment), and all the letter grades are one thing... All these other things that are part of your recipe that it takes to be a principal: being able to

lead your staff, being able to get people to come with you, just communicator, being in your community together, getting partners to help accomplish the goals you need for your school, I couldn't name them all... All these things are part of being a great principal. Coaching and developing teachers. Those are big things. Of those big things, I felt good about the rest of them (personal communication, January 29, 2020).

Weinzapfel described the system as a “goofed up system” (personal communication, January 28, 2020) and that the A-F school grades had not at all improved her own effectiveness as a school principal (personal communication, January 21, 2020). She went on to say that although the reception of a B left her embarrassed and dejected, it did not have a long-term impact on her self-efficacy. “I know that seems like an oxymoron,” she said, “but I didn't question my abilities” (personal communication January 28, 2020).

Nicholas argued that the A-F grading system does not adequately measure the quality of schools and shared his advice to his staff when they received a less than desired grade:

This does not define us. Please do not, even if we get an A, this does not define us. We will try to meet the needs of all our kids and do the best we can for all our kids. And if we're doing that, then I'm not really as worried about the letter grade...” (S. Nicholas, personal communication, February 10, 2020).

Each principal made statements like these during the course of interviews, statements which pointed out that principals did not view the A-F system as a good barometer of their own performance or ability. Because principals viewed the system as an ineffective and even irrational measure of schools, each of them was able to distance themselves, on an intellectual level, from allowing a poor letter grade to change the way they felt about their own effectiveness as leaders.

Given what appears to be a school letter grading system that shows no signs of being replaced or ended, we might wonder how long the doubts these principals expressed lasted. Schools, after all, receive a letter grade every year. Whatever experience principals undergo upon receiving a letter grade has the chance of reoccurring each year of their career. The evidence from the study suggests that the strain on self-efficacy for each of these principals was temporary. Rather, the feelings of pain, embarrassment, stress, and self-doubt that had done some damage to their self-efficacy seemed to have transformed into other feelings. The nature of these feelings varied among the three principals. For instance, Cregg wept at one point as she spoke about the pains of receiving repeated F grades. Although she is now at a different school, the experience with the A-F system, paired with the intense challenges of working in a high poverty building, clearly still resonated with her.

There were a couple of days definitely where I was like, “Oh gosh, what are we going to do?” But right after you have your one minute whine, you better be ready with an action plan because that’s all you’re getting. So I think principals of places like Anniston don’t let themselves feel what you just made me feel. You

don't allow it. You compartmentalize that. You stick it down someplace. You hold onto it (personal communication, January 22, 2020).

There were numerous other moments during her interviews that Cregg revealed a principal whose self-doubt had ended but whose resentment towards to A-F system remained. She noted how the system implicitly calls children and educators “failures” and expresses pride that “400 kids at Anniston walked away from school every day feeling important and valued and smart, in a system that makes them feel weak and ignorant and dumb” (personal communication, February 4, 2020). And yet, in the same interview, Cregg offered any number of details that show her sense of self-efficacy is strong. She described the uncertainty she felt as a first-year principal that she now feels mastery over (personal communication, February 4, 2020). She looked back at her performance at Anniston and indicated that she was proud of her work there. “The one thing that was a knife,” she said, “was the F grade” (personal communication, January 29, 2020).

Interestingly, both Weinzapfel and Nicholas pointed to their own family backgrounds as helping to protect their sense of self-efficacy in face of pain associated with undesired school grades. Weinzapfel spoke of her own father and his promotion of education, pointing out that education cannot be taken away. She attributed her ability to recover from the embarrassment of Garden Elementary's B grade to her own upbringing (personal communication, January 28, 2020). Nicholas recalled his father's observation that schools needed to be safe, orderly, focused on achievement, and a pleasant place to be. Measured against these barometers, Nicholas felt that his performance as a school

principal had been positive (personal communication, February 13, 2020). He also indicated that his religious faith played a role in not allowing the A-F system to significantly deteriorate his belief in his ability to lead a school.

Consequently, both Nicholas and Weinzapfel seemed to view the A-F system as something that has hurt them, but has not inflicted permanent damage to their self-efficacy. When asked what advice she would offer educators who are going into the principalship, she responded, “I guess the biggest thing I would say is stay true to yourself, stay true to your kids, stay true to your teachers, love your kids, enjoy them, try not to get too wrapped up in all of the state assessments” (personal communication, January 28, 2020). Her admonition about not getting “too wrapped up in all of the state assessments” seemed indicative of a principal whose pain at a one-time drop in her school’s letter grade had been replaced with a sense of perspective about the A-F system.

Interestingly, the participant who most seemed to express a sense of acceptance of the school letter grading system is Nicholas. More vividly than Weinzapfel or Cregg, he articulated on several occasions what he perceived as possible benefits of the system to his own view of himself and even some of his professional practices. He acknowledged on several occasions the doubt he suffered when his school received an undesired grade. “But as I looked at that (letter grade,)” he said, “I don’t think I was an ineffective principal, and that’s how that made me feel at times. And I determined that (the letter grade) is not going to make me feel that way anymore” (personal communication, February 13, 2020). The sentiment of not being defined by his school’s letter grade was a recurring theme throughout his interviews in this study.

Nicholas also noted that while “I try... real hard not to let (the A-F system) totally define who I am, but I try to use it as a bit of a benchmark for... what I can do to improve and to help my teachers, help their kids improve...” (personal communication, February 7, 2020). He went on to say the A-F system is “good at making me aware” and described using the A-F letter grade system to not only establish a goal for his staff to improve, but to point out how close they were to earning a C (personal communication, February 18, 2020). He noted that “(the school’s letter grade) gave me a little more reason to push our teachers as far as their teaching practices” (personal communication, February 18, 2020)/ Nicholas, then, was the principal in this study who most saw the A-F system as something that could be leveraged to bring change not only to his school, but his own instructional awareness as well.

Self-Efficacy and Changed and Unchanged Letter Grades. Two of the principals in this study experienced changes in their school’s letter grades, while one principal’s school had received only F grades since the A-F system was initiated. The principals’ reactions to grade changes, as well as reactions to unchanged grades, were instructive in assessing how both changes in letter grades as well as low unchanged letter grades, impacted their sense of self-efficacy. The evidence of this study strongly suggests that the improvements in a letter grade have no impact on a principal’s self-efficacy, but a low letter grade that does not improve can cause pronounced pain and short-term declines in self-efficacy. Relative to self-efficacy, principals indicated the A-F system cannot improve self-efficacy and can only harm it.

Perhaps most surprisingly, Weinzapfel and Nicholas, whose schools had experienced grade improvements in some years, both indicated that any improvement in their school's grade did not improve or change their sense of self efficacy. Weinzapfel was asked to describe any changes in her self-efficacy the year that Garden Elementary's grade rose from a B to an A;

None. I felt we've had the same level of effectiveness through it all. The only thing that's changed, I would say, is just the emotional status of me. The emotional status of the teachers, just feeling totally dejected when we got a B. Embarrassed a little bit too (personal communication, January 28, 2020).

In essence, then, while Weinzapfel suggested that there was no change in her self-efficacy when her school's grade improved, she indicated there was a distinct lessening of the emotional toil that accompanied Garden Elementary's B grade the previous year. Answering an earlier question about how the improvement in her school's grade might have strengthened her self-efficacy, Weinzapfel was even more direct:

I would still say no... Because I think as an instructional leader, which is part of the principal's role to, when I say academics, that includes everything within academics: instruction, curriculums, assessment, all that. I think as a good instructional leader, you're always looking for how you can help your kids learn more. (The state has) given us the standards. We know what's expected. They could even measure our knowledge of the standards without giving the letter grade system (personal communication, January 21, 2020).

