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## 21st-Century Learning: An Autoethnographic Study Of A Principal Opening A New Elementary School To Support Children In A Border Community

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21ST-CENTURY LEARNING: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A  
PRINCIPAL OPENING A NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO  
SUPPORT CHILDREN IN A BORDER COMMUNITY

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Doctoral Program in Educational Administration

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## **DEDICATION**

It is with respect, gratitude, honor, and love that I dedicate this dissertation to my family, friends, co-workers, and The University of Texas at El Paso. My family is my inspiration, supporting my desire to pursue higher educational goals after high school, a time of transition in so many ways. I remember my father, God rest his soul, who attended commencement ceremonies when I graduated with a high school diploma, a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree. He was proud and provided the fatherly support that I needed at that time. I remember my brother and sister congratulating me and supporting me always, encouraging me to finish what I had started and to enjoy the journey along the way. Mostly, I remember my mother, who sacrificed everything to ensure that her children would grow up to be strong and sound individuals who would one day attend college and have a career, always certain that we would work hard to give back to our own communities. She is the driving force, backbone, and strong will upon which our family has relied at every turn. There truly are no words to express my thanks!

I also dedicate this work to my friends, my grandparents, Ms. Johnson, my third-grade teacher, The University of Texas at El Paso, and most important, Dr. Penelope Espinoza, my Committee Chair and mentor, who took time to guide me and push me to realize a dream, a life-long goal: the attainment of a doctoral degree. Thank you all for caring so much!

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PRINCIPAL OPENING A NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO  
SUPPORT CHILDREN IN A BORDER COMMUNITY

By

JESSE A. SEPULVEDA

DISSERTATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

This autoethnography analyzes how my life experiences both as a student and as an educator in this community influenced my principalship and my efforts to open a new elementary school focused on college and career readiness. The aim of this dissertation was to utilize an autoethnographic method to examine the process of opening a new elementary school in a far west Texas border community. Current research, along with my own experiences, demonstrates that traditional approaches to teaching and learning no longer move students toward 21st-century learning objectives of problem solving and troubleshooting. The new school, a 21st-century learning facility in a school district that is more progressive than its neighboring districts, offers elementary students the opportunity to learn collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking, in part offered by a project-based learning approach. Three overarching goals support the school's vision: ensure academic success, provide social and emotional learning support, and infuse the methods supported by a college and career readiness approach. The significance of this self-study is that it provides a reflective method for monitoring the planning stage through the first year after opening the new school. This autoethnographic study reviews local data regarding the problem of college degree attainment, examines state-mandated data for the campus at the end of the first school year, and, most important, qualitatively documents building a new school and its culture to support student success and student potential at the elementary school level.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES .....	x
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xi
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Borderline .....	1
Life in a Border Community in West Texas .....	3
Being Schooled in Far West Texas .....	5
High School .....	7
College .....	7
Back To Cali .....	9
Public School Educator.....	10
Purpose of the Study .....	14
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Background of the Problem .....	16
Significance of the Study .....	18
Economic Impact .....	20
Community Setting .....	21
Me, WE! in a New School .....	24
The Charge From the District .....	25

Practical and Intellectual Goals .....	33
Research Questions .....	36
2. OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	38
Conceptual Ideality .....	38
Academic Success.....	41
College and Career Readiness .....	44
The Four Cs.....	49
Social-Emotional Learning .....	51
3. METHODOLOGY .....	54
What is an Autoethnography?.....	54
Why Use Autoethnography?.....	55
The Site .....	56
Data Collection .....	57
Self-Observations.....	61
Photo/Social Media Observations.....	62
Calendar Events .....	64
Meeting Minutes and Notes .....	67
Approach to Data Analysis .....	68
Limitations .....	70
4. GROUND ZERO AND MORE.....	72
Central Office Support.....	72
Centrality of Teachers.....	75
Move Mountains .....	77



Culture Matters .....	78
The Field Trip .....	80
First Day of School .....	81
Embarking on Year 1 .....	83
Social and Emotional Learning for Beginning of Year 1 .....	85
Academics for Beginning of Year 1 .....	87
College and Career Readiness for Beginning of Year 1 .....	88
Onward to Middle of Year 1 .....	92
Social and Emotional Learning for Middle of Year 1 .....	93
Academic Success for Middle of Year 1 .....	96
Middle of Year PBL.....	99
Middle of Year Data .....	100
End of the Year .....	103
End-of-the-Year Data Review .....	104
End-of-Year State Results and the Texas Education Agency.....	105
5. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS .....	114
Research Question 1 .....	115
Research Question 2 .....	119
School Business .....	120
Culture.....	120
Research Question 3 .....	123
Demographic Implications.....	123
Military Student Implications .....	125

Suggestions for Future Research .....	126
Final Reflections .....	127
Future Plans as a Principal .....	127
REFERENCES .....	133
VITA .....	142

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1 Ethnic Distribution in the Study’s Target Community, Region 19 .....	23
Table 2 Ethnic Distribution of Students Prior to the School’s Opening .....	58
Table 3 Student Enrollment by Grade Level .....	59
Table 4 Distribution of Students by Special Designation .....	59
Table 5 New School Data: State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, 2017 .....	85
Table 6 Results of the State of Texas Academic Assessments Report for Year 1 .....	112

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1 Plan for Social and Emotional Learning During the First Few Weeks of School.....	88
Figure 2 Nonnegotiables for Staff and Teachers .....	97
Figure 3 New School Progress Monitor .....	101
Figure 4 New School Middle-of-the-Year Benchmark Data .....	102

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Borderline**

Public school teachers in far west Texas work long and hard. Saroyan et al. (2009) posited that the students whom they studied realized four qualities in teachers that make them effective (a) they are prepared, (b) they are knowledgeable, (c) they promote learning so that students can learn independently, and (d) they prepare and manage instruction. A teacher must possess and use these qualities, as well as others, during the school day to be effective in the classroom. I know this to be true because I served my community as an elementary school teacher in far West Texas. A teacher's commitment to educating children in a border community is personal and commendable. This area of Texas is rich in history and culture, but marginalization is a way of life. Elementary school education along the United States-Mexico border, specifically in this region, is unique and presents the educational community an instructional conundrum: continue traditional education methods because they are familiar or move students forward by implementing instruction that supports 21st-century opportunities. Previously, I had the extreme pleasure of serving this community as a substitute teacher. After long days and nights of commitment to school and coursework, I acquired my first certified position in a public school setting as a second-grade teacher. A few years later, I navigated uncharted waters as a fourth-grade teacher and then worked diligently as an instructional technology leader. Soon, I had managed to become an assistant principal, and I now serve my community as an elementary school principal. It feels like just yesterday that I was surrounded by students as I walked down those aisles, tables on each side in a row. I was a very good teacher, but I had much to learn after that first school year.

