

North Carolina Teacher Perceptions of School Turnaround Efforts

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13 May 2013

Abstract

This exploratory pilot study utilizes in-depth interviews to gain baseline information in anticipation of a larger, mixed methods study examining North Carolina teacher perceptions of school turnaround efforts. Results of the pilot study indicate that teachers do in fact feel conflicting signals, complain of insufficient planning time, intervention knowledge gaps and burdensome administrative work associated with school turnaround efforts. Despite certain negative feedback, the pilot study teachers indicated an interest in receiving help and bettering their practice as educators. Future research should work to expand this research by implementing large scale survey methodologies and incorporating analysis of school principal management and communication strategies.

Table of Contents

Background.....	1
Title 1, Part A.....	1
TALAS.....	1
Turnaround Models.....	2
School Improvement Grants.....	4
Overlap between Title 1, TALAS and SIG.....	5
Theoretical Underpinnings.....	6
Methodology.....	8
Subject Selection.....	9
Selection Criteria.....	9
County Characteristics.....	9
Pilot Interviewee Profiles.....	10
Findings.....	10
Intervention Knowledge Gap.....	10
Mixed Signals.....	12
Burden of Administrative Tasks.....	13
Insufficient Planning Time.....	14
Do Teachers Want Assistance?.....	14
Study Limitations.....	15
Modification and Direction for Future Research.....	16
Interviews.....	16
Changes to Interview Instrument.....	16
Expanding to a Mixed Methodology.....	17
Execution Considerations: Timeline and Cost Factors.....	18
Bibliography.....	19

Appendices

Inherent Logic Model of the Research Question.....	21
Informed Consent.....	22
Interview Instrument.....	24
Teacher Interview Request Letter.....	27
Principal/District Permission Letter.....	28
Demographic Questionnaire.....	29
Suggested Timeline for 2013-14 Implementation.....	30

Background on Selected School Turnaround Programs

Title I, Part A

Title I, Part A funding is money designated from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to improve educational outcomes for low-income students. The federal government grants Title I money to schools based on the percentage of students in poverty at the school. Title I is designed to support state and local school reform efforts to reinforce and amplify efforts to improve teaching and learning for those students farthest from meeting state standards. Schools with poverty rates below 40 percent, and those choosing not to operate a school-wide program, offer "targeted assistance programs" in which the school identifies students who are failing, or most at risk of failing, then designs an instructional program to meet the needs of those students. Schools with poverty rates above 40 percent can choose to operate a "school-wide" program. School-wide programs do not identify specific students for Title 1 programming. Instead, schools upgrade the programming to the entire student population.

Both school-wide and targeted assistance programs must be based on effective means of improving student achievement and include strategies to support parental involvement. Title I, Part A supports a variety of personnel and activities including teachers, teacher assistants, professional development, parent involvement, computer labs, and preschool programs. Although Title I funding is tied directly to school reform efforts and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, as of 2008, "no large district or state had yet been willing to incur the loss of Title I revenue in order to opt out of some of NCLB's requirements."¹ Under the Obama administration, states can apply for NCLB waivers releasing them from certain requirements. Due to the NCLB waiver North Carolina received, beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are no longer required to identify Title I schools for improvement, corrective action, and restructuring.

Title 1 includes two types of school monitoring: Compliance Monitoring and Program Quality Reviews. Compliance Monitoring is the more formal of the two and is completely compliance driven. Program Quality Reviews are less formal and designed to see how well the school is meeting improvement. During Program Quality Reviews, Title 1 monitors can interview and observe teachers and offer feedback on how they are doing.

Turning Around North Carolina's Lowest-Achieving Schools (TALAS)

North Carolina's TALAS initiative operates out of the Office of District and School Transformation at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI). It targets the bottom 5 percent of elementary, middle and high schools, all of

¹ Gordon, Nora. 2008. Pp 309

which have performance composites below 60 percent (based on 2009-10 data). The performance composite score for a school is the proportion of students' scores on state end-of course and end-of-grade assessments that are at or above proficiency. TALAS also targets high schools with graduation rates below 60 percent. A total of 118 schools met one of these two criteria. Additionally, District and School Transformation works with the lowest 10 percent of districts in the state. As part of the Race to the Top grant received from the U.S. Department of Education, North Carolina agreed to shift to the federal school turnaround models.

Turnaround Models

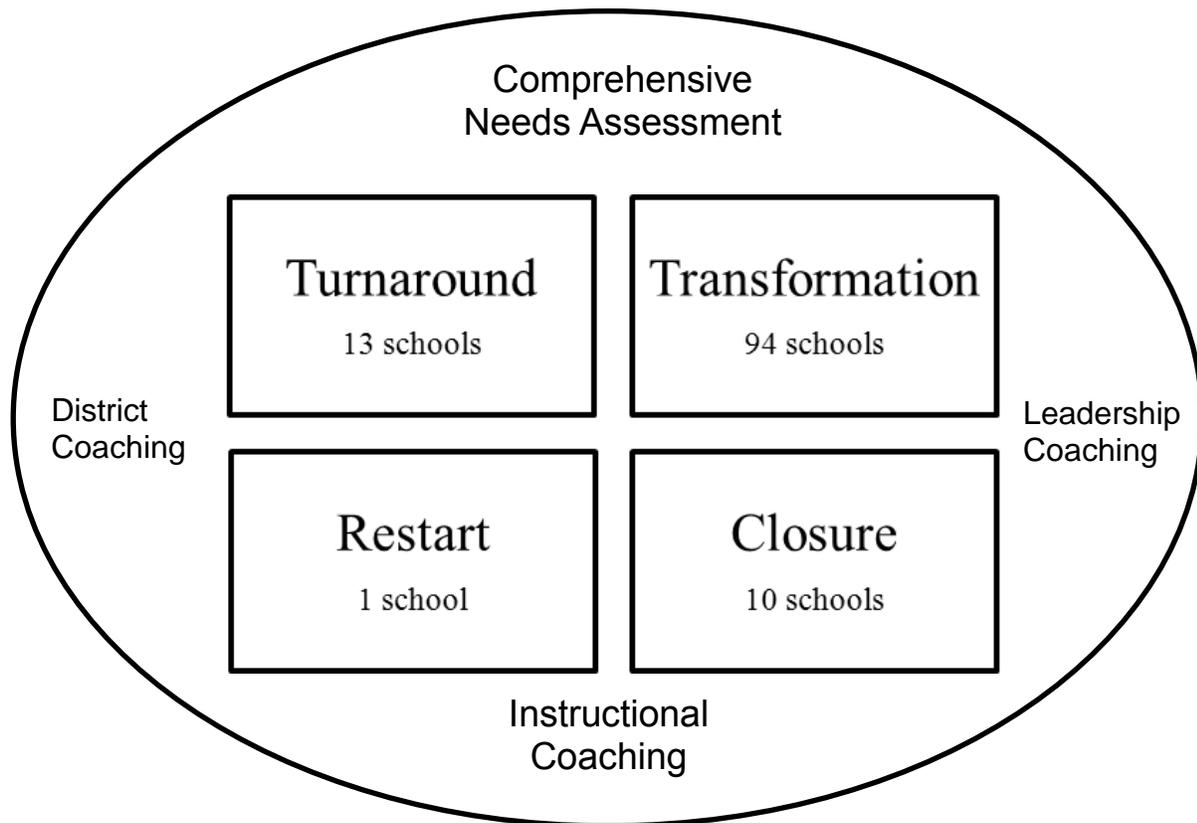
- **Turnaround model:** Replace the principal and rehire no more than 50 percent of the staff. Grant the principal sufficient operational flexibility (including in staffing, calendars/time, and budgeting) to implement a comprehensive approach to substantially improve student outcomes.
- **Restart model:** Convert a school, or close and reopen it under a charter school operator, a charter management organization, or an education management organization that has been selected through a rigorous review process.
- **School closure:** Close a school and enroll the students who attended that school in other higher achieving schools in the LEA.
- **Transformation model:** Implement each of the following strategies: (1) replace the principal and take steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness; (2) institute comprehensive instructional reforms; (3) increase learning time and create community-oriented schools; and (4) provide operational flexibility and sustained support.²