It is fair to note Weinzapfel's observation that the school's quality perhaps could be judged by its staff's knowledge of the standards as opposed to student performance. Nonetheless, the broader point she made was that she saw no change in her self-efficacy related to the A-F school letter grading system, and, irrespective of her school's letter grade, felt like she was an effective leader of her school.

Nicholas also voiced a similar absence of a boost to his self-efficacy when Westwood's grade improved to a C after two years of D grades:

I would say the feeling of getting the C grade and getting out of that status, while I felt like I left (the school) in a good spot. There was not necessarily a sense of celebration or anything like that. It was more a sense of relief, that "Okay, we didn't get a D..." (personal communication, February 10, 2020)

Principals were asked to speculate about how a dramatic hypothetical improvement or decline in their school grade might alter their sense of self-efficacy. Nicholas indicated he would feel little sense of accomplishment if his school's grade leapt from C's to A's. "I guess I might have a little pride if we got an A," he said, "but it would certainly be guarded" (personal communication, February 7, 2020). In a later interview, he went farther, suggesting that an improvement in his school's letter grade not only would not impact his belief in his ability, but also that it would not be his primary source of satisfaction:

I would say... that I don't know that I would have had a great deal of joy over getting a B or an A... I just wanted us to get out of that status for our teachers in

for myself and for our school because I knew we were a better school than what this letter grade indicated... (personal communication, February 10, 2020).

Interestingly, when asked to envision his response would be if his school's grade dropped precipitously to an F, Nicholas spoke in measured terms, simply saying he would try to determine what happened. If grade went "way down," he remarked, "I wouldn't feel like it was totally my fault, that's for sure. But I'd know that I probably had a part in it..." (personal communication, February 10, 2020).

On the other hand, both Weinzapfel and Cregg spoke in strong and even extreme terms when asked to envision how they would feel and respond should their schools experience a four-letter change. As the principal of an A school, of course, Weinzapfel would face a drastic deterioration should Garden Elementary's school grade drop from an A to an F. "I just wouldn't show up the next day," she said, going on to say that she would almost consider retirement rather than facing her community and colleagues in the face of an F grade (personal communication, January 13, 2020). While not stated directly, her response suggests that the reception of an F would have a potent impact on her self-efficacy, so much so that it would threaten her emotional ability to continue on as principal. It is noteworthy that Weinzapfel's vision of leaving the principalship was not rooted in thinking that she would be forced out or removed by the school board for poor performance; rather, she envisioned leaving due to embarrassment and emotional strain.

Cregg's context, of course, was very different than Weinzapfel's. Anniston has received F grades since the inception of the A-F grading system. Consequently, a drastic change in letter grade would be a pronounced improvement. Nonetheless, Craig indicated

that any improvement in letter grade at Anniston would result in a celebration not for the sake of an improved letter grade, but rather, because of the symbolic triumph over incredible adversity:

Would we have had an all-night celebration? Yes. That would have been an all-nighter for sure, no matter what night that news came on. I think the staff would have felt the same way. If I could have ever gone to them and said, “Guess what, man? We’re out (of family status).” The momentum... that that would create for everyone, to just say, “Hey, man. Hard work pays off” (personal communication, January 29, 2020).

There is meaning in each participant’s response to these hypotheticals. Cregg’s characterization of an improvement in letter grade -- “we’re out” -- was semblative of some type of escape, as if being freed from restraint or confinement rather than being empowered or lifted up. Further, it is informative to consider each principal’s response to this hypothetical in light of his or her school grades. Both Weinzapfel and Cregg, whose school grades are at the highest and lowest echelon of the grading spectrum, offered the most fervent responses to the hypothetical scenario of a drastic grade change. Nicholas, however, led schools whose grades were squarely in the middle of the letter grade spectrum. His responses to a hypothetical two letter grade improvement or two letter grade deterioration were the most moderate and least extreme of the three principals in this study.

Summary of Findings

Principals in this study expressed widespread skepticism that the A-F school letter grading system was an effective measurement of either the quality of their school or their own individual capability. Each participant raised objections to elementary school letter grades being based on only one assessment and consistently argued that the quality of a school should be based on a much broader criterion rather than one assessment. While each participant expressed that the reception of a poor letter grade gave birth to some doubts about their ability to be effective school leaders, all of them noted that this deterioration in self efficacy was largely temporary and that they each still retain a positive belief in their capability to effectively lead an elementary school. Although they had slightly different views of the extent to which the A-F system had influenced and sometimes strained their self-efficacy, all the principals unanimously and consistently articulated that the school grading system had inflicted considerable emotional pain on them. Principals who led schools whose grades have improved did not report any change or improvement in their own self-efficacy. In addition, while they indicated that an improvement in grades could bring some sense of relief, all of the participants indicated that a drastic, multi-letter improvement in their schools' grade, would not have meaningful impact on their self-efficacy.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

Educational research does not lack for studies on school accountability. Amongst that body of research, however, studies of school letter grading accountability systems are far scarcer, and studies of the relationship between letter grading system and principal self-efficacy appear to be non-existent. This is surprising. At the time of this writing, well over 20 states and large cities employ letter grading systems. The use of letter grades as part of a school accountability system is no longer an idiosyncratic rarity. The effectiveness of accountability systems would be well-served to better understand all the dynamics surrounding the letter grading system: how it is viewed by educators, how it impacts communities, educators, and students, and whether it truly captures what it aspires to. We do know enough about letter grading system to know that they are potent. If they can go so far as to affect housing markets (Figlio & Lucas, 2004), they surely have the power to have significant effects on the principals who work under them. Until this study however, no such attempt had been made to consider how principals view letter grading systems and what consequences of the system, both intended and unintended, may result their use by policymakers.

This study seeks to explore two fundamental research questions: how do Indiana elementary school principals view the A-F Indiana school letter grading system, and to what extent, if at all, does the A-F letter grading system impact the self-efficacy of Indiana elementary school principals. While this study is intended to be an exploratory study with no direct attempts to generalize its findings to a larger audience, these findings do offer valuable insights and warrant further examination. We have seen that principals

who initially viewed the school grading system with cautious optimism quickly came to see it as inadequate, irrational, and punitive, even in schools with high and improving achievement levels. All three participants acknowledged that they experienced decreases in self-efficacy that they attributed directly to the A-F system, though they acknowledged that the deterioration to their self-efficacy was temporary and not long-term. Perhaps most jarring, however, was the participants' unanimous description of the A-F system's capacity to exert deep pain and sadness on principals over the course of their career, even in the face of success.

The common experiences of these three principals relative to the A-F system should be alarming to policymakers. These educators represent diverse backgrounds and contexts, yet they all offer skepticism and even condemnation of the state's primary means of measuring and characterizing their school's quality. It is important for these findings to be analyzed and considered, as there are lessons to be learned from these participants. Their observations can lead to a renewed accountability system that is viewed as fair and credible by educators while still serving the public interest.

In this chapter, I discuss these findings and their implications. First, I will offer an analysis of how these principals view the A-F system and what meaning they make of letter grades in general. I will consider previous research and hold this study up to its predecessors, examining three things: the ways this work affirms previous findings, the ways it deviates from previous understandings, and the ways in which further research could broaden our understanding of the A-F system and its impact on principal self-efficacy. Based on these findings, six recommendations will be offered, recommendations I believe would improve Indiana's school accountability system and

would benefit students, educators, and communities. I will revisit some of the limitations of this study and offer some thoughts on why this work, in spite of those limitations, is both valid and important. Finally, I conclude with an imagination of the kinds of schools that might result if we determined that a school's pursuit of an A grade was deemed to be its highest purpose.