My first few years as an educator in far west Texas were exciting, but teaching in various schools and districts, public school education was traditional at best. Not knowing more than what we had been taught, we hung on to the familiar, in essence, remnants of the century-old industrial-age factory model of education.

It was my experience, depending on the school district or school, that the vision of the leader supported the style of teaching at each school. Unfortunately, a smorgasbord of teaching styles and a belief in single-file, drill-and-kill methods as the best way to support learning is still a very prevalent vision for many schools in the borderland. Providing a way to deliver knowledge to students is important; unfortunately, doing so via lecture continues to be the dominant method in many parts of the world (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009). Texas Senator Eliot Shapleigh (2007) agreed that problems existed at state and regional levels that affect the overall educational system. In “Texas on the Brink: Distant Dream, How Texas Ranks Among 50 States,” he directly affirmed his belief that every Texan might rise as high and as far as their spirit, hard work, and talent might carry them. Senator Shapleigh reiterated that with education, and hard work, every Texan might achieve great success (Shapleigh, 2007).

There is a lack of support and direction for creating learning opportunities that prompt problem solving, a skill that is needed in modern America. The transition from high school to college is difficult and the ability to continue and finish college can be just as or more difficult for many children who enter college. I know because I was a student in this community. I started in kindergarten; before I knew it, I was walking on the university campus as I made my way from class to class. So why do some students in the community struggle to make the transition to college and/or persist in their program of choice?

As a school teacher, I worked long and hard and most every day I went home exhausted. I believe this to be the experience of most educators. They work long and hard for many hours each week but the growth that they want to see is not as much as they would like to see. After my first year, I realized that I was doing all the work and my students seemed still to have energy for days. So, I concluded that a problem exists in the community, most certainly not intentional. Students in this region need support to receive educational opportunities to succeed. College and career readiness skills, infused at the elementary school level, offer a strong possibility for a solution to this borderland problem. To meet the needs of students in the short term and the community in the long run, it is vital that schools embrace the ideals of 21st-century teaching. This work is an autoethnographic study of how my experiences as a school leader who grew up in this region informed the opening of a new elementary school focused on college and career readiness. This study examines possible pathways for incorporating best practices, activities, and ideals in planning the opening of a new school. Autoethnography requires self-observation and self-reflection; thus, I begin by detailing my own educational journey.

### **Life in a Border Community in West Texas**

My background is modest. I am a native west Texan who grew up in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in the border city of El Paso. My neighborhood was located just south, on the literal edge, of one of the nation's largest interstate freeways. Although we were not poor, our family lived on a tight budget. My father worked for the U.S. Postal Service and my mother was a stay-at-home housewife. Both dedicated their lives to raising three children to ensure that we would grow up to give back to our community, to be vital active citizens who would learn and give back.

My father grew up in poverty in the “lower valley,” a region far south of the interstate highway. The large interstate highway that runs through the region, historically and in many areas still today, seems to be the dividing line between the haves and the have nots (keeping in mind that the “haves” in this border community are not as well off and do not have as much as the “haves” in larger cities in America). My father picked cotton as a child and shared a small one-bedroom adobe home with seven family members. He worked hard to learn English and go to school. Later he graduated salutatorian in a high school that was predominantly White and at a time when segregation was the norm. The valedictorian in my father’s cohort was awarded scholarships to varied prestigious colleges in the United States; my father was offered a draft into the U.S. Army. His grade point average, only a half-point less than his counterpart due to a grade of B in physical education was enough to keep him from being awarded a free college education. He talked about his plights and trials and tribulations. It was clear that not much had changed in all those years: My high school experiences were similar and, although better in many regards, academically my students’ experiences seemed to follow suit.

My mother grew up near the city’s downtown area and lived in a large family. Her father owned a small community grocery store, and her mother was a stay-at-home mother. After economic downturns, their family sold the store, moved, yet managed to buy a house of their own. Soon after, my mother dropped out of high school, her first year. She needed to work and contribute to family expenses. She forsook a high school diploma, but she is the smartest woman I know. Her family was supportive; when they were little, she and her siblings walked to school—rain, snow, or shine. Living in downtown El Paso at that time was representative of the times, much as is seen in movies such as *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. She and her three brothers attended school with White children but understood the stark disparity in the school. On



their way to school, they walked by another elementary school, a school for Black students. After elementary school and leaving high school early, my mother was employed in a variety of jobs. She did not have a vehicle; she walked or rode the bus to get to work as a cashier and waitress at local downtown eateries and as a sales clerk at a large and well-known downtown department store. The 1950s was a great era for her and she enjoyed life and did her part to make her way, support her parental family, and survive. Although my parents grew up in very different ways, they experienced the same inequities and, once married, they raised three children in a small west Texas town and managed to keep everyone afloat.

### **Being Schooled in Far West Texas**

I went to elementary school with mostly Hispanic children. I remember the first day of school when I attended kindergarten; I cried and was scared, and my mother struggled to let me go, but the teacher was strong. Before we knew what was happening, I was in class and learning. I have vivid memories of life in elementary school. I remember all of my teachers, most of whom were Caucasian. Our school principal, assistant principal, school secretary, and the team were all Caucasian. They lived north of the interstate highway, but they worked south of it. For some of us, elementary school in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s was rough. I worked hard in school and my parents rarely struggled with me to finish homework or achieve good grades. I remember locking myself in the bathroom with encyclopedias, reading from beginning to end, and being amazed at what life had to offer. At that age, everything is exciting, new, and, in many ways, unbelievable. I shared a bedroom with my brother; as all siblings do, we fought. Two years apart and very different in many ways, we struggled even to sleep in the same room. Bunk beds were not accommodating but they were all we had. My sister was a few years older; she mostly did her own thing. All in all, we were a family living day to day and unconcerned about our

futures. At least, that is what I remember. Education was not discussed in clear terms, high expectations or other, but it was clear that we would attend school, learn, do our best, take every opportunity to better ourselves.