To date, all schools participating in the TALAS initiative have also completed a Comprehensive Needs Assessment. These assessments involve the collection and analysis of data to assess schools' processes, procedures, and instructional practices and their impact on student learning.³

² U.S. Department of Education. 3 December 2009

³ JLEOC Report. January 13 2013. Pp 28.

Breakdown of school turnaround models chosen by TALAS schools:



*Report to the Joint Legislative Committee on Education Oversight, 2011-2012 School Year

The Comprehensive Needs Assessment creates a framework which:

- provides districts and schools with a clear view of their strengths, areas for improvement, challenges, and successes;
- enables a systematic review of practices, processes, and systems within a school district;
- assists district and school leadership in determining needs, examining their nature and causes, and setting priorities for future action;
- guides the development of a meaningful district or school plan and suggests benchmarks for evaluation; and
- most importantly, it is a cornerstone of continuous improvement, ensuring the best possible outcomes for all students.⁴

Schools that participate in a Comprehensive Needs Assessment receive an overview of the entire Comprehensive Needs Assessment process during an orientation conducted by an Instructional Review Coach. In addition to the

⁴ Department of Public Instruction website.

information provided to LEAs by the Comprehensive Needs Assessment, District and School Transformation also supports schools by providing two types of coaches: School Transformation Coaches and Instructional Coaches. School Transformation Coaches work primarily with school and district leadership to build capacity for transformation. The Instructional Coaches are of greater interest to this report as they deal directly with classroom teachers. Instructional Coaches have had successful classroom experiences and are familiar with successful teaching practices and pedagogy. The responsibilities of the Instructional Coaches include:

- providing on-site, job-embedded professional development;
- leading change to advance student achievement;
- modeling classroom instructional strategies;
- communicating with school and district leadership, District and School Transformation Coaches, as well as NCDPI staff; and
- building capacity and developing structures that support sustainable improvement and change.⁵

School Improvement Grants (SIG)

School Improvement Grants (SIGs) are federal grants to State Education Agencies (SEAs), who then subcontract out the grants to LEAs to use in specific low-performing schools within an LEA. In 2009, SIGs were funded nationwide by a \$546.6 million dollar appropriation as well as an addition \$3 billion in ARRA funding.⁶ Similar to the TALAS program, in order to receive SIG funding, schools must commit to implementing one of the four U.S. Department of Education recognized school improvement models. Unlike the TALAS program, which automatically enrolls schools meeting its criteria, SIG is a competitive grant program, meaning that schools must decide to apply for SIG funding, and then write a successful grant application to win the funding.

As with TALAS, the transformation model tends to be the most popular in North Carolina schools. Of the 24 North Carolina schools receiving SIG funding in 2010, 16 chose the transformation model, 6 chose the turnaround model, 1 chose restart and 1 chose school closure. In 2011, 17 schools received SIG funding and 16 of those schools chose the transformation model (1 chose the turnaround model). North Carolina received over \$113 million dollars in SIG funding between 2010-2012. LEAs must prioritize SIG funding for its “persistently lowest achieving” schools based on the following criteria:

- **Tier I:** Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring:

⁵ JLEOC Report. January 13 2013. DPI. Pp 28.

⁶ U.S. Department of Education. 3 December 2009

- Among the lowest-achieving five percent of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in the state based on school test score data, or;
 - Is a high school with a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) less than 60 percent over a number of years;
- **Tier II:** Any secondary school eligible for, but not receiving Title I funds:
 - Among the lowest-achieving five percent of secondary schools in the State eligible for, but do not receive, Title I funds; or
 - Is a high school with a graduation rate as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 200.19(b) less than 60 percent over a number of years.
- **Tier III:** Any Title I school in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring meeting exact criteria determined by the SEA which could include:
 - Schools with low absolute performance but high growth rates over a number years, or;
 - The bottom 6–10 percent of Title I schools in improvement, corrective action, or restructuring.⁷

Several key, and often missed, elements of successful SIG applications include a commitment to “increased learning time for all students and an emphasis on financial incentives, increased opportunities for promotion and career growth, and more flexible work conditions to recruit and retain staff”⁸ The emphasis on increased learning time can also include instructional teams’ focus on and use of data to improve student performance.

Overlap Between Title 1, TALAS, and SIG

All three programs differ somewhat in implementation, but all work towards the same goal: improving performance of currently underperforming schools in the State of North Carolina. As one might expect, a number of schools in the state participate in all three programs. Theoretically, the three programs could complement one another and work together to improve low performing schools with TALAS providing support, SIG providing additional funding and Title 1 acting as a monitoring agent.