Making Meaning of Letter Grade

A subtle but meaningful element of these findings lies in the way the three participants made meaning of letter grades. A careful analysis of the ways principals responded and discussed letter grades reveals that they each have different ideas about what constitutes an A school. Nicholas, and to some degree Cregg, made mention on various occasions of how hard he was working, or how hard other principals are required to work. He voiced concern that principals and teachers in struggling schools are likely working just as hard, if not harder than those in suburban school. One gets the sense that Nicholas's barometer of quality is the extent to which principals and staff members work hard to serve students. In his worldview, then, quality might be determined by effort. Cregg and Weinzapfel voiced similar thoughts. Cregg talked on numerous occasions about the things schools need to do, beyond instruction, that students depend on: emotional support, basic needs including food; enriching and engaging activities, making school and learning fun, exposing students to a wide variety of futures they can choose from, and so forth. For these three principals, those tasks that merit an A are not simply indicative of high-quality schools; they are core values and potentially even moral imperatives.

So for these principals – – and very likely almost anyone who has ever been in school – – the meaning of an A is a murky, individual, and even ethical concept. The lack of any type of qualitative description of “A” schools by the state of Indiana contributes to this ambiguity. This is a critically important insight. It is, at its essence, the source of deep and occasionally painful dissonance between the way principals view their schools and work versus the way state accountability systems do. This dissonance, of course, largely speaks to the fundamental difference in education’s purpose between these principals and state policymakers. All of the participants in this study voiced a willingness to grow and even talked about their personal and professional weaknesses. But they also deeply believe that they come to school each day and put into practice those views and tasks that are central to their vision of high-quality schools. It is little wonder, then, that the reception of an undesired grade is so painful and frustrating for these educators. The poor grade represents not just a poor academic score; rather, it represents an institutionalized judgment that the school – and consequently, the principal -- is not meeting core values and responsibilities. We recall Cregg’s observation that the reception of an F is equivalent to being labeled “a failure.”

It is worthy hypothesizing how this dynamic might exist in the public at-large. These three principals all held world views that interpreted an A grade, or an F grade, differently. It is very likely that members of the general public have their own, very personal conceptions of what a particular letter grade means. When the state releases its school grades each year, there are countless interpretations amongst citizens of what those grades mean. Certainly the three participants of this study made different sense of the letter grades; it seems all but certain that the general public does as well. For an

accountability system that strives to have a common, shared understanding of letter grades, this is problematic.

Finally, we should consider what principals did not articulate when they gave voice to what a letter grade meant to them. None of the three talked about any salary reduction or lost wages due to an undesired letter grade. None of the three participants indicated that a poor letter grade was met with pressure from their supervisors, nor did they fear a poor grade would prove to be an impediment to future career growth. None of the three participants said that a poor grade might lead to a demotion or job loss. None of the principals indicated that a poor school grade would make constitute a stain on their community. Rather, for all of the principals, the perceived repercussions to an undesired school letter grade were entirely emotional and deeply personal.

Connections to Previous Research

Like most research, this study was rooted in the findings of previous studies. Interestingly, these findings reinforce some of the research of earlier studies and contradict others. For instance, one of the fundamental pillars of Bandura's (1981) work on self-efficacy was the capacity of social persuasion to change one's level of self-efficacy. The presence of social persuasion as a driver of self-efficacy was on vivid display in this study, notably in Valerie Cregg's interviews. Cregg spoke occasionally about feeling a sense of success when others would praise her work, hearing comments that "bolster you and make you feel like this person thinks I'm doing a good job, and I respect them... I think, OK, well, if you think I'm good at my job that makes me feel better" (V. Cregg, personal interview, January 29, 2020). Weinzapfel indicated that one

of her fears from receiving a poor letter grade was that others might think she is doing a poor job or not working hard enough. Both Weinzapfel and Nicholas spoke of their family backgrounds and indicated that one measure of their self-efficacy is whether their parents would approve of their performance. Thus, all three participants in the study indicated that their sense of self-efficacy is, in part, shaped and bolstered by the comments of others around them, mirroring Bandura's supposition that self-efficacy can come from social persuasion.

One of the more direct similarities between the findings of this study and previous research is the presence of great stress and pain that principals associate with accountability systems. Earlier studies (Finigan & Gross, 2009; Kubow & Debard, 2000; Milanski, 2000; Torres, Zellner, & Erlandson, 2008) all concluded that school accountability systems have significant ability to inflict pain on educators who work under them. All three principals in this study reaffirmed these findings. Not only did these three participants describe feelings of pain and stress, but all of them gave voice to the possibility of leaving their jobs, not because of parental pressure, staff complaints, or central office pressures, but simply because of a letter grade that was of embarrassment or hurt to them. Some of the principal quotes in Howard and Malloy's (2008) work, which found that principals working under accountability system can experience feelings of pain, failure, and incompetence, at times are nearly identical to what all three of the principals in this study said in describing their reaction to the A-F school letter grading system. The stress and pain these three described matches the findings of previous research regarding school accountability.

While each participant articulated, in varying degrees, levels of strain and negative emotion associated with the A-F school letter grading system, each participant also indicated that their sense of self-efficacy fluctuates in the face of different school grades. What was noteworthy about this finding was that it, too, mirrored previous research (Berry 1987; Schunk, 1981) indicating that levels of self-efficacy are fluid and can change due to a variety of circumstances. There perhaps is a convergence of Berry and Schunk with Bandura here. It is possible, for instance, to attribute the changes in self-efficacy in these principals to other sources of affirmation, notably social persuasion. While poor letter grades, at different points in their careers, may have given birth to self-doubt and feelings of ineffectiveness, each principal seemed to cope with and eventually conquer these feelings of ineffectiveness through the power of uplifting words and relationships with others. In essence, all three participants manifest Nicholas's determination not to be defined by the letter grade. For these principals, the numerous sources of self-efficacy are perhaps compensatory and healing.

One final thread of previous research that this study affirms is the work of Howe and Murray (2015), who raise objections to school grading systems on the grounds that they undermine the ability of schools to mold students who can thoughtfully participate in and elevate the democratic process. To be clear, none of these participants spoke in any kind of direct way about this Jeffersonian principle. But at several points, each of them voiced concerns that the rigidity of the A-F system impedes teacher attempts to create lessons that are engaging for students and that promote higher-order thinking, two skills clearly necessary for being a skilled participant in the discourse about public policy and politics. Weinzapfel, for instance, gave voice to the idea that critical thinking skills

and those skills needed to be a successful adult have given way to other lessons whose goal was not critical thinking, but rather, test preparation:

The enjoyment of just experiencing school as we used to know it and doing those enrichment activities, and doing things that might be more fun... That would certainly provide kids with a broader background experience, preparing them for what's to come: adulthood. Those have kind of gone by the wayside (S. Weinzapfel, personal communication, January 18, 2020).

Neither Weinzapfel nor any of the other principals spoke explicitly of the need for schools to prepare students to be participants in the political process and civic discourse. But within her comment is a concern that higher-order, critical thinking engagement activities have given way to test preparation. To be sure, each participant in this study gave voice to wanting to see students succeed. But for Weinzapfel and the other principals, the imperative to prepare students for the state accountability exam rests not in a belief that a good test score represents fundamental learning, but rather, to help the school avoid an undesired grade.