Although we were not rich, by any means, my dad made a good living. As an elementary school student, I yearned to learn, see, and experience. My dad managed to save enough money to have a home, a car, and food for the family. We were also lucky in that we had enough money to take family trips in the summer to places not so far away. Most of my friends never left El Paso for any reason. Los Angeles was a favorite destination, affordable because we stayed with family in their small two-bedroom house. The summer trips, which were few and far between, inspired me to leave this west Texas town and travel, experience new adventures. In many ways, I realize now, these trips provided opportunity to see and experience things that most who lived in my community could not. These travels provided knowledge and life connections that helped to prepare me for things to come. To see new places and meet new people and discuss our unique experiences with others was exciting.

Overall, elementary school was boring. Day in and day out: Sit, listen, and do. The most memorable moments in elementary school were those when I worked hands on, discussed my work with others, and just got my hands dirty. This was second grade. Ms. Bandow (pseudonym) allowed our class to work in small groups to create, communicate, collaborate, and think critically. By the end of that school year, our teams had created horse-drawn carriages, made period clothes (sewn by hand), and constructed time-period homes. It was the thematic lesson that provided real enjoyment and opportunities for real and true learning. We discussed our projects, she read theme books to us, we collaborated on the projects, and we were given free rein to create and enjoy. Ironically, that was the only lesson that I remember from Kindergarten

through 12th grades that inspired me so much; I remember almost every detail to this day.

Generally, my teachers loved to talk; when they stopped talking, we sat quietly, worked independently, and anxiously awaited lunch, physical education, and 3:30 pm.

Growing up in our community meant learning to survive. There were two pathways: stay in school, learn, and move forward, or skip school, get in trouble, and drop out. Luckily, I had no desire to miss school or to drop out. As boring as it was, I learned, I excelled. However, I yearned for the day when I could move far away.

## **High School**

High school was in some ways a blessing. I attended a large high school, 3,000+ students. With that many students, everyone had a what I like to call a brand-new start: new friends, new relationships, and new learning opportunities. I quickly adapted, made friends, and discovered a newfound hope in education. But that did not last long; just as I had experienced in elementary school, high school teachers loved to talk, even more than elementary school teachers. Again, I did well, I motivated myself, and I managed to excel. Eventually, I graduated in the top 20% of my class. I was disappointed. I had strived for more but I had fallen behind in my sophomore year. For some reason, teachers at that grade level talked more than the teachers at every other high school grade level. Rarely, if ever, did my teachers mention opportunities in our future, opportunities in education, and how to plan for college and a career.

## **College**

Family trips were fun, and they sparked my interest in attending college out of state. I decided to apply for college. While in high school I was “book smart,” I knew little about how to get into college, particularly at very little cost. My family could not afford the out-of-reach full fees that an out-of-town university demanded, so the thought of going to school out of town was

an unrealistic dream. Years later, when I saw my high school counselor, she commented about “how smart” I was that I could have attended many colleges or a “college of your choice.” What she failed to mention, both in high school and during that exchange, was how I could have managed to do so with the right information at hand. Perplexed, I also learned that I could have qualified for scholarships but, due to the lack of guidance and direction, I waited for the day when I would go to college locally. I am thankful that I saw my counselor, now many years ago, but not for the reasons others might have had. I was thankful that she sparked my inquiry into the process—the how, not because she did due diligence to meet with me and guide me, but rather because she did not do so and I was inquisitive. To meet her now would probably not be a pleasant encounter. Even without her assistance and guidance, I managed to find my way. I sold my car, I applied for grants, and my parents provided money that they had saved for just that purpose. It was not much, but it got me there—college out of town. My mom accepted a job at Walmart as a door greeter so that she could send me money for groceries and bus fare. A college loan and some cash in hand created that ability to experience life far away from home.

The move to California was the beginning of a new and interesting journey. Perseverance, hard work, and conviction created a pathway to college. Although I would love to say that I thank teachers who pushed me to excel and provided opportunities to make that dream come true, I cannot say that. Leaving El Paso was a struggle. It was difficult and relentlessly taxing on hope. However, with support from my family, my persistent nature to learn and find answers, I attended a large university in southern California. Once there, I excelled, I grew up, I learned more. Although it was exciting and provided opportunities to grow, I missed being at home. Also, I learned that college professors loved to talk even more than high school teachers. The experience was amazing, but I moved back to my beloved border city after the school year

ended. In some ways, I was one of those statistics, the start-and-quit group, the ones who fall behind.

I was grateful to return to home. I missed home, I missed family, and I missed all that I had taken for granted. Moving back, I looked at life through a different lens. The lens now focused on a career, success, and prosperity. This new lens, not necessarily rose-colored glasses, looked at life realistically from life lessons already learned. When I returned, I was adamant to continue where I had left off, so I enrolled in the local university. I learned quite a bit about navigating life while away in a big city. I quickly applied and qualified for a few grants and scholarships. Somehow, I managed to pay my way through college. The funds were there, the difficult part was finding out the how and where to apply. But where there is a will, there is a way. Looking back, learning to solve problems and think critically is a process that can be learned if one is given the right opportunities. Life would have been so much simpler and easier to navigate if someone had just taken the time to show me.

I graduated from the far west Texas university with a business degree in one hand and honors in the other. Navigating school while supporting myself was challenging. I worked in a local school district as a substitute teacher. The work was good, it was flexible, and above all, it was surprisingly exciting. I had yearned for the day when I could leave but, having left for so long (1 year), I enjoyed being home again.

### **Back To Cali**

Trying to find professional opportunities in this far west Texas town can be difficult. I chose to move and look for opportunities in larger markets. I was eager to expand my horizons and create new and financially secure career opportunities, so, once again, I moved back to California and, this time, stayed for a few years. Los Angeles is fast paced but, with persistence

and ambition, I managed to gain a lucrative position in the movie and music industry and I was successful. At a very young age, I was making more money than I ever thought I could.

However, living in a large city and working in that industry is a trade-off. Life was fast and furious, everyone for himself, and the years went by quickly. I aspired to do more and yearned to go back to school, but college in Los Angeles is expensive. So, I packed my belongings, moved home again, and enrolled in the local university, this time to pursue a master's degree in business administration.

Moving back to west Texas was not an easy task. Over time, I had acquired furniture, personal items, and some debt, so the move back required more steady work. Upon my return, I remembered a few good friends and moved quickly to obtain elementary school substitute work. The schedules were flexible, work was always available. In many ways, I was eager to return. Working with children is a blessing and is a path to support others in life-altering ways. I missed working with children and because I did, I missed my days teaching in the classroom.