All three programs work closely with school and district administrators, but this study is more interested in how the requirements of these programs translate down to individual classroom teachers. Due to the complicated nature of these programs individually, this study posits that the messages coming to teachers are complicated at best and conflicting at the worst. It is also possible that teachers are

⁷ U.S. Department of Education. 3 December 2009

⁸ SIGnificant Points. 23 March, 2011.

completely unaware of the various reform efforts in their buildings, instead simply completing the paperwork and reforms handed to them by their administrations.

Theoretical Underpinnings

With so many different programs present in individual schools, teachers might feel a sense of conflicting expectations or mixed signals originating from the various programs. Anecdotally, teachers have expressed to the NCDPI the opinion that they receive too much help. To date, little published research deals specifically with the conflicting signals faced by American educators due to myriad state and federal reforms. Such reform efforts compound the already hectic society in which educators and principals live. Such a state is not unique to education. The human service sector more generally functions in a pluralistic society where many interest groups have a stake in the sector's operations.⁹ To grasp the full extent to which educators feel conflicting signals from school turnaround efforts, any research must incorporate actual teacher perceptions of the turnaround efforts.

Several studies utilize survey data to study educator or principal perceptions on a variety of topics including teacher perceptions of principal expectations and school improvement more generally.¹⁰ In-depth interviews can function as an effective precursor to surveys as they provide an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the field and refine potential survey questions.¹¹ Additionally, in-depth interviews allow the participants to voice their perceptions freely, without any restrictions or norms set by the researcher. This pilot study used in-depth interviews with selected teachers to fill a significant knowledge gap, and help education policymakers and administrators better understand how to positively impact teachers in their classrooms.

During the course of the pilot study, the researcher came to understand that answering the question about teacher perceptions of school turnaround efforts required more research into another factor of the equation: school principals. How a teacher perceives school turnaround efforts is likely influenced by communication from the building level principal. The following hypothesis developed as a result of the pilot study.

The U.S. Department of Education or State of North Carolina develop various school turnaround efforts and transmit them to LEAs. The principal receives information concerning specific turnaround efforts from district administrators or the state. The principal then decides how to filter information to teachers concerning the programs, which impacts teacher perceptions of the programs. Theoretically, teacher perceptions of school turnaround efforts could impact the implementation of turnaround programs. School turnaround efforts are designed to eventually impact

⁹ Morehouse, Anne Shephard.

¹⁰ Kiranh 2013, Barfield 2011, Akert, 2009

¹¹ Boyce, Carolyn. pp.3

student academic outcomes as long as If the turnaround models have been tested and found to improve student outcomes, one can reasonably assume that principals and teachers who implement turnaround efforts with more fidelity should see greater results in student outcomes. The reverse should also be true.

Communication and management strategies involved in turning around a low performing school are somewhat analogous to creating organizational change in the private business sector. In the metaphor, the school principal plays the role of the middle manager, who supervises and directs staff members (teachers). The school itself is the organization. A low performing school, subject to multiple turnaround efforts, works perfectly as an organization needing to reconsider its practices in order to better outcomes for its customers (students in this case). The same types of organizational reflection recommended by organizational communication experts fit well in the education sphere.

Facilitating change in any organization requires a certain level of organizational readiness. Organizational readiness is a multi-faceted and leveled construct involving each member of the organization's value of the change, along with their willingness and ability to implement it.¹² Managers play a key role in developing and assessing organizational readiness for their specific organization. Managers must identify the organizational capabilities of their organization by reviewing previous organization performance and the potential for future accomplishments by the organization in its current state.¹³ Similarly, principals must know what their teachers are realistically capable of doing to improve student outcomes. A key component to success in changing an organization is consistent change messaging from leadership.¹⁴ The principal is critical in communicating consistent change messaging to the rest of the staff.

Organizational communication researchers have identified five necessary elements to change messaging. Those elements are: discrepancy, efficacy, appropriateness, principal support and personal valence.¹⁵ Discrepancy refers to whether or not individuals believe the organization needs to change. The principal must demonstrate to the staff how the school performance differs from (in this case, is much lower than) the end objective.¹⁶ Efficacy addresses staff confidence in their ability to succeed.¹⁷ If teachers feel like they will fail under the new changes, it is likely they will resist anything new. Appropriateness, whether or not individuals feel the proposed change is the best alternative,¹⁸ applies less in the school metaphor because the specific turnaround efforts addressed in this paper are prescriptive. With the exception of Title I, principals and teachers have very little say in whether or not their school participates or which programs get implemented. However, the

¹² Weiner. 2009.

¹³ Cohen, pp.262-63. 2008.

¹⁴ Armenakis 2002.

¹⁵ Armenakis, 1999.

¹⁶ Katz and Kahn, 1978

¹⁷ Bandura, 1986

¹⁸ Armenakis, 2002

principal's ability to convince the staff of the appropriateness of the change still matters. If teachers feel the proposed turnaround efforts are not appropriate solutions to the problems faced by the school, they are unlikely to implement those changes with great fidelity.

The fourth element directly speaks to principals and managers: change must be continually supported to become fully institutionalized. Many employees might wait to fully support a change until they see actual support coming down from the school administration in the form of training, time or resources.¹⁹ Finally, principals must understand that individuals in the organization will be interested in how the proposed changes personally benefit them. If the changes threaten a person's self-interest, that person will be more likely to resist the change.²⁰ With these elements in mind, principals must consistently communicate change messages to staff members in order to see the changes through to success. Principals who effectively invest their staff in school turnaround efforts should see the greatest results in terms of student outcomes.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study to determine how a specific set of elementary teachers in North Carolina view the effects of various state and federal turnaround efforts on their teaching. Due to its exploratory nature, the study intentionally asked broad questions to gain a firmer understanding of this aspect of school reform. The sections following the pilot study results provide next steps for future researchers and suggestions for delving more deeply into the topic.

The specific research question this pilot study hopes to address is:

"How do elementary teachers perceive the effects of multiple school turnaround efforts on their ability to effectively teach their students?"

Answering this question will help provide important insight to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction as to the effectiveness of state and federal school turnaround efforts. To date, no other qualitative research has been done to cover this aspect of school reform.

After identifying potential participants, the researcher contacted school level principals and research departments where appropriate, for permission to interview teachers. With permission from the principal or district the researcher contacted individual teachers. If a teacher agreed to be interviewed, the researcher conducted a one-on-one interview at the participant's school or over the phone. If teachers declined participation, they were thanked for their time and not contacted further.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Clark et al 1996

The school level principals were not informed which teachers participated, nor were they given information on the teachers' responses.