There is a sense that Weinzapfel and Cregg arrive at the same conclusion about the effect of the A-F school grades on the critical thinking skills of students, yet they arrive at it in very different and subtle ways. Weinzapfel, for instance, paints a picture of the negative that follows when the A-F system is present. "Because of the A-F school grading system," she might say, "our kids struggle to learn to be successful thinkers in the political context." We harken back to Cregg's observation that any number of successful policymakers and political participants rose to their positions without ever

having been a student under the A-F system. Ironically, then, Cregg presents a vision of the good that can happen when the A-F system is absent. “Because their curriculum was never narrowed by the A-F system,” she might suggest, “they were able to succeed, even to the level of holding political office and making policy decisions.”

Without question, the findings of this study affirmed some of the findings of other existing research. Having said that, though, there are two critical elements to this study that yielded important contrast with other research surrounding accountability systems.

First, Chase and Kane (1983) found that principals in high performing schools had confidence that they could take action and influence events. This was not at all the sense that Weinzapfel articulated during the interviews for this study. In fact, Weinzapfel indicated that she not only felt like she had no control over her school’s grade the year it slipped to a B, but also felt, even in retrospect, that there was nothing she could have done to prevent that. Like other principals in this study, she described the reception of school grades in gambling terms, even comparing it to a crap shoot and not especially knowing how to control it. Hers is a National Blue Ribbon School, a school whose letter grade history is comprised of almost entirely A’s, and yet she shared the view of Nicholas and Cregg, whose schools posted far lower grades and had much greater poverty than Weinzapfel’s, in expressing a clear belief that she could not control her school’s grade.

Secondly, the findings of this study stand in stark contrast to those studies (Champion, 2012; Egley & Jones, 2005; Sodoma & Else, 2009) which found that accountability systems can give birth to enhanced job satisfaction and fulfillment in school principals. While Nicholas did express a moderate sense that the letter grade offered a baseline starting point of how his school might improve, both he, Cregg, and

Weinzapfel spoke forcefully and consistently about the fundamental inadequacy and unfairness of the school letter grading system. None of the participants – even those that had experienced an improvement in letter grade – articulated any sense of enhanced job satisfaction stemming from the A-F letter grading system. All three of the principals spoke of the system’s capacity to impose significant pain on principals, a pain that all three principals described and experienced on a personal level.

The disparity between the findings of this study and previous research relative to principal job satisfaction merits some discussion. What could explain such different findings? A more careful look at the previous studies may yield some speculation. Why is it, for instance, that the principals in Champion’s (2012) work – principals leading schools in New York City, a school system using the A-F school grading system-- had increased their levels of job satisfaction, whereas those in this study reported no such feeling? For starters, Champion did case studies only of principals and schools whose letter grade had significantly improved. Her work’s purpose was to determine what ingredients helped these schools raise their letter grades, and as such, her focus went far beyond the issue of how principals viewed the A-F system and how that system impacted their self-efficacy. Left unexplored in her work are the thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of those principals whose schools have grades remaining the same or deteriorating. Should she have chosen to broaden her sample size, her findings might very well have been significantly different. Sodoma and Else (2009) reported increased job satisfaction among Iowa principals, but it is worth noting that Iowa schools were not subject to A-F school letter grades. This is not to entirely discount the relevance and validity of these studies. They do tell us something, and their findings may paint some

picture of ways in which principals might find personal and professional satisfaction by letter grading systems.

There may be a personal meaning in the ways that the three participants of the study indicated that they approach their work in the ways they seem to define success. During the course of their interviews, each participant gave voice to some of the core, fundamental reasons they chose to be principals. For instance, Weinzapfel pointed to the joy of student relationships and providing students enrichment opportunities that can broaden their thinking. In speaking of some of his most effective moments, Nicholas spoke about the ways he was able to use the authority of the principalship to help lift people out of painful and deteriorating situations. Cregg spoke at some length about the importance and potency of offering a student a very different vision of his or her life than what made immediately lay in front of him/her. In essence, all of the principals in this study saw as their fundamental mission to establish relationships and improve the lives of their students.

From the perspective of these participants, the Indiana A-F system does not aid in that goal. In fact, the principals in this study argue that the letter grading system actually impedes their goal of truly changing and improving the lives of students.

At numerous points in this study, I have acknowledged the limitations of this work and have not claimed that it is generalizable to all of Indiana principals. Even after reviewing these findings over and over again, I remain cautious about generalizing this study. On that front, further research is warranted, and I will discuss that shortly. But in the meantime, it is vividly clear that these three principals, who come from different schools and backgrounds, who have varying experiences with the letter grading system,

whose school grades range from A through F, unanimously rejected the school grading system as an adequate means of ensuring accountability in school quality. All three of them not only voice skepticism that the system is helpful to students, parents, or educators, but they also unanimously view the A-F system as something that can profoundly damage principals, teachers, and students. The consistent refrain that the letter grading system is inadequate and threatening to principals in all different contacts suggest that the dynamics discovered in the study are likely to be far more widespread than merely the three participants of this work.

At its core, this finding represents a distinct departure from previous studies of school accountability systems and their impact on educators. The principals in this study argue that an accountability system comprised of traditional, well-known letter grades, has a public resonance that other accountability systems do not. All three participants have relayed feeling very different under the letter grading system compared to previous, descriptive label systems; the system essentially constitutes a public shaming that threatens their self-efficacy and can impose significant pain and stress. Previous studies have shown the ways in which accountability systems can impose stress on principals, but none has established a relationship between a letter grading system and school principals. Further, no other accountability systems have been shown to leave principals feeling as if the system they have worked under has served to label them professional and personal failures.

Recommendations

Given all of the information learned from previous research studies and the findings of this study, there are several steps policymakers could take that could lead to better educational, social, and emotional outcomes for both Indiana students, parents, and educators. As such, let me put forth several recommendations -- some that are social, some that are legislative -- that I believe would absorb the lessons of these three participants and other research studies, and would better meet the ultimate goals of school accountability systems. I do not present these recommendations in order of importance; rather, I present them in two different sections. First, I offer two specific recommendations born from this study's findings. Secondly, I offer broader recommendations I believe would contribute to a thoughtful, strategic, and rational construction of a state accountability system. While it is possible that these steps could all be taken simultaneously, to do so would prevent all of the complexities of school accountability from synchronizing and working together. I would argue that a successful accountability system is not a beginning point, but rather, an ending point. It should be the final product of all the values and aspirations of a community, state, or even a nation, and each of those values and aspirations are nuanced, complex, and often times hidden behind overly simplistic or uninformed dialogue.

I offer these recommendations:

1. *The final accountability ratings must not be merely letter grades.* The findings of my study, along with much of the literature surrounding accountability systems, makes vividly clear that school operations and performance are far more complicated than one letter grade can capture. The options for these final public ratings are many. Policymakers could simply choose to include all the criteria required in the accountability

rating and simply tell the public how many of those criterion local schools met. Each criteria of the accountability systems could have short descriptive verbiage similar to previous accountability systems, giving communities an idea of which standards schools are excelling in and which standards may need further attention.

2. University level administrative licensure programs need to include in their coursework training and resources to help aspiring school principals be aware of and cope with the emotional and psychological demands of the principalship, paying special attention to the stress that can be associated with the public nature of accountability systems. The principalship, as we have seen from the findings of this study, has evolved significantly during the age of school accountability. For many aspiring school principals, having their school's "grade" publicized and examined by the community is something not considered when they are contemplating a career in school administration. It is undeniable that school principals, along with the school at large, no longer perform in siloed privacy. Rather, the performance of schools is now quantified and publicized for community consumption, and we have heard clearly from the three participants of this study that that is an element of the accountability system that is straining and occasionally painful. We have seen that this emotional weight exists not only for school leaders of at-risk schools, but even for school principals leading highly successful buildings. Aspiring school administrators would be well-served by university programs that teach them stress management and other psychological tools to withstand what can be feelings of insufficiency and failure in the face of a poor public accountability rating.