A wise person once told me that life is a journey and, although the goal is to make it your destination, it truly is the journey that makes life worth living. The trajectory one sets for oneself is exciting, but sometimes it does not work out. Although I fell in love with my job, I experienced setbacks and pitfalls. Young and unsure, but sure at the same time, I began my quest to become an elementary school teacher and, with a master's degree in the works, something I just could not give up, I made the decision to obtain teacher certification. When one is young, anything is possible.

### **Public School Educator**

As an educator, 18 years and growing, I have worked in many public school settings. My teaching career has spanned various grade levels and many school districts, but it all began in

2002 as a kindergarten teacher. This experience created pathways that have led to my current administrator role. Diversifying my professional portfolio was and continues to be important, so working as a technology instructional specialist and as an assistant school principal has allowed me to move into my current role of elementary school principal.

Being an assistant principal was strange, to say the least. I was granted an administrator title but, in many ways, I was just an assistant. I was a principal in waiting and, when the wait was over, principalship began. The first school that I directed was an elementary school. It provided hands-on understanding of the true inner workings of a school. As a teacher, a school is a place where teachers teach and students learn; however, a new perspective evolved as I made my way up the career ladder. The school is also a business, and my role in educating students is indirect.

In the first year, I experienced many challenges. Systems in place were created to support learning but some required change. I was promoted to administer an established school that had evolved under someone else's vision. The school enrolled children in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. The first year at an established campus requires walking on eggshells. Loyalty to an old vision and relationships established over years can be difficult to sidestep. Balance and patience must coincide with persistence and professionalism. Students must learn, make progress, and move forward. Upward mobility is only as strong as the base that supports it, so moving forward in an established school in a border community can be difficult.

The school is in a fast-growing area of town, one of the fastest-growing areas in the state at that time. Because of that, it quickly became an overflow school for the district. Quickly, students were transferred from many campuses. These students had moved there from various parts of the country, as the school enrolled a high percentage of military-connected families. The

school grew from 700 students to 1,100 students during the summer I arrived, and it quickly acquired a pre-kindergarten hub. The challenge was evident.

One year before my assignment there, academic achievement had dropped and parents had become very disappointed. In my first year, I worked hard, fast, and many hours. By Year 2, we experienced gains, as reflected in the state data. In Year 3, the school once again made significant gains. By Year 4, we had obtained three State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STARR) designations. Progress was evident. Most satisfying was to know that the staff had become a cohesive team. What I noted most at this school was that, when teachers allowed children to work collaboratively, they grew and developed in many ways. Teachers are not easily persuaded. (I know, I was a teacher.) But when they begin to realize how much progress can be made when students are allowed to talk, discuss, and solve problems, momentum begins.

After a few years, I was ready for a change. The school district was and is growing and schools are being built. Here, there are important opportunities to move children upward and onward. I eagerly applied for the new school principal position, the opportunity of a lifetime. The new school would be only one of two schools in the district built to facilitate 21st-century learning. I was selected as the new principal of Campus #139.

Principalship is a unique experience. It offers ways to support others, specifically children. A principal does not directly impact the education of students, but rather offers indirect support. I had had no intention of becoming an administrator. I was happy in teaching, working with 22 students, providing them the best that I could offer. I worked hard and eagerly, learning the best practices that support the very skills that support healthy life outcomes. Hard work and persistence are noticed. Soon, I was offered opportunities to move onward and upward in the



educational hierarchical chain. Skeptical at first, I was eventually engaged, and I am grateful for the trust that was bestowed on me. To open a new school is an honor, but it is humbling because the lives of many rest on the decisions of a few.

Often, I've been asked, "Why did you choose to open a new school?" Opening a new school involves hours of dedication, hard physical labor, late hours, weekends, and mental preparation. For me, the decision was easy, an opportunity to work with a team of dedicated people toward a common vision, to support the students in the community. Our hope was to build a strong 21st-century learning foundation.

Living in this far west community has been a blessing, but it has been difficult. Growing up, looking back, school was uneventful, almost a worthless experience for me. I hesitate to admit it, but I was lucky to have come out of that experience successfully. To be able to create successful opportunities for more students in this area, to go to college, to build a career, and to give back to this wonderful community is a blessing. Becoming an educator, I was happy to see that changes had occurred, but it was also shocking, being on the other side, to see that real change was minimal at best.

The new school would open in one of the largest school districts in Texas, located on an international border separating two countries, two cultures, and two modes of thinking. Far west Texas, as with any region, has its own culture. It is strong and it is "old school" (pun intended). Change is difficult, but when it is approached with sense and sensibility, it can be a beautiful thing. Providing children opportunities to make progress in a learning environment that supports 21st-century learning is truly a win/win situation for everyone. To prepare students for the transition from elementary to middle school to high school and beyond, with the intent to provide long-lasting skills, is an honor.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Today, new workforce hires must be innovative and articulate, communicative, collaborative, team oriented, technology savvy, and creative. The skills for learning must come from school, where teaching them is essential. Children in elementary schools have opportunities to acquire and mobilize knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are necessary to learn and solve problems (Cossio-Bolanos et al., 2019). These are desirable attributes that must be cultivated in young students to ensure that they are equipped with 21st-century skills, the skills needed to become vital citizens in the 21st century. Values of 21st-century learning emphasize community building, collaboration, social justice, intrinsic motivation, deep understanding, active learning, and taking children seriously (Churchill, 2014). Twenty-first century skills, commonly identified as *the four Cs* (Kim et al., 2019), are collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. They provide students opportunities to solve problems and evaluate. Kim et al. (2019) described the 21st-century skillset as encompassing critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, metacognition, communication, digital and technological literacy, civic responsibility, and global awareness. These skills are the “gold standard” for students to meet the demands of the 21st-century workforce and life (Kim et al., 2019).

Al Kandari and Al Qattan (2020) stated that the 21st-century approach to teaching and learning must continue to move forward if the competencies of this endeavor are to prove fruitful, creating opportunities for children eventually to function fully in a 21st-century society. The purpose of their study was to identify these skills, review current practices, and evaluate for skill utilization. The results indicated that 21st-century skills are not being utilized; in fact, their findings identified a great disparity between declarations of implementation of teaching these skills and actual implementation.