During the interview, the respondent was asked a series of open-ended questions organized into these content areas: awareness of school reform efforts, administrative effects of reform efforts, reform efforts impacting teaching, teacher buy-in, and conflicting signals.²¹ Participants also gave data on their demographics.²² The interviews were audio taped for later analysis. Interviews lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes.

Subject Selection

Initially, the sample was supposed to consist of 18-20 elementary (4th and 5th grade) teachers in North Carolina. Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to contact the ideal number of teachers due to several factors including principal or district unwillingness to allow the researcher into school buildings. Once these impediments to research became clear, the researcher shifted methods and instead used two interviews from one rural county in North Carolina as pilot interviews. Future researchers may use the preliminary findings from these pilot interviews as a starting point for their own research.

Selection Criteria

Teachers were chosen from a set of nine elementary schools meeting all of the following selection criteria:

- Located in North Carolina.
- Include elementary students in grades 3-5 because that is when North Carolina begins mandatory state testing for elementary students, although only 4th and 5th grade teachers were interviewed.
- Qualify for school-wide Title I programming.
- Qualify for the NC DPI TALAS initiative.
- Receive School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding.

County Characteristics

Both interviews originate in the same county, hereafter referred to as "Blue County."²³ The county contains 55,954 residents, 57.3 percent of which self-identify as African American, and 40.7 percent Caucasian, compared to 22 percent and 72.1 percent in North Carolina as a whole.²⁴ Approximately 22.6 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, compared to 16.1 percent in North Carolina generally.

²¹ To review the interview instrument, please see Appendix 3.

²² The demographic questionnaire is in Appendix 6.

²³ County name has been changed to protect subject anonymity.

²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau 2013

The median income for Blue County is \$34,198, which is significantly lower than the median income of \$46,291 in North Carolina.²⁵

Pilot Interviewee Profiles

The findings section examines the results of pilot interviews with two teachers: Laura and Akela.²⁶ Laura is a 47-year-old white female 4th grade teacher. She has three years of lead teaching experience, all in Blue County. She serves on several committees, including the School Improvement Team. Akela is a 33-year-old African American female 5th grade teacher. She has 12 years of teaching experience, with six of those in Blue County.

Findings

This section highlights key findings similar to both pilot interviews. Each represents an area of note worth future study or attention. The pilot study initially hoped to understand teacher perceptions of school turnaround efforts. A few interesting trends emerged concerning school turnaround efforts including teachers' general knowledge of such efforts and mixed signals from them. Both teachers mentioned the severe burdens on their time in and out of school. Finally, the interviews revealed interesting insight into whether or not teachers want classroom assistance and if they feel they are getting any from the reform efforts currently present in Blue County.

Intervention Knowledge Gap

Perhaps the most striking finding from the pilot interviews is that neither teacher had specific knowledge of the turnaround efforts present in her school building. Laura had more knowledge of turnaround efforts as she serves on the School Improvement Team, however, even she was unable to identify SIG funding or the TALAS initiative by name. Since SIG assistance comes to schools in the form of money, instead of instructional materials or coaches, it is unsurprising that neither teacher was aware of its impact at the classroom level. TALAS, however, has greater implications for the classroom, since a major component of the program involves sending instructional coaches into the schools. In fact, according to the Director of District and School Transformation, Pat Ashley, "teachers should know [TALAS] is in the school."²⁷

In a roundabout way, both teachers did reference the TALAS Initiative; they simply did not know they were doing so. Both Laura and Akela mentioned observers coming from the NC DPI. Laura stated that she is observed approximately once per

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Names have been changed to protect respondent anonymity.

²⁷ Interview with Pat Ashley, January 17, 2013.

month, but sees the NC DPI observer in the building doing “pop-ins” approximately two to three times per month. During these “pop-in” visits, the observer rarely spends much time in any classroom and instead checks in on teachers and the school in general. Laura’s account of the NC DPI observers tracks closely with Akela’s observations.

Akela: “I’ve been visited maybe 3 or 4 times [this year], but he probably stayed maybe 2-3 minutes per time. He just kind of comes in, check and see what I’m doing, er...see what the kids are doing and kind of leaves out.”

Unlike Laura, Akela has not been selected for formal observations by the NC DPI observer. She mentions that she rarely sees the observer, and only for short bursts of time. Akela’s experiences mirror Laura’s description of the “pop-in” visits. Both Laura and Akela also indirectly referenced the TALAS initiative by acknowledging that their school was “low performing” (Laura) or “at-risk from test scores” (Akela), thus requiring attention from the NC DPI.

Both teachers seemed to agree on the idea that the classroom observations tended not to affect their classroom.

Akela: “My kids are used to him...they just kind of explain what they’re doing to him and he leaves out. Sometimes he...does the activity for a little while.”

Laura: “It doesn’t really affect my teaching. I try to go on as if no one’s here just like I would normally. I’m not going to worry too much about what they’re thinking about what I’m doing as much as I am thinking about what my students think about what I’m doing.”

Since both teachers work in school environments where observations frequently occur, their nonchalant attitudes towards classroom visitors are unsurprising. Laura did note that the DPI representatives work especially closely with the principals.

When asked about specific interventions present in their school, both Laura and Akela identified Daily Five and mClass Reading 3D. Blue County employs Daily Five, an English Language Arts strategy. The NC DPI piloted mClass Reading 3D in 2010 and expanded to more schools throughout 2011 and 2012, and then finally scaled up the program to all North Carolina elementary schools by legislative mandate for the 2013-2014 school year.²⁸ Laura also mentioned retired teachers being paid to serve as tutors in the school. Although she was not certain, she suspects these tutors are paid with Title 1 funding. Akela never mentioned Title 1 funding during the conversation. At the classroom level, Akela mentioned that she must do enrichment and enhancement for students based on test data, but could not

²⁸ Auton, Susan. August 2012

think of other examples of classroom interventions as a result of school reform efforts.

Another area deemed an “intervention” during the interviews consisted of testing requirements:

Laura: “If I’m going to do that ongoing reading assessment and I’m individualizing for Reading 3D, why am I also doing a [common] reading assessment every four weeks, and behind that a benchmark every nine weeks and an EOG reading assessment? Why is there so much assessment?”

Laura’s comments express her frustration at the amount of testing she must administer to her students. The assessments appear to be a mixture of requirements from the district and state level. In addition to the testing listed in her comment, Laura’s school also expects her to create and design ongoing formative assessments in reading. Besides pointing out the requirements for Reading 3D, Laura was not able to delineate specifically which programs required the assessments.