While these two recommendations most immediately connect to the findings of this study, I believe that the insights these principals shared point to broader systemic breakdowns and inadequacies that require a more comprehensive and philosophical repair. As such, I offer the following recommendations that require a high-level political and social endeavor.

3. There needs to be a concerted national, state, and local effort to coalesce around common understandings of what constitutes a quality school beyond mere academic standards. There is broad consensus that a quality school should endow students with mastery of core academic skills. Virtually all accountability systems account for and measure this component of school operations. But the principals of this study, along with countless other researchers, parents, social philosophers, and some policymakers repeatedly pointed to the many obligations and expectations that are rightfully placed on schools. In the information age, it is not unreasonable that schools should expose children to technological components such as coding and other digital skills. Some schools are called upon to help supplement community needs, such as supplying food to at risk students or providing language lessons for non-English speakers. Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum (2011) argue that 21st-century schools need to produce students who can think critically, creatively, and collaboratively. Absent these skills, students will find their future jobs outsourced or automated. Undoubtedly there are numerous other needs schools are expected to fill from one community to the next. Nonetheless, though these expectations are demanded of schools, accountability systems seldom give them credit for meeting any of them other than the academic ones. Beyond previous standards-based initiatives such as Common Core, s

tates would be well served to build broad understandings of what schools do, what communities need, and then build an accountability system around how well schools meet the diverse responsibilities placed on them.

4. Governors should organize traveling listening sessions, going to numerous points -- urban, rural, and suburban -- in many locales across their states. These listening sessions should include a wide swath of stakeholders: parents, students, educators, small business owners, social service representatives, university and college officials, trade school officials, and all others whose work is influenced by the public school. The purpose of these listening sessions should be twofold: 1) to garner clear understandings of all the responsibilities local schools are charged with and all the needs they fill in their respective communities, and 2) to identify the various qualities of a successful school that any accountability system must account for.

5. It is imperative that parent input be reflected in accountability systems. State policymakers should assemble a working group of parents, teachers, school principals, superintendents, and students to create a state-wide parent survey that can be administered in every school district in a given state. The goal of this survey should be to ascertain parent attitudes towards their local school. This input can provide valuable feedback to schools and can help chart the way to improvement initiatives. Parent surveys, for instance, can help principals and other educators understand the extent to which communities feel like schools are accepting of racial and religious differences among their students. These surveys can clarify the extent to which parents are satisfied or dissatisfied with their local school districts. As parents are, in fact, taxpayers, it is reasonable that they should be afforded the opportunity to provide feedback about their

views of their local school, and this feedback should be included in state accountability systems.

6. State policymakers should assemble a wide group of stakeholders and build an accountability system metric that measures the many needs they have learned that schools fill across their state. This accountability system should include multiple criteria and data points, including academic performance, parent surveys, and other data points identified by the listening tour stakeholders who traveled the state. Among the indicators of the new accountability model should be the results of the parent survey that is administered to every school in Indiana. Further, the new accountability system should be reflective of information gleaned from the statewide survey of principals and their views of the A-F school grading system. Academic goals for each school should still be included in the accountability system. However, each school should have its own academic goals individualized and established by the state based on previous years data. It should be entirely acceptable, for instance, for a school with abundant resources to have its language arts passing rate goal set at 80%, while a school with significant at-risk students might have a passing goal of 60%.

Fundamentally, states need to be architects of a school accountability system reflective of the many and complex needs schools fulfill and the constituencies they serve. For decades now, policymakers have slowly embedded the quantification of education into every facet of education policy. There is every appearance of education policy founded on the idea that that which is valuable can be measured, and that which cannot be measured is not valuable. Research conclusively tells us otherwise.

Further Research

This study sought to gain an understanding of two things: the way Indiana elementary principals view the Indiana A-F school grading system and the ways in which the A-F letter grading system impacts, if at all, the self-efficacy of principals. I have acknowledged on several occasions that the very small sample size of the study warrants caution as we digest these findings. Nonetheless, answers to both of the research questions should be concerning. The findings of the study reveal principals who not only express great skepticism about the validity of the school letter grading system, but also articulate genuine pain that can be attributed to the A-F system. Scholars and policymakers might very well dismiss these complaints if they were only coming from principals whose schools have failed to make academic progress. Clearly, however, that is not the case with these participants. When even the leader of a National Blue Ribbon school sounds the alarm about the system, it suggests but this problem is felt by schools and principals that the state education system would describe as superior. Cregg has now left Anniston to lead a suburban school and still voiced deep condemnation of the system. Nicholas has seen his school's grade rise, yet he, too, remains a critic of the system. The consternation and warnings we hear from these three educators are not merely the resentments or excuses of failed building leaders.

As such, further research of this topic is important. The findings of the study suggest the strong possibility that a wide swath of Indiana school principals do not have faith in the accountability system that is designed to serve families and communities. Further, these findings give rise to the possibility that a large number of Indiana principals are living under tremendous strain and even pain because of a state

accountability system that should be intended to help improve schools. Therefore, it is of significant importance that policymakers understand the way professional educators view the A-F school grading system and how that system may be impacting their self-efficacy and even emotional welfare. There is every reason to believe that educators and communities will accept and respect what they view as credible relative to school accountability systems.

There are several pieces of research that could be helpful to policymakers in meeting the goal of an accountability system that is viewed as credible by educators and educational experts. First, a broader state-wide quantitative study could provide information about how widespread this phenomenon is. Elementary principals could give valuable, measurable feedback as to the extent to which they view the A-F system as a valid measure of school quality. We could have a broader, state-wide understanding of how many principals felt that their school's current letter grades match their school's overall quality. It could be particularly helpful to get a sense as to the extent school principals believe the school letter grading system serves to help improve schools.

Secondly, using valid and reliable self-efficacy tests and surveys, we could make widespread data scientifically valid and less dependent upon personal feelings and reflections. This is of importance in numerous ways. We could garner further understanding of the extent to which there is a correlation between the A-F school letter grading system and principal self-efficacy. This in and of itself could be significant and noteworthy. Imagine, for instance, that we discover that school principals whose school grades are D's or F's still report high levels of self-efficacy. If so, something must explain that dissonance. Are school principals poor judges of their own effectiveness?

Does the current accountability system do a poor job of measuring school and principal quality? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, surely steps need to be taken to address it. It is, of course, entirely possible that a widespread survey of this nature might very well reveal that there is no meaningful gap between school letter grades and principal self-efficacy. The findings of my study, however, do not suggest that that is a likely possibility.

Revisiting Limitations

As we consider the significance and implications of the study's findings, it again bears acknowledging that the limitations of this study preclude it from being widely applicable to all principals in the state of Indiana. For starters, this study included only three participants. While their professional contexts vary, they are all of approximately the same age with approximately the same number of years in education. Each of them has worked under the A-F system, and each of them has also worked under previous accountability systems that they uniformly described as less threatening and disparaging as the school letter grading system. It is possible that younger principals, those whose careers have only known the school letter grading system, might have a very different view of it and make different meaning of it.

In addition, some of the subject matter here, while not deeply personal or intimate, can still be of a sensitive nature. Ms. Cregg, for instance, had a visibly emotional reaction in recounting the slew of F grades Anniston received. To discuss something as personal as one's self-efficacy does present some inherent complications.