Today's children were born into a world that is robust with technology, a place where they are expected to acquire unique skills that enable them to communicate, think, and solve problems for themselves and be creative to excel in their careers. Technology supports real learning and supports the ability to move beyond paper and pencil. It is interactive, supportive of the interactivity needed to collaborate, and it provides the ability to think faster (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018). Children must acquire skills that move them from the factory model of education early enough in their educational pathway to ensure a successful transition (Shaw, 2016). Children can learn and are excited to do so when they are given the opportunity. They have the innate ability to learn when they are taught to become self-sufficient learners (Karably & Zabucky, 2017). They should be given support systems to begin that journey, sooner rather than later, in an elementary school setting where they have opportunities to ask questions and seek information in a way that allows them to monitor their learning (Karably & Zabucky, 2017).

This study is focused on school leadership for college and career readiness, beginning at the elementary school level, based on my own experiences and the data presented herein. The necessary structures of 21st-century learning will support a strong and successful student transition from elementary school to high school to college and to the workforce. Research that identifies predictors of postsecondary success at the elementary level is sparse (Hein & Smerdon, 2013). Thus, it is important to look at best practices in elementary schools that provide skills that are needed by students to move toward postsecondary success. Research has shown that 7,000 students drop out of school every day because they are bored or because school is not relevant to their lives (Shaw, 2016). I could have been part of those statistics.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand how an elementary school principal who attended school in this area and became an educator can provide opportunities for children to become creative thinkers, problem solvers, articulate communicators, and collaborators, with the expectation that they will make a successful transition from elementary school to college and career. Opening a new school offered an opportunity to swing the educational pendulum, to spark real change. A school's purpose is to teach students to learn, allowing students to use their own resources, to confront challenges, and to do so through solving problems (Cossio-Bolanos et al., 2019). In this study, I examine how being a school principal and opening a new school is vital to supporting educational transformation in an area that is not accustomed to change, with the ultimate intention to support students' successful transition to college and career.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Outlined in the literature review in Chapter 2 is the theoretical framework that guided this study: the idea that 21st-century learning provides access to college and career opportunities. The skills that are promoted by 21st-century learning are supported by problem-based learning (PBL) theory and project-based learning. The overall goal of the 21st-century learning framework is to provide students opportunities to capitalize on college and career opportunities. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

### **Background of the Problem**

This research is intended to contribute to understanding administrative processes, procedures, and products that are employed in support of innovation and transformation of a newly opened elementary public school. The role of the principal is critical to the success of the school. Navigating the political arena creates challenges and brings about ramifications as a result of decision making. Principals influence every area, from curriculum and instruction to

policies, resources, staff selection, parental support, assignment of students, and programs. Most important is that the principal sets the overall vision and direction that creates the culture of the school. Principals exhibit positive postures and determination to improve their schools and ultimately affect the long-term impact on students.

Southern U.S. border communities have been and continue to be historically disenfranchised from political and social institutions. The unfortunate implication is that, unless this trend is reversed, these border communities will fail to provide strong academic support that children need for a 21st-century future. School administrators must have a genuine commitment to help border communities to succeed. This effort should begin in early childhood settings. This vision may require challenging the power structure of the greater society. It is no secret that misguided policies delay or deny progress and school transformation. As an example, parents and students are often disempowered by educators and politicians who denounce bilingualism and cultural diversity. Some educators have worked to regain the communities' voices that have been ignored in political debates. Dual-language programs are gaining momentum in some border school districts. In general, transforming Prekindergarten–Grade 12 education systems to prepare all students for college and careers is critical to meeting the needs of America's society today. School principals are well positioned to innovate practices and empower students, parents, and staff with a sense of urgency so the nation maintains a competitive edge. Effective leadership in any program is essential. The role of a leader making professional development manageable and supportive for both new and experienced teachers and students is critical (Lindholm-Leary, 2005).

### **Significance of the Study**

In 2015, college- and career-ready standards were introduced to many states. Gaps were evident. What students knew and what they were expected to do to make a successful transition to college was of great concern. Assessment scores across the board were low (Cawn et al., 2016). Public school systems were created to facilitate vertical progression from the elementary school to high school and beyond, prompting students to move forward. Educators attempted to help students to attain goals, ultimately high school and college graduation. The data for low-income students is of great concern in a border community (Cawn et al., 2016). Based on statewide and regional data, assessment scores were low almost everywhere, but the data in this borderland community were telling.

Local college data have provided insight. One data source for the period during which the new school was being planned, the Council on Regional Economic Expansion and Educational Development (CREED), reported data in the 60x30 El Paso (EP) Report (CREED, 2015), a baseline understanding of El Paso's educational attainment, supported by findings from the National Center for Higher Education Management System (NCHEMS), which identifies gaps in reaching the statewide 60% college attainment goal by 2030. The 60x30 EP Report is based on the 60x30 TX Strategic Plan Report (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2014), which details the same information at the state level. The combined findings provide strong data to show that many students are not making a successful transition to college or are not completing their program of choice. The overall goal of the 60x30 TX Strategic Plan is to "ensure that 60 percent of all Texans ages 35-34 will hold a post-secondary degree or certificate by the year 2030" (THECB, 2014, p. 1). The plan spawned a local strategic plan.

The 60x30 EP Report (CREEED, 2015) shows that the El Paso population ages 25 to 64 with at least an Associate degree was 30.8%, comparatively below other large city percentages: San Antonio at 35.2%, Houston at 38.2%, Phoenix at 38.3%, Albuquerque at 39.2%, Dallas at 40.4%, San Diego at 46.%, Austin at 48.5%, and Denver at 49.8%. The report shows that El Paso's percentage falls far below global, federal, and state levels: Korea at 67.8%, the United States at 45.7%, and Texas at 36.0%, all well above El Paso at 30.8%. The data are clear. El Paso's college attainment rates are concerning. The education system falters somewhere in the overall vertical alignment process.

In reviewing the report's findings regarding the attrition rates of students in El Paso, starting with the obvious 100% of students who enroll in public education at the Kindergarten level, the CREEED report (2015) shows that, by eighth grade, 7% of those students leave the public education system. By 12th grade, 85% of the students who remained in ninth grade graduate from high school and 61.5% of El Paso high school graduates go to college. Only 17% of those students were tracked from eighth grade. Among the El Paso high school graduates who go to college, 55% attend a 2-year program and 45% attend a 4-year institution. Of this overall group, 17% obtain a postsecondary certificate or degree within 11 years (THECB, 2014). The data are staggering.