Mixed Signals

In addition to the three major programs included in the research, teachers must also cope with many district and school-level initiatives, as alluded to in the previous section. One could reasonably assume that some of the messages get lost in translation, and that teachers end up receiving mixed signals from the various programs. Results from the pilot interviews seem to support the mixed signals hypothesis. When asked whether or not they felt like they received mixed messages about what to do in the classroom from various reform efforts, both teachers responded affirmatively.

Laura: “You get a lot of different ideas if you have so many different people. You have the instructional coaches, peer teachers, you have DPI representatives, your principal, your assistant principal, you have so many people coming in, maybe you’re getting a lot of different ideas.”

Akela: “You don’t know what’s working and what’s not working when you have so many things going at one time. You have like five different things running at one time...so it’s a little confusing to figure out what’s working.”

Both Akela and Laura expressed how difficult they find it to keep up with so many different programs and ideas. Additionally, the presence of multiple programs, with different strategies and regulations, makes it difficult for teachers to track what

works for their students, and what is superfluous. The perceived rapid turnaround for most of these programs compounds the confusion problem.

Akela: “The problem is they’re always getting something new. Then maybe a year or so later they’ll change it. You go through all these changes, [but] they don’t last.”

Laura: “Because we’re a low performing school, there’s a tendency to just say ‘let’s just throw everything in here.’ When you have so many different things, I don’t think you can ever do justice to them.”

The rapid turnarounds accompanying many reform efforts detrimentally impact educators, who must try and keep up with the many changes and implement them at the school level.

Laura: “There are too many different ideas in too many different areas. I think there’s not enough cohesiveness in them and I think that puts a big burden on educators to try to please everyone and all the different facets of everyone coming to tell you to do this and do that.”

Although policymakers and politicians wish to create rapid change in the public education system, that desire all too often comes at the price of half-implemented programs, abandoned before they ever have a chance to reach their full potential.

Burden of Administrative Tasks

With multiple school turnaround efforts present in a school building, one might expect teachers to face additional paperwork or administrative tasks related to the turnaround efforts. Both interviewees in the pilot experienced excessive paperwork in their jobs.

Laura: “Sometimes I feel like I’m doing more like secretarial work. Paperwork, video watching, doing a lot of different strategies instead of focusing on my planning and individualizing...for my students.”

Akela: There’s always some kind of paperwork to do. Teaching now is about 20 percent teaching and the rest is paperwork.”

A few examples of the paperwork mentioned during the interviews include progress reports, parent contacts, discipline reports, records of guided reading groups, roster verification for EVAAS and detailed lesson plans. Laura explained that the lesson plan template for her school changed four times over the course of the

previous school year, but now, because the school was in improvement, teachers must write nearly scripted lesson plans and submit them every week.

Insufficient Planning Time

The paperwork burden is one of several factors contributing to the next major theme that emerged from the interviews: insufficient planning time.

Akela: “You really don’t have planning period. Every planning period, something is required of you.”

Something both Akela and Laura staunchly agreed upon was the lack of planning time during the school day. One day each per week, their school requires them to attend a Professional Learning Committee and grade level meeting, leaving only 135 total minutes of planning time for the week.

Laura: “That leaves you three days you can do planning in. It takes sometimes 2 hours to do a language arts plan...there’s no way I can do science and social studies.”

Laura notes in her comment that the extremely detailed lesson plans can take up to two hours for a language arts plan, leaving little time for teachers to plan for any other subjects or take care of administrative tasks like grading, writing formative assessments, and parent contacts. In addition to meetings during the school day, both teachers have weekly staff meetings after school where they engage in vertical team meetings or other professional activities. Both teachers spoke about how they simply cannot get all the work done during the school day and frequently stay late or bring work home with them.

Akela: “You do all this stuff at home. I know I have several things to do this weekend. Everyone says ‘it must be nice to be off at 3:30,’ but it’s impossible to be off by 3:30 if you’re a teacher...I have parents who call me at like 9 o’clock at night.”

Do Teachers Want Assistance?

Before beginning this pilot study, the researcher spoke to a DPI employee who mentioned anecdotal evidence of teachers receiving “too much help.” The implication being that the “help” was not helpful at all, which begs the question: Do teachers want assistance? Arguably, if teachers do not want assistance in their classrooms, they might be less likely to engage fully in school turnaround efforts. Conversely, if teachers really do want help in their classrooms, they would be willing to embrace programs and ideas that truly help them improve as teachers and effectively reach their students.

Findings from the pilot interviews indicate that yes, teachers do want assistance. When asked whether or not the teachers felt like they could benefit from assistance in the classroom, both responded with firm yeses.

Akela: “Um, yeah. You can always benefit from assistance.”

Laura: “If I had assistance, it would be someone to come in and help with instruction, and to work with students. That’s what I need.”

Unfortunately, the impact of the “help” coming to teachers through the programs examined in this paper falls short of the teachers’ expectations. When asked whether or not she receives help now, Akela responded that she thinks she will at some point, but currently is not getting help from turnaround efforts. As the less experienced teacher, Laura received more attention from the DPI observers and school level instructional coaches. She notes that the instructional coaches help by giving ideas for instruction and sometimes assisting with lessons. Like many beginning teachers, especially those teaching in difficult situations, Laura still feels a great deal of anxiety towards instruction:

Laura: “Because our children are struggling so much, I sometimes feel desperate to find [resources]. What could I do differently? It’s always a constant search.”

One factor in Laura’s desperation could be a shift in available professional development for teachers. Akela notes that as budgets have gotten tighter over the past few years, the opportunities for professional development have declined while professional development requirements have remained the same. She points to Teacher Academies as a specific example of a type of professional development she claims to no longer have access to due to shrinking budgets.

When asked about specific professional development opportunities, both teachers highlighted district specific programs. Laura mentioned the “Connections” program, which caters to beginning teachers with one to three years of experience. According to Akela, the county supplies the only real options for professional development.

Study Limitations

As this paper only reflects the findings of a pilot study, I must caution readers against extrapolating and applying these findings to other groups of educators in North Carolina. Two interviews are not enough to draw definitive or generalizable conclusions. As both teachers worked in the same county environment, the results may not be generalizable outside of Blue County. Additionally, it is possible that the amount of information or method of information sharing employed by the principal directly influences teacher perceptions of school turnaround efforts. The pilot study

could not answer the question of how much knowledge principals have of school turnaround efforts; or how much information suffices. Questions also exist as to how principals see the expectations of school turnaround and how, in turn, they translate those expectations to teachers. Unfortunately, the pilot study cannot make any statements concerning outside factors, including administrative leadership, that might influence teacher perceptions.