Depending upon the emotional context of the discussion, some participants may feel uncomfortable being entirely open and honest. Secondly, it may very well be a false assumption to assume that every principal is acutely aware of their own self-efficacy, as some psychological elements of the self lay beneath our own understanding of ourselves.

I offer this acknowledgement and note of caution to blunt what could be a dismissal of this research by policymakers responsible for the onset of the A-F system in Indiana. The findings of this study are significant, important, and arguably even startling. They are suggestive of a phenomenon more prevalent than merely these three participants. These findings certainly warrant further research and exploration by both current and future educators, university administrative licensure programs, and state and even federal policymakers. Participants in this study all voiced deep skepticism about the validity and accuracy of the school letter grading system, suggesting that educators who work under the shadow of the system have a little faith or belief in it. Perhaps just as importantly, these results demonstrate that a state accountability system designed to elevate public schools may actually be serving to inflict significant pain and strain on the leaders of those schools. Unquestionably, there will be policymakers that will rightly argue that an accountability system is not designed to bring comfort to educators. In fact, it could be that pressure and pain placed upon poor building leaders may actually be a positive outcome. But this study also found that the A-F letter grading system even imposed painful negative emotions on principals of successful, highly graded schools. It is counterproductive that in an age of teacher and principal shortages, that an accountability system may actually serve to be steering talented prospective educators away from the principalship.

Conclusion

Though this study was comprised of only three participants, much has been learned from the principals who lent their voice and experience to this research. There were two research questions at the core of this work: how do Indiana elementary school principals view the Indiana A-F school grading system, and how does the Indiana A-F school grading system, if at all, impact the self-efficacy of Indiana elementary school principals? On balance, the three participants of this study view the Indiana school letter grading system as an inadequate measurement of school quality. They also view the A-F system as a threat to principal self-efficacy and a weight that can cause genuine hardship and pain at various stages of a principal's career, even in times of great success and service to students and families. The principals of this study found that in spite of the fact that they felt like their schools were succeeding on a variety of fronts, the A-F system offered no credit for those successes.

To be sure, state and local educational agencies are charged with some fundamental academic tasks. One of those tasks – – and possibly the preeminent task for policymakers and service providers – – is to equip students with essential academic abilities, notably in numeracy and literacy. So it is not unfair for an educational agency to respond to Nicholas by telling him that his hard work is appreciated, but it is not the end goal of the agency. Similarly, they might tell Weinzapfel that students coming to school and enjoying it are positive outcomes, but they fall outside the core mission of that agency. They could reasonably tell Cregg that providing students of Anniston Elementary hope and vision is noble, but that means little if those students are continually unable to

exhibit the academic skills necessary to achieve that vision. The academic responsibilities of schools should not and cannot be dismissed.

But it is in this vein that the rigidity of the current Indiana A-F school grading system perhaps most fails to account for the broad and human needs of children. Let us imagine a child who comes to school having partially mastered his grade level math. Let us also imagine that same child comes to school having witnessed domestic abuse in his home. Would the policymakers who champion the A-F school grading system tell schools that when that child walks through the front door, it is more important to send that child to math class than it is to send him to a counselor? Would they say that it is more important to minister to the child's mathematical deficiencies than it is to minister to the trauma he has experienced? Would communities? If a school principal paused her classroom observations and instead spent 30 minutes to help restore that child, would policymakers say that such a principal was abdicating the most important part of her job? Surely policymakers and communities would agree that child's urgent emotional needs and possibly even basic survival needs trump the need to build that child's mathematical skills.

It is a mistake to view scenarios of this nature as melodramatic outliers. They happen on a daily basis in schools across the United States. Children sometimes come to school hungry. They sometimes come to school lacking clean clothes. They sometimes come to school fearing that the home they woke up in may not be available to return to that night. They come to school from foster-care. They sometimes come to school not having done homework because there is no meaningful safe or quiet place to complete that work when they are at home. They come to school while their families are sometimes

in desperate need at home. And in each of these scenarios, schools are called upon to help.

For the principals in this study, then, the urgency of the work that they view as important and morally required is not recognized by the current school letter grading system. In fact, these responsibilities even compete with the kind of work the letter grading system demands, a letter grading system that produces elementary school grades based only on one assessment. It is in this reality that the three participants of the school voiced consternation that they continually feel that they, along with their schools, perform their jobs at a level much better than what their school's letter grade suggests. When the public sees the final letter grade, they seldom see the other urgent responsibilities and tasks principals undertake.

If, in fact, policymakers have deep faith in the school letter grading system and charge schools with the goal of making an A, we might imagine the extreme ways that schools could work towards that A grade. We could eliminate specialty subjects such as art and music and devote that time to further mastery of core subject areas like math and reading. We could end the practice of counselors providing whole class social skills lessons and instead return that instructional time to teachers to focus on core academic areas. We could tell schools to suspend their efforts to provide students backpacks of food on the weekend and instead devote those efforts to professional development of teachers or the procurement of more instructional resources. We could do away with recess to provide more instructional time. We could implement daily or weekly assessments in school, both formative and summative, so that teachers could reteach

when necessary and students and parents would have a constant idea of the status of their learning.

We would be remiss, however, not to analyze whether such a system is something we would desire. Is this a school we would want our children to attend? Would the principals who implement these methods be judged as highly effective?

Fundamentally, there exists a wide divide between what meaning these participants make of an A versus how the state currently quantifies it. We recall Cregg's story of the state board of education members, who upon seeing Anniston Elementary, remarked "This is not an F school. If this is what we're calling an F school, we're making a mistake" (V. Cregg, personal communication, January 15, 2020). To date, the Indiana A-F system evaluates elementary schools only on the basis of one assessment. There is a profound human cost to that calculation.

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**APPENDIX A:
Letter Of Informed Consent**

Paul Swanson
2201 Wilson Boulevard, #702
Arlington, VA 22201
812/270-0443

**INDIANA UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR
RESEARCH
Paul Swanson
Indiana University School of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Dissertation Proposal**

DATE (T.B.D.)

Principal _____:

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in my research study. As a practicing elementary principal in the state of Indiana, you are in a unique position to offer insights and contributions to understanding the ways principals perceive the Indiana A-F school grading system and what the relationship is between the letter grading system and principal self-efficacy.

The purpose of this letter is to obtain your written consent for me to include you in my study. This study's purpose is to determine the relationship between the Indiana A-F school grading system and principal self-efficacy. Specifically, I seek to understand how the Indiana A-F school grading system might impact the way that principals feel about their ability to successfully lead a school, how it might impact their day to day work, and how a change in their school's letter grade (if applicable) impacts the way they feel about their ability to successfully lead a school.

Your participation in this study will be comprised of up to four conversations with me. The first conversation will be a telephone or web-based conversation of approximately 15 minutes in which I overview my study and ask you to consider participating. The second conversation will be a telephone or web based conversation of approximately 30 minutes in which I gather basic background information about your professional experience and your current school. Our third conversation will be a telephone or web-based meeting of approximately two hours at or near your current school in which we will in detail your general impressions of

the Indiana A-F system, your school's recent letter grade, and the meaning you make of that letter grade and how it may or may not impact the way you view your abilities to lead a school. If necessary, I will schedule a fourth conversation (telephone or web-based) of less than one hour with you to ask any follow up questions that may arise as I reflect on the information you have provided me. With your permission, our face to face conversation will be audio recorded so that I can accurately transcribe our interviews. Within one month of our face to face meeting, I will provide you a written transcription of this conversation should you wish to review it for accuracy.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. Your inclusion in this study will be entirely anonymous. There are no physical, social, or legal risks to participating in this study. Given that a portion of this study may ask you to describe the emotions and intellectual meaning you make of the Indiana A-F grading system and your school's recent letter grades, it is possible that some participants may feel uncomfortable sharing personal thoughts about the way they view their own ability to lead a school. During our interviews, you are entirely free to state that you would prefer not to answer a particular question or discuss a particular topic.