The CREEED (2015) report provides data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the governing body of public education in the state. TEA revealed that, in 2012, the last year for which data were available, 6% of El Paso's 10th- and 11th-grade students tested at the "commended performance" level in all subjects. TEA sets testing requirements for public school students. Students are assessed annually in Mathematics, Reading, Writing, Science, and Social Studies. The purpose of the assessment is to determine the success rates of students regarding

college and career attainment. TEA data suggest that the outlook for this region is of concern. More recent findings from the TEA site show that the STAAR aggregate scores for 10th and 11th graders for 2016-2017.

The 60x30 EP report (CREEED, 2015) showed that only 17% of El Paso eighth graders received a postsecondary credential 11 years later. This is far below the Texas average of 20% and is the lowest in any region in the state. The report is also clear that almost all El Paso college-going students attend either The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) or the El Paso Community College (EPCC) system. Completion rates at both institutions are not efficient or sufficient, specifically as they relate to the overall goal of the report (i.e., that 60% will obtain a degree by 2030). The report stated that 38% of UTEP's full-time entrants complete a program in 6 years and only 13% of EPCC entrants complete a program within 3 years.

The overall recommendation by NCHEMS is as follows: The K–12 education system in El Paso must increase the rate of college-ready students to at least 60% (CREEED, 2015). This means that strong academic, college- and career-ready, and life skills areas should be reviewed, assessed, and addressed. The high schools in the area should not undertake this alone. The data suggest that these skills must be addressed as early as pre-Kindergarten/Kindergarten and should be vertically aligned to middle school and high school levels. The report stipulated that a stronger alliance must be formed between the two local higher education institutions, UTEP and EPCC, with the local school districts.

### **Economic Impact**

The global market is the new 21st-century job market. Students are graduating and finding jobs that provide global market opportunities. Students must also compete with graduates from around the world. The data from the 60x30 EP report (CREEED, 2015) highlights a



concern in the border region: The students outlined in this report are not moving to college successfully and/or they are not graduating from 2-year and 4-year institutions. The economic impact on the local economy, therefore, is less than positive. The 60x30 EP report (CREEED, 2015) also reported the following general per capita income levels in 2014 for the population ages 25 to 64 with at least an Associate degree: El Paso \$18,214, San Antonio \$25,546, Houston \$30,689, Phoenix \$27,069, Albuquerque \$25,731, Dallas \$30,325, San Diego \$31,770, Austin \$32,549, and Denver \$35,256. In this comparison, El Paso's per capita income falls far below that of those competitive markets. El Paso has both low educational attainment and low per capita income indicators (CREEED, 2015). Higher incomes are associated with economies that have more highly qualified and skilled workforces. The data in the report indicate that (a) these students in this region are not competitive, (b) are not becoming skilled workers in the regional workforce, and (c) face a bleak economic future that extends to the community.

Better jobs are unfilled in competitive markets because the skill level in this region is not on par with competitive markets. Brenner (2001) stated that El Paso had lost ground to national and international competitors in the previous decade. From 1950 to 1990, El Paso was 20% above the state average in college attainment; that changed by 2014 to 30% below the state average. By 2020, 65% of all new U.S. jobs will require postsecondary educational skills (CREEED, 2015).

### **Community Setting**

The new school, 21st Century Elementary, is in the West Texas School District on the border of Mexico and the United States, separated by a sliver of water, the Rio Grande River. Cultures mix as children from this area, from Mexico, and from outside the region learn together in traditional U.S. public schools. Children of military families who have traveled the world are

relocating to this region and are being enrolled in classrooms where the region's traditions have been established. The context presents many opportunities for learning.

To understand the dynamics of this community, it is important to view a snapshot of the demographics of the region as reported by the TEA (2018). The most current available data reflects the demographics just prior to the opening of the school (Table 1).

The West Texas School District provides educational opportunities to approximately 46,500 students. An especially large percentage of students are classified as Economically Disadvantaged and/or English Language Learners. The new school in this district was built to accommodate 21st-century learning in a community with the indicated demographics. Beyond establishing a learning environment that serves the 21st-century student, it was also important, when developing an academic structure for the school to consider the unique needs of most of the students, who are of Hispanic descent.

**Table 1***Ethnic Distribution in the Study's Target Community, Region 19*

Ethnicity and status	Region		State	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
African American	3,893	2.2	684,349	12.6
Hispanic	159,258	90.2	2,847,629	52.6
White	9,996	5.7	1,484,069	27.4
American Indian	312	0.2	20,283	0.4
Asian	1,154	0.7	242,247	4.5
Pacific Islander	378	0.2	8,254	0.2
Two or more races	1,555	0.9	129,490	2.4
Economically disadvantaged	135,604	76.8	3,283,812	60.6
Non-economically disadvantaged	40,942	23.2	2,132,588	39.4
Section 504	8,349	4.7	354,440	6.5
English Language Learner	51,174	29.0	1,054,596	19.5
Disciplinary Placement (2017-18)	2,776	1.5	75,963	1.4
Dyslexia	3,036	1.7	194,074	3.6
At risk	97,892	55.4	2,713,848	50.1

*Note.* From “Region 19 Ethnicity Distribution: Texas Academic Performance Report, 2016-17,” by Texas Education Agency, 2018, [https://rptsvrl.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?\\_service=marykay&\\_debug=0&single=N&batch=N&app=PUBLIC&ptype=H&\\_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&level=region&region=19&namenum=19^prgopt=2019/tapr/student.sas](https://rptsvrl.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&_debug=0&single=N&batch=N&app=PUBLIC&ptype=H&_program=perf rept.perfmast.sas&level=region&region=19&namenum=19^prgopt=2019/tapr/student.sas)

To understand the local demographics of this region just prior to the opening of the school, it was important to contextualize them in terms of the characteristics of the U.S. Hispanic population. The Pew Hispanic Center produced a report based on tabulations of the Census Bureau’s 2009 American Community Service (ACS), the largest household survey in America (Passel, 2011). Hispanics accounted for about 16.3% of the total population, about 52 million people (Passel, 2011). In 2000, Hispanics in the United States totaled about 36 million. This accounted for a 46.3% growth rate in that decade. About 23% or 17 million of the youth in America were Hispanic (Passel, 2011). Of these, about 11.1 million (the subpopulation) had illegal or undocumented status.