Modifications and Direction for Future Research

Based off my experiences conducting this research, future researchers hoping to extend the work of the pilot study should consider making several changes to the research design.

Interviews

Future researchers should consider conducting the teacher interviews during the fall semester. Since all the selected schools are low performing and subject to several turnaround initiatives, I discovered that many principals were unwilling to allow me into their school buildings to interview teachers. In order to gain any data applicable to larger groups of teachers, future researchers will need more extensive access to teachers. Conducting interviews in the fall would be a better strategy to reach teachers because the spring semester is significantly busier for most schools. Although a few principals still might refuse to allow in-person interviews during school, the odds of reaching teachers are better in the fall.

Expanding the pool of interviewees to principals as well as teachers would provide the NC DPI with a better understanding of how aware schools are of various reform efforts in their buildings. It is entirely possible that principals are aware of all state and federal reform efforts, but choose not to pass all the information along to their teachers. One of the interviewees mentioned that the NC DPI representatives work especially closely with principals, implying that principals have more complete information about turnaround efforts in their buildings. Researchers cannot fully understand why teachers perceive school turnaround efforts in a certain manner unless they also understand what information the school leadership shares with the teachers.

Changes to the Interview Instrument

I also recommend making several changes to the interview instrument based off the pilot interviews. Remove the questions pertaining to how observations affect classroom teaching. The teachers in the pilot agreed that their students are used to classroom observers, so they generally have no effect on the classroom environment. I suspect that many teachers in low performing schools feel the same way, as they are observed frequently. The section on conflicting signals should be expanded to understand the nuances behind the mixed signals. The interviews of

this study only indicated that teachers do feel confused, but they offer little insight into the specifics of the problem.

Expanding to a Mixed Methodology

The pilot study was designed as a preliminary research tool to glean a better understanding of teacher perceptions of school turnaround efforts. The next logical research step would be to design a survey for statewide deployment to principals. The survey would include information on the types of school turnaround efforts present in the school and how the principal shares (or does not share) that information with teachers in the building. Future researchers should make sure to use a powerful survey tool with built-in analytical capabilities such as Qualtrics to facilitate data analysis.

After analyzing principal responses, a separate teacher-centered survey could be deployed. The benefit of doing the principal survey first enables future researchers to separate out teacher responses into buckets based on principal responses. Researchers could go a step further and conduct teacher focus groups, basing the groupings off similarities or differences in the way that principals share information. The survey data would be able to more fully answer questions of principal influence on teacher perceptions.

As school turnaround efforts exist to improve student performance, the next logical evolution of the research involves including student performance or growth data and beginning to examine correlations between certain management practices and student outcomes. There are two interesting levels of analysis embedded in this approach. First, researchers could look at teacher level management of school turnaround information and its impact on student outcomes. Teacher perceptions of the turnaround efforts likely impact the fidelity with which they implement turnaround measures in the classroom. Alternatively, principal management practices, as explored in the statewide survey, provide researchers with the option to explore the management question at the school level. Inclusion of both principal and teacher management practices allows researchers to more clearly examine and establish management structure and flow within the school. I recommend developing a typology of schools based on the level and type of information flow within the school. Some examples of possible typologies include “high information” and “low information.” Developing a classification system for the schools would allow researchers to test for correlations between different school types and student academic outcomes. Future research could possibly produce best management practices for principals and teachers of low performing schools that best support student growth and achievement.

Execution Considerations: Timeline and Cost Factors²⁹

The above recommendations for future research illustrate a best-case scenario with unlimited time and resources. Time and cost considerations will likely force a few changes in the plan. Constructing and deploying the survey is both realistic and feasible. Although the NC DPI currently uses Survey Monkey as its primary survey mechanism, I recommend using more powerful software, such as Qualtrics. The NC DPI could partner with Duke University to utilize the software for the purposes of this research. Conducting in-person focus groups might not be as cost-effective. The NC DPI would likely ask teachers to travel to Raleigh for the surveys, or would have to incur the costs associated with renting spaces throughout the state and travel for DPI employees. Reasonable alternatives to in-person focus groups might include small group webinars, or cyber focus groups using Skype technology.

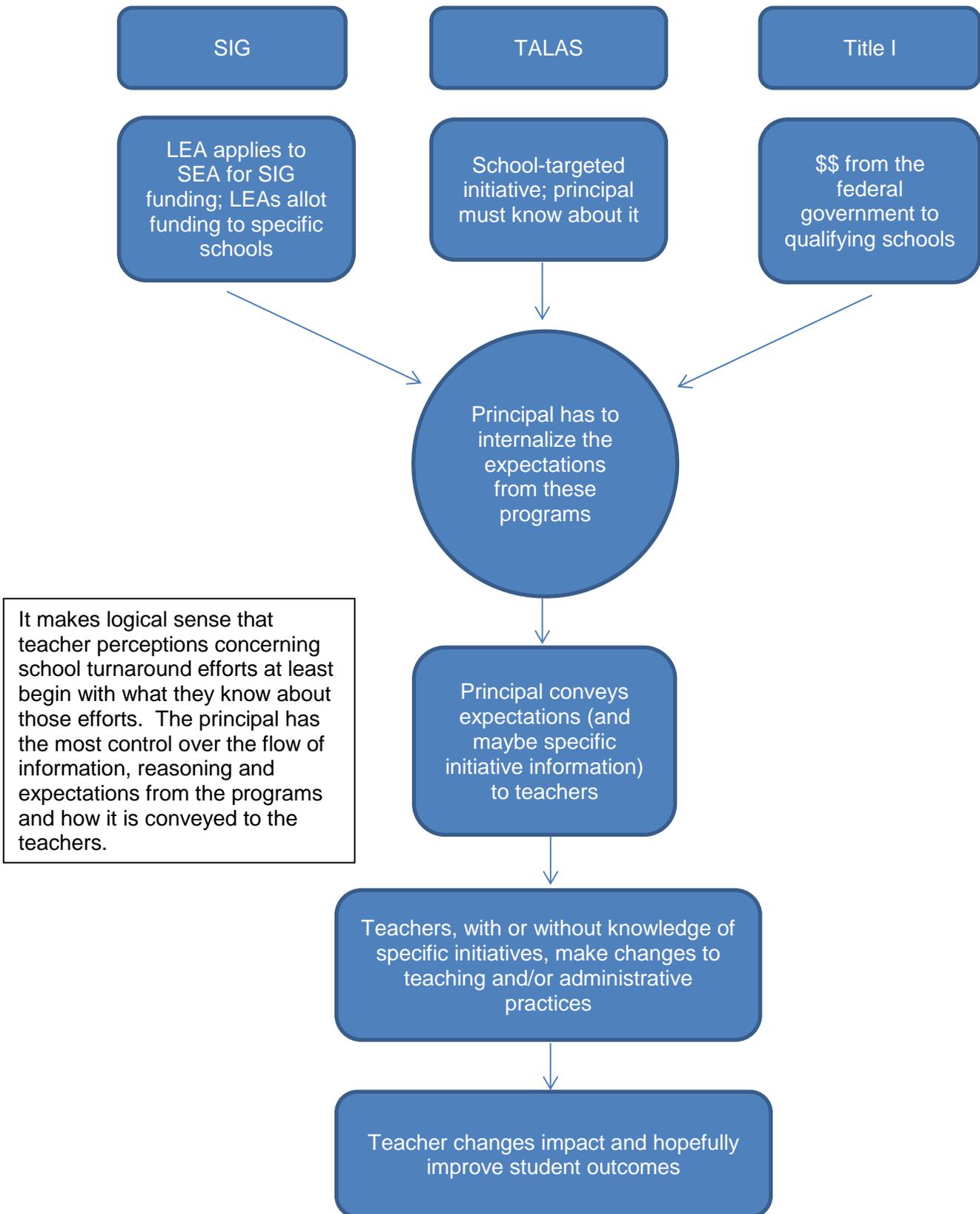
²⁹ For a preliminary timeframe for implementing this research during the 2013-2014 school year, please see Appendix 7.