Upon completion of all of our conversations, you will receive a \$25 VISA gift card. There is no cost to you participating in this study other than the time you share with me during our conversations.

Should you have any questions about this research study, do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached at the address at the top of this letter, or via cell phone at 812/270-0443. For questions about your rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or to offer input, please contact the IU Human Subjects Office at 800-696-2949 or at irb@iu.edu.

Respectfully,

Paul O. Swanson, Principal
Thomas Jefferson Elementary School
Falls Church, Virginia

APPENDIX B:
Initial Telephone Conversation/Participant Recruitment Protocol

Interviewee: _____

Interviewee Title: _____

Interviewee School: _____

Date and Time: _____

Telephone Meeting Agenda

- I. Introduction of researcher
- II. Overview of study objectives/research questions
 - i. Bandura's definition of self-efficacy (people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives)
- III. Overview of participant requirements and benefits (including VISA gift card)
- IV. Explanation of ethical protections for participants
- V. Request for participation
- VI. Next steps
 - a. Overview of next phone conversation (participant background)
 - b. Schedule next phone conversation
 - c. Schedule face to face interview

APPENDIX D:
Interview #1: Videoconference Interview/Participant Background Protocol

Interviewee: _____

Interviewee Title: _____

Interviewee School: _____

Date and Time: _____

Interview Agenda:

The purpose of this interview is to secure largely factual information about the participant's professional and personal background, current school context, and general thoughts about the Indiana A-F school grading system.

- I. Introduction, confirmation of participant agreement, review of ethical protections for participants
- II. Participant Background
 - a. Tell me about where you grew up and where you went to school
 - b. What was school like for you overall?
 - c. How did your school experience shape your desire to become an educator?
 - d. Tell me how you came to be a principal.
 - i. How many years have you been an elementary school teacher?
 - ii. How many years have you been a principal?
 - iii. How many years have you been in your current role?
 - iv. Where did you do your leadership preparation?
 - v. What made you want to become a principal?
 - vi. Were there any key moments or experiences that you feel steered you towards a career as a school principal?
 - vii. Were you "tapped" by anyone or encouraged by anyone to become a school principal?
 - e. How has the principalship changed since you began?
 - i. If you had the choice of doing it all over again, would you still choose to be a principal?
- III. Current School Context
 - a. What is your vision for this school?
 - b. Tell me a little about the context of your current school
 - i. What is your school's current enrollment?
 - ii. What are the demographics of your students and teachers?

- iii. What percentage of your school's students qualify for free and reduced lunch?
 - iv. What is the geographic location of your school? Rural? Urban? Suburban?
- IV. Initial Thoughts Surrounding Indiana's A-F School Grading System
 - a. What are your general thoughts about the Indiana A-F school grading system?
 - b. What do you see as some of the greatest rewards of your current job?
 - i. Is there a connection between these rewards and the A-F system?
 - ii. How does the A-F system impact the attainability of these rewards?
 - iii. Imagine your school would get an A next year. How would that impact your thinking about the extent to which your job is rewarding?
 - c. What do you see as some of the greatest challenges of your current job?
 - i. Is there a connection between these challenges and the A-F system?
 - ii. How does the A-F system impact the likelihood of experiencing these challenges?
 - iii. Imagine your school would get an F next year. How would that impact your thinking about the extent to which your job is challenging?
- V. Leadership
 - a. What do you think it means to be an effective educational leader at the building level context?
 - b. Thinking in broader terms, what do you think it means to be an effective educational leader in a larger, more state or national context?
- VI. Next steps
 - a. Overview of face to face interview questions
 - b. Confirm date of face to face interview

**APPENDIX E:
Videoconference Interview #2: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

Interviewee: _____

Interviewee Title: _____

Interviewee School: _____

Location of Interview: _____

Date and Time: _____

Interview Agenda:

The purpose of this interview is to explore the participant's views of research question #2 and its subsidiary issues: How do elementary school principals view the Indiana school letter grading system?

- I. Thank you and review of research objectives
- II. Review of consent and permission to audio record
- III. Professional Experience With A-F System
 - a. When do you recall first learning of the Indiana A-F school grading system?
 - b. What was your initial understanding of the purpose of the A-F system?
 - c. How has that initial understanding changed?
 - d. What have been your experiences with the A-F system in this building?
 - i. Any emotional reactions to the system?
 - ii. Any change in curriculum/professional development/instruction/personnel/scheduling in response to the A-F system?
 - iii. How have those experiences been different than experiences you have had in other buildings?
- IV. Making Meaning Of The A-F System
 - a. When you consider the A-F school grading system, to what extent do you think of that system in terms that are positive? Negative? Neutral? All or some of the above?
 - b. In your view, how much does the system lead to a change in quality of Indiana schools?
 - c. What does your school's grade mean to you?

- i. In what ways is the grade a source of pride? Shame? Pressure? Achievement?
 - ii. How much do you and your staff discuss the grade? How much does it impact your school goals, instructional plans, etc...
 - iii. To what extent do you consider a “good grade” a professional responsibility?
 - iv. In what ways does your staff respond to the school grade?
 - v. What kind of response does your community have to the grade? Pride? Shame? Apathy?
 - vi. How much do you and your staff talk about the letter grade?
- V. Participant Influence Over Letter Grade
 - a. How much influence do you feel like you personally have on your school’s A-F letter grade?
 - i. How easy or hard is it to control your school’s grade?
 - b. What are the things you have done to try to improve your grade?
 - c. How much of your school’s letter grade is a result of your work?
 - d. To what extent do you think your school’s grade is impacted by people or factors beyond you and your work? How do you feel about this? (i.e. does the participant express gratitude/frustration at a letter grade being determined in part by influences beyond his/her work?)
 - e. What are the chances that the school’s letter grade would change if you left the school?
- VI. Connection Between School Grade And Overall Quality
 - a. To what extent do you think your school’s most recent letter grade matches your school’s overall quality?
 - b. To what extent do you think your school’s most recent letter grade matches your own overall quality as a school principal?
 - c. How much control do you feel you have over your school’s overall quality?
- VII. Next interview

**APPENDIX F:
Videoconference Interview #3: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

Interviewee: _____

Interviewee Title: _____

Interviewee School: _____

Location of Interview: _____

Date and Time: _____

Interview Agenda: The purpose of this interview is to explore the participant's thoughts on research question #2 and its subsidiary issues: How does the letter grading system influence elementary principals' self-efficacy?

- I. Thank you and review of research objectives
- II. Review of consent and permission to audio record
- III. Participant Self-Efficacy
 - a. How much influence do you feel like you personally have on your school's overall quality?
 - i. How easy or hard is it to control your school's overall quality?
 - ii. To what extent do you see yourself as having more or less control over your school's grade than do the principals of other schools?
 - b. On balance, how effective do you see yourself as an elementary school principal?
 - i. How would you compare your level of effectiveness to principals whose school grade is better than your school's? Worse than your school's?
 - ii. How effective have you been in bringing positive cultural changes to your school?
 - iii. How effective have you been in producing high quality student achievement?
 - iv. How effective have you been at cultivating and maintaining positive relationships with parents and teachers?
 - v. How effective have you been at making a positive contribution at the district level?