History is important. We learn from the past and we attempt to sidestep the pitfalls that we encountered; to do so requires data. Texas' first federal census taken in 1850; it counted more than 14,000 residents of Mexican origin (De Leon, 2008). In 2008, that number was close to 6.5 million people in the second-largest state (De Leon, 2008). Passel (2011) reported that the unauthorized immigrant population in Texas was about 1,650,000, second only to California, with about 80% born in Mexico. These figures are staggering for the education system. Today, the data presented by CREEED support the observation that many students in this border region continue to experience the educational and economic pitfalls of the past. The new school, built to accommodate 21st-century learning, will help students to move forward with the skills that they will need to make a successful transition to college, remain in college, and later contribute to the local economy. The large immigrant population, the high percentage of Hispanic students in the region, and the history of this community are areas of concentration and focus in the new school.

### **Me, WE! in a New School**

A few years before opening the new school, I had moved from being an administrator of an established school to an administrator who would open a new school, creating the standards and support systems that would support the college and career needs of the community. Change is inevitable, especially when opening a new school. Leadership, opening a new school, and change go hand in hand; success as the outcome of change ultimately depends on the school leader (Atasoy, 2020). Transformation of a school is important if the school is to make necessary gains, but it is a much longer process when the staff, resources, and foundations required to facilitate a 21st-century learning environment are not considered properly. After success at an established campus, where moving an entire team to work toward a new vision and a new set of goals is difficult, it was evident that this was my jumping point to more.

## **The Charge From the District**

I was hired to open the new school, a school designed to facilitate 21st-century learning. It was a dream come true in so many ways. It was a marriage that just made sense. Although the school was designed in this manner, the only real mandate from the school district was to suggest the use of the best practices provided through experience and professional development to support this type of learning. There was not a plan or a map, but a great genuine trust that the school would open on time and experience success.

Most educators might think that principals who were opening new schools in our school district would move through a training boot camp of some kind..

I remember the day when the position was posted. I contacted a comrade principal, who gave me feedback and support. She had opened a new school 3 years prior; she provided advice and guidance that moved me to apply. The application process was not simple, by any means. I was asked to apply and interview with a team of stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and community members of the schools that would be sending students to the new school. I was provided scenario-based questions, which made me smile inside as I sat poker-faced front and center. I prefer the scenario approach because I can pull from my background and my own experiences and intertwine the details to provide feedback that is efficient and supportive. My hope was that I would be able to do the same at this time. As I left district headquarters, the drive home was egregious as I went back and forth on every question and answer engraved in memory forever, but I figured that all I could do was to try. At the end of that day, I was a bit more ready to apply the next time. I received a call that evening from the Human Resources department and was asked to interview again, this time with the district Superintendent's cabinet team. I would arrive at the district offices by 8 am to engage and

hopefully impress the team to some extent that they would allow me the opportunity to open the new school. I am usually a very calm and cool interviewee, but I must admit that I was a bit nervous; my stomach felt like a vacuum had been inserted into my mouth and was slowly trying to suck out the insides. I grabbed a magazine as I sat in the waiting room of the superintendent's office and read every single word. I was called in and sat again front and center as each cabinet member posed questions. The questions were mostly scenario based, so I was able to answer each one, but without any confirmation that what I had presented was good enough to move forward. That evening, as I attempted to keep my mind off the matter, I was once again contacted by the human resources office and asked to arrive early the next day to meet with the Superintendent of Schools and the Assistant Superintendent who would oversee the new principal and school. I entered his office and memories of years gone by immediately flooded my thoughts. The experience felt very familiar: a visit to the principal's office in elementary school. The two leaders asked a series of questions about my experience in education and my current principalship. As I left the office, I felt defeated, not only because once again I had given a very bad interview, but I noticed two others in that waiting area, one a very good and experienced principal in the school district and the other a stranger. The next school board meeting, on the following day, would provide the answer. I was not present that next evening and I waited anxiously for a telephone call or a text or a tweet or anything that would provide THE ANSWER. I was inundated with phone calls and congratulatory messages and the rest is history. It was most definitely a monumental moment.

June 2017 was a milestone for me. I was officially named as the principal of the new school. The school was scheduled to open in approximately one school year. I worked in the district service center for that year to prepare. After a review of articles, suggestions from

supervisors, and discussions with principals in the district, I looked back at my experiences and determined the goals for the new school and worked toward those goals. Many might imagine, as I did prior to this experience, that a school principal would be faced with a battery of professional development opportunities and training on how to open a new school. The reality was that the process was a solo conquest with an organic approach in many ways. I worked in a small cubicle for a school year as I developed the process that would help me to open on time, following the advice in research cited here and the advice and guidance of the various departments with which I would work on this journey.

The school district where I work continues to look for more and progressive ways to improve student academic progress. The evidence is available that the goal is for students to work in 21st-century learning environments to continue to move forward. The district started the process of creating 21st-century learning facilities in the new and fast-growing neighborhoods within its boundaries. Two schools were built in this fashion when my school opened its doors. Although schools in the district that already exist are not built in this way, the research that supports this type of learning is available and is provided to the district's administrators. Once again, the school leader, not the facility, can create the possibility. Creating change in an established school is possible but it takes time and certainly is not easy. Opening new schools naturally opens that door; it is expected that change will happen and it is an opportune time to create a vision in which all of the new participants can engage.

Although the school is a blank canvas in many ways, many tasks await a school principal who is charged to open a new school building and to do so with college and career readiness in mind. School culture is an important factor. Sharing the common goals and vision of the school

and having the ability to move people toward those goals creates the opportunity for change and success (Atasoy, 2020).

The list of items needed for the opening of a new school can be as long or as short as needed, but the details are extensive: staffing; student enrollment; furniture, supplies, and resources for all stakeholders; contractor communication; assessment data; academic goals; and vision, mission, and culture. My checklist provided the foundation for what was to come. Also important to the opening were the overall activities, all integral to a strong opening: (a) setting the vision for ambitious instruction, (b) upgrading instructional models, (c) setting systems to ensure data-driven instruction, (d) setting structures for intervention and enrichment, (e) setting systems for ongoing professional development, and (f) providing consistent coaching to teachers and staff (Cawn et al., 2016). Through all of this, ambitious instructional leadership is needed—the ability of the leader of the new school to intentionally and with investment attend to all of the facets of learning, including professional development, lesson planning, staffing, assessment design, and curriculum implementation (Cawn et al., 2016).