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Appendix 1: Inherent Logic Model of the Research Question



Appendix 2: Teacher Perceptions of School Turnaround Efforts Consent Form

Dear Respondent:

I am asking you to be in a research study,

I am a graduate student from Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. I am asking you to participate to help me better understand what Grade 4 and 5 teachers in North Carolina think about state and federal school level reform efforts. I have asked about 20 teachers from nine different elementary schools across the state to participate in my study.

If you agree to participate in the study,

You will be asked to take part in an in-depth interview. The interview will last between 30-45 minutes. I will ask you questions about state and federal reform efforts in your school, your perspectives on how these efforts impact your classroom teaching and whether or not you find these efforts helpful. Your interview will be audio-recorded. If you do not wish to be recorded, please refrain from agreeing to participate. I will also ask you if you would like to be contacted for future interviews, to follow up on your original thoughts on this subject. Follow-up interviews could be conducted in person, online, or on the phone at your convenience.

What are the potential risks and benefits of taking part in this study?

Although I do not anticipate any of my questions to be of a personal or sensitive nature, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can choose not to answer or stop the interview at any time. Some examples of questions I will ask you include:

- Are you aware of any specific state or federally funded reform efforts in your school? Which ones?
- How often would you say your classroom is observed by someone from the state?
- Would you say the reform efforts make your teaching easier or more difficult? Why?
- Can you give me an example of assistance you are receiving from these reform efforts?
- How is this assistance helpful or unhelpful to you?

There is no direct benefit to you, but by participating you could be contributing to an effort that may help me learn more about what teachers think about school turnaround efforts in North Carolina.

Will your answers be kept private?

I will keep your answers as private as possible. This means that I will not keep your name in any of my research data. Instead, I will use a study identification number in my data and will assign you a pseudonym in my report. Duke and DPI will receive only a report. All other research data will not be shared. Further, I will keep all my research data on a password protected computer and in locked file cabinets that I only have access to.

However, even though I am taking these measures to protect your identity, I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality. Because there are very few schools that qualify for this research (only nine schools in the entire state), it is possible that a future researcher could identify you as a result of your answers.

I appreciate your participation,

Your answers will greatly inform my project, but I will not be able to compensate you for participating in this research.

The decision to be in this study is voluntary,

You can decide whether or not to participate in this study. If you decide to be in the study, you may change your mind and stop participating at any time, for any reason. If you do participate, you may skip any question or choose not to share your thoughts if the discussion makes you uncomfortable.

If you have questions,

The research staff at Duke University will be happy to answer any questions you have regarding the study. If you have questions or concerns about this study, please contact Jennifer DeNeal or Professor James Johnson at (919) 613-9310. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee at Duke University at 919-684-3030.

Please ask any questions you may have now before you decide whether to participate.

Permission for participation

I have read this consent form and have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. I **agree** to participate in this study.

Signature

Date

Appendix 3: Interview Instrument

Warm up

1. What do you think about state and federal reform efforts in North Carolina?

Intent: Warm up question to get the teacher thinking generally about school reform efforts in the state before moving specifically into reforms at the school level.

Module 1: Awareness of school reform efforts

1. Are you aware of any specific state or federally funded reform efforts in your school? Which ones?

Intent: Question trying to discern whether or not teachers even know about various reform efforts in their school.

2. How did you become aware of these reform efforts?

Intent: To understand how teachers find out about reform efforts in the school.

Module 2: Administrative effects of reform efforts

I want to understand if the reform efforts are affecting other aspects of teachers' jobs beyond actual classroom teaching that could affect their job performance. HOWEVER, I may end up having to cut this section and focus more on the actual teaching because the interviews are going to be fairly short.

1. How have your administrative responsibilities changed with school reform efforts/in the past 3 years?

Intent: General question to see if teachers' administrative responsibilities have changed as a result of school reform efforts. I asked with "the past 3 years" because teachers might not know that changes resulted from reform efforts.

2. What is the process for submitting lesson plans? How have reform efforts changed the process?

Intent: It's possible that the reform efforts require additional or different lesson plan forms than what the school requires. This question is getting at that possibility.

3. How have your professional development opportunities/requirements changed?

Intent: New reforms could come with additional professional development responsibilities. Going to professional development could take teachers out of the classroom and ultimately affect their teaching either negatively (decreased class time) or positively (gaining more effective teaching practices through PD).

4. Can you describe any meetings you have with instructional coaches from reform programs?

Intent: This question is to find out about any meetings outside of class teachers are required to attend with instructional coaches. I am not asking about classroom observations by instructional coaches.