- vi. To what extent do you feel your overall effectiveness as an elementary school principal as changed in recent years?
 - 1. To what do you attribute this change in the way you view your own effectiveness (if applicable)?
 - 2. To what extent has this change about your view of your overall effectiveness been connected to the A-F system?
 - c. What makes an elementary principal effective and how do you know if you are being effective?
 - d. Does the letter grade your school receives reflect the quality of the school year you and your staff just had?
 - e. Setting aside external factors such as financial resources, parent support, and the like, to what extent do you feel that you have the personal and professional abilities to lead your school and to create the kind of school you want to create?
 - f. Where does this sense of your ability level come from? i.e. What is your rationale for answering the above question?
 - g. How do you imagine you would perform as a principal in a school whose free and reduced rate was very different than the school you currently lead?
 - i. Does this suggest that you believe the school's letter grade is a reflection of the school's quality or the student demographic?
- IV. Influence of A-F System
- a. In what ways do you think that the Indiana A-F school grading system has impacted your work as a school principal?
 - b. To what extent do you think the Indiana A-F school grading system has an influence of how you wish to spend the remainder of your career? Does it make you more likely to change positions? Less likely? How might it impact your desire to enter into central office positions?
 - c. When you think back to the beginning of your administrative career, do you think your capability to be successful in the principalship have changed? If your feelings have changed, how much of that change do you feel is attributable to the Indiana A-F school grading system?
- V. Next Interview

**APPENDIX G:
Videoconference Interview #4: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

Interviewee: _____

Interviewee Title: _____

Interviewee School: _____

Location of Interview: _____

Date and Time: _____

Interview Agenda: The purpose of this interview is to explore the participant's thoughts on research question #3 and its subsidiary issues: "How do principals of schools whose letter grade changes at least one letter grade (i.e. moving from a B to a C, an F to a D, etc...) experience any change in their levels of self-efficacy?"

- I. Thank you and review of research objectives
- II. Review of consent and permission to audio record
- III. Participant Reaction to Recent School Grade And Change From Previous Year
 - a. Tell me about your most recent letter grade.
 - i. How did you learn about the grade?
 - ii. How did your staff react?
 - iii. How did the community react?
 - iv. How did the superintendent react?
 - v. What were your thoughts about it?
 - b. How did you feel when you learned when you learned of your schools most recent letter grade?
 - i. What are some things that lead you to feel this way? (Community response? Central office response? Increased/decreased support from staff?)
 - c. What changes/responses, if any, are you planning to make due to this letter grade?
 - d. How does your reaction to letter grades differ from your reaction to accountability systems of the past that did not involve letter grades?
- IV. School Letter Grade And Participant View Of Self

- a. During recent years, your school's letter grade has changed at least one grade. To what do you attribute this change to? In what ways do you think this change is reflective of your leadership? (if applicable)
 - i. If your leadership style has changed, how much of this change is caused by the A-F letter grading system?
- b. Thinking about your letter grade and its change from last year, to what extent do you feel differently about yourself as a leader?
 - i. How would you describe your view of your overall effectiveness this year compared to how you felt about your effectiveness in previous years?
- c. To what extent do you think your school's most recent letter grade matches your overall quality as a school principal?
 - i. In what ways does this change in letter grade impact how likely it is you could be hired as a principal at a different school?
 - ii. How would you compare your effectiveness this year to your effectiveness last year?
 - iii. In what ways does this grade change your leadership style?
 - iv. In what ways does your school's letter grade reflect how effective you could be at another school?
 - v. In what ways do your school's letter grades impact your career hopes and plans?
- d. What advice would you give to leaders entering the school principal profession now?
 - i. What advice would you give them that is specifically related to the A-F system?

V. Interview conclusion

- a. Overview of next steps
- b. Confirm address to which interview transcript should be sent
- c. VISA gift card

Paul O. Swanson

EDUCATION

Doctorate in Educational Leadership, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 2020

- Dissertation: Nothing and Everything: The Relationship of the Indiana A-F School Grading System and Principal Self-Efficacy in Elementary Principals
- Dr. Suzanne Eckes, Dissertation Chair
- Minor in SPEA Public Policy

Master of Science Degree, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, Indiana, 1999

- Major in Secondary Education

Bachelor of Arts Degree, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1989

- Major in English
- Minor in Psychology

EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

Principal, Thomas Jefferson Elementary School, Falls Church City Public Schools, Falls Church, Virginia, 2016-present

- Used teacher leaders to orchestrate school improvement plans, focusing on math performance among English language learners
- Implemented school-wide PBIS model to recognize and reward positive student performance
- Focus on visually-accessible classroom to enhance learning for special education students and English language learners
- Created professional development schedule on early release days throughout school year
- Created visual elements of school's Primary Years Program (K-5 IB framework) in hallways and classrooms
- Held "Chalk Chats," monthly town halls with parent community to discuss issues of importance to community and school

Principal, West Elementary School, MSD of Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, Indiana, 2010-2016

- Initiated "Tomorrow Starts Today" program, addressing post-secondary education possibilities for students and planning for parents; Took 5th grade students to various southwest Indiana college and universities for campus tours and admissions lectures
- Implemented PBIS student behavior model titled "SWIM to Success," resulting in significant reduction in discipline problems and office referrals
- Partnered with SABIC, a large local plastics business, to create a mentor program matching high-needs, at-risk students with professional role models
- Began chess program for 2nd through 5th grade students

Principal, Hedges Central Elementary School, MSD of Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, Indiana, 2009-2010

- Oversaw closure of school building due to financial crisis and organized student field trips to the schools they would attend next year.
- Revamped after-school tutoring program to target at-risk students and focus school curriculum on ISTEP problem-solving areas

- Improved school-parent relationships and staff morale through "Catch Them Doing It Right" initiative that seeks out student and staff achievements to praise

High School English Teacher, Mount Vernon Senior High School, MSD of Mount Vernon, Mount Vernon, Indiana, 1993-2009

- Secondary English/Literature/Composition Teacher
- Member, School Improvement Team, 2002-2009; helped to coordinate school's ESEA and Indiana public law 221 goals and plan creation/implementation.
- Chairperson, Free Voluntary Reading Committee, 2004: briefed and successfully campaigned faculty on merits of reading program for the 2004-2005 school year

PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES AND TRAININGS

School-University Research Network, William and Mary University, Williamsburg, Virginia, 2018-2020

- Two-year program comprised of principals in Virginia and William and Mary faculty
- Focus on school improvement through John Hattie's "Visible Learning" and collective efficacy

Model Schools National Conference, National Harbor, Maryland, 2019

- Breakout sessions and mainstage speakers on school improvement models with focus on at-risk learners

Expediting Reading Comprehension For English Language Learners Conference, Charlottesville, Virginia, 2018

- Building reading fluency and expanded vocabulary among English language learners

Performance Matters Student Data Systems, 2019

- Using student data to identify and track student progress
- Instrumental in data analysis to steer school improvement goals

COMMUNITY SERVICE AND VOLUNTEER POSITIONS

Board of Directors, Alexandrian Public Library, 2013-2016

Board of Directors, Family Matters of Posey County, 2012-2016

Volunteer, At The Cross Mission/Food Pantry, Mount Vernon, Indiana 2011-2016

President, National Education Association of Mount Vernon, 2002-2006

HONORS AND RECOGNITION

Lilly Teacher Creativity Grant, "In The Footsteps Of William Shakespeare," 2007

- Received \$7,000 grant to travel to England and visit Shakespeare-related sites

National Endowment for the Humanities Grant, "Shakespeare In Ashland," 1996

- One of 25 teachers in nation to be selected for month-long seminar in Ashland, Oregon to study the teaching of Shakespeare with Southern Oregon University and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

REFERENCES

Supplied upon request