5. Do you have extra paperwork to fill out for specific programs? Can you give me examples?

Intent: Specific question about paperwork or forms to capture anything the teacher didn't mention in the first three questions.

Module 3: Reform efforts impacting teaching

This section is supposed to get at the effects of reforms on actual classroom teaching. Examples of these interventions include: curriculum changes, classroom observations

1. Can you give me an example of classroom level interventions that happened as a result of school reform efforts?

Intent: Glean specific examples of what teachers perceive to be interventions.

2. How often would you say your classroom is observed by someone from the state?

Intent: My client believes some teachers are getting observed all the time, so I'm trying to collect some data to that end.

3. How does having an observer in your classroom affect your teaching and student learning?

Intent: Follow up question to the number of observations to find out more about why observations matter.

4. Has your curriculum changed with school reform efforts? How?

Intent: This is another possible idea I have for an intervention coming from the reform efforts. The question should get teachers to talk about new curricula they've had to implement as a result of the reforms.

5. Would you say the reform efforts make your teaching easier or more difficult? Why?

General question to understand if the reforms are overall positive or negative from the teacher's perspective.

Module 4: Teacher buy-in

I wonder if having teacher buy-in to the reform efforts has an effect on whether or not they're successful (my guess would be yes). This module is to help me understand whether or not teachers are buying in to or resenting the reforms.

1. Do you feel like you could benefit from assistance in your classroom?

Intent: Establishing whether or not the teacher feels he/she needs any help at all. A teacher who feels he/she does not need help might be related in some way to feelings of resentment towards the assistance.

2. Can you give me an example of assistance you are receiving from these reform efforts?

Intent: Another way of asking about classroom or administrative interventions, but might draw out different answers because it's framed as "assistance."

3. How is this assistance helpful or unhelpful to you?

Intent: Teachers who perceive the reforms as "helpful" could have more buy in to them.

Module 5: Conflicting signals

Intent: Module to flesh out this idea of conflicting signals potentially faced by teachers in schools with multiple reform efforts. Maybe the existence of multiple efforts creates more confusion than help.

1. Do you feel like you are receiving mixed signals as to what you're supposed to do in the classroom from different reform efforts? Can you give me an example?

Intent: Question is trying to get at conflicts between the reform efforts – ex: are instructional coaches from one program telling teachers to do something different than the requirements or expectations of another program?

Cool-down

1. Is there anything else you would like to say about reforms in your school or classroom that we haven't already talked about?

Appendix 4: Sample Teacher Interview Request Letter

March 1, 2013

Dear Ms. /Mr. (teacher name),

I am a Master's of Public Policy student at Duke University working to identify the effects of multiple school turnaround efforts on elementary teaching practices. As part of my research, I am interviewing up to 20 teachers in 9 elementary schools across North Carolina. I am doing my research with the knowledge of NC DPI and approval from the school district authorities and the school principal, but am working independently from the state. My final report will be submitted to Duke to meet my graduation requirement. I also will submit my final report to DPI in April 2013.

I would like to talk with you about your experiences with the requirements of various school reform efforts, and how the presence of these programs impacts your teaching.

I know you are busy and want to be respectful of your time. Would you be willing to meet with me at a time that is convenient for you on (date)? I expect our conversation will last between 30-45 minutes, but we can talk for as little or as long as you want to.

You should know that I intend to audio-record our conversation as a way to maintain an accurate record of our discussion. This will help me focus on what we are talking about instead of take notes. If you do not wish to be recorded, please refrain from agreeing to participate.

Because I respect your privacy, I will not include your name in my report or attach it to any data I collect about you. However, I cannot guarantee complete confidentiality of your identity given the small number of teachers I will be speaking with and the limited number of schools I am researching. Nonetheless, I will destroy all records of your name after I have written my report.

Your input would greatly inform my research and assist me in writing my final paper. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennifer DeNeal

Email: jennifer.deneal@duke.edu

Master's Candidate

Sanford School of Public Policy

Duke University

Appendix 5: Sample School Principal/School District Permission Letter

March 1, 2013

Dear Principal/School District Administrator (principal name),

I am a Master's of Public Policy student at Duke University and I am researching the effects of multiple school turnaround efforts on elementary teaching practices in North Carolina schools that receive federal Title I school-wide funding, School Improvement Grant and NC DPI District and School Transformation funding. I am doing my research with the knowledge of NC DPI and approval from the school district authorities. A final report of my findings will be submitted to Duke to meet a graduation requirement as well as to DPI.

After examining schools throughout the state, I have identified (school specific name), as a school with receiving federal Title I school-wide funding, School Improvement Grant and NC DPI District and School Transformation funding. I am writing to ask your permission to interview selected elementary teachers at (school specific name). With your permission, I would like to contact your 4th and 5th grade teachers.

I would like to set up interviews with the above teachers during the week of March 11th -15th. I would like to talk with teachers about their experiences with the requirements of various school reform efforts, and how the presence of these programs impacts their teaching. I hope to interview at least two teachers from your school. Interviews would take place before or after school or during a planning period. I will not allow the interview to impede student learning time. I expect the interview to last no longer than 30-45 minutes, but I can talk to teachers for as little or as long as they want to.

Your teachers' input would greatly inform my research and assist me in my research. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Jennifer DeNeal

Email: Jennifer.Deneal@duke.edu

Master's Candidate

Sanford School of Public Policy

Duke University

Appendix 6: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire Teacher Perceptions of School Turnaround Efforts

What is your gender?

- Male
 Female

How old are you? _____

What grade do you teach? _____

How many years have you been teaching? _____

How many years have you been teaching at this school? _____

What was the highest level of school you completed?

- Elementary school
 Some high school
 High school graduate/GED
 Some college or two-year degree
 Four-year college degree
 Graduate or professional school

Which best describes your race and ethnicity?

- Non-Hispanic White
 Non-Hispanic Black
 Hispanic or Latino
 Another race, ethnicity
 More than one race, ethnicity

Appendix 7: Suggested Timeframe for Implementation During 2013-2014

June-July 2013

Develop survey instrument

August 2013

Deploy survey to principals

October 2013

Deploy survey to teachers

January – March 2014

Conduct focus groups and follow up interviews

April – August 2014

Write up initial findings based on survey data, develop model to incorporate student growth and performance data.

September – October 2014

Collect student performance data from the 2013-014 school year and apply to model

November – December 2014

Write up and distribute final report