First and foremost, the school must open. Although I worked independently for a school year at district headquarters, a new school needs a family, a team of people working together to create opportunities. A staff, systems, expectations, protocols, and vision must be developed. In a case study by Caren Caldwell Bryant (2004), interviews with six principals who had opened new schools suggested that the following be taken into account when opening a new school: (a) Provide release time for elementary principals who are assigned to open new schools, (b) open the staffing process for new schools to allow all interested staff members to apply, (c) involve stakeholders in the school planning and design process, (d) provide professional development activities for school leaders to help them to improve the leadership skills that are required to



build new learning communities, and (e) plan to provide the technology infrastructure and flexibility for new schools promptly. In dissertation research by Tammi Sexton (2010), qualitative data were gathered regarding the experiences of four elementary school principals who had opened new schools in a large urban area. Findings indicated that three overarching areas must be addressed: staffing, scheduling, and technology. Regardless of the resources used, the most important function of the school principal before opening a new school is staffing. As other research suggests, “the principal is going to be held accountable for the success or failure of those he or she hires” (Heller, 2004, p. 47).

Staffing is important for any entity, but teachers are the heart and soul of a school. They must gravitate toward the vision of the new school. Overall, three themes define an outstanding teacher: purpose, relationships, and approaches to teaching (Pillsbury, 2005). A teacher, first and foremost, must desire to build strong relationships with students, colleagues, and parents if students are to succeed. A teacher's overall goal is to teach and to do so with best practices in mind. A teacher must stay focused on current trends, particularly college and career trends in the 21st century.

The staffing process for teachers in my school district was efficient and allowed me the strong opportunity to interview and observe applicants, most of whom were current teachers at various campuses in the district. Teachers for the new school were expected to be open and to know instruction, to understand how students would work in collaborative structures, and to understand how to dissect and disaggregate data so that the result is data-driven instruction. Teachers should know how to provide direct instruction, be explicit with instruction, understand the importance of the gradual release model, understand balanced literacy foundations, and know

how to implement rigorous instruction (Cawn et al., 2016). I utilized these themes to review all applicant data and then utilized them once the list was filtered for interviews and observations.

Campus staffing for a new school in the study district is supported by the district's Human Resources (HR) department. Teachers were allowed to place their names on a list for transfer to the new school in early February of the school year prior to the opening of the new school. I reviewed the list, gathered quantitative and qualitative data, and used the data to create a list of potential teachers for the new school. I notified the school principals where those teachers were located and advised them of my interest and my intent to appear unannounced in their classrooms to observe them. I created observation dates without notice to the teacher and walked into the classroom at times that were convenient for the school. The data were entered on a spreadsheet that allowed for entries of other key important data. First was instruction: the strength of the teacher in providing introduction to the objective, the gradual release of instruction from the teacher to students that allowed students to collaborate, communicate, think, teach each other and solve problems, organization of the lesson, questions posed, station time and guided support time, and the close of the lesson. Based on these data, I narrowed the list of teachers to the number needed by grade level. Students would arrive to the new school from various campuses. The strategy was to acquire teachers who would be able to move to the new school and remain at their current grade level. I interviewed each teacher candidate individually, formalizing questions based on the described criteria but incorporating questions that would help me to understand the teacher's ability to move to a 21st-century learning environment. Examples of these questions follow.

1. What do you know about project-based learning and how will you incorporate this into your daily lessons?

2. Tell me about a time when you provided a lesson that allowed students to work collaboratively.

3. How might you address a classroom that is struggling with word problems in mathematics?

4. Reading is complex and requires a vertically aligned set of expectations if students are to master elementary school reading concepts. As a second-grade teacher, share your understanding of expectations that you would address, and provide at least one example.

5. How might you differentiate your reading lessons for your fifth-grade students if a re-teach of the objective was needed, based on the data that you collected?

At the end of each interview, I presented my expectations for the new school: hands-on, engaging, 21st century in nature, and more. I then entered their responses into a spreadsheet, taking into consideration the need for bilingual and special education staff. Throughout this process, I communicated with the Information Systems (IS) expert, who gathered teachers' assessment data, such as results of prior state-mandated tests for the teacher's grade level that I added to the spreadsheet. Upon making my final decisions, I reviewed certification with the support of the HR staff person and then notified each teacher of acceptance to the new school. Obtaining the teacher's consent was important because the final step would be official approval of the transition by the HR department. The final step was to provide digital recommendations to the HR department contact person for the transfer to the new school. All teachers were sent a letter of transfer with a copy to their current principal, specifying their start date and expected duties. The process was extensive but important, as it helped to create integrity for the new school.

Over all, I kept in mind that opening a new school was an opportunity to experience change through the lens of a 21st-century learning expectation. We would have to remain strong! Teachers are usually comfortable with their current-year grade-level assignments, so I kept this in mind when considering assignments for the next school year. Some educators can become complacent if they remain in the same grade level year in and out; with a new school, this can be an advantage. When planning the opening of the new school, I realized the school would need extra support and experience at each grade level. Content knowledge is vital, so each teacher, after the application and interview process, was placed in the grade level in which they had specialized at their last campus. Finally, dynamics and synergy were needed to invoke a new and needed energy, so a review of the number of years a teacher had accumulated in the profession was another advantage to opening a new school. New teachers intermingled with seasoned teachers, providing a unique advantage to the team. A fresh outlook, coupled with new strategies and tactics supported by experience and confidence, was another goal.

Many of the new school's students are bilingual. They would need teachers with the required bilingual certification. I looked specifically at schools that had high numbers of bilingual students where teachers were excellent in their craft. I ensured that bilingual and special education teachers were identified and recommended.

A teacher's impact can be from two to three times the impact of any other school factor, including the quality of the school leader (Marzano, 2003). Teachers are the number one impact factor; high-quality teaching is essential if students are to make progress in a college/career learning environment. The same process was used to staff all positions on campus, but the teacher position was the number one priority. It was my goal to bring on board teachers who were successful and who would be willing to accept change by moving to a 21st-century learning

facility to provide college- and career-ready skills to students in a school located in a border community. This is a significant change for some teachers, both physically and regarding mindset. One of the most important tasks in the hiring process was to meet one on one with each teacher, provide insight into the goals and expectations, and ensure that each teacher understood that the transition meant that real change would be expected, that hard work would be expected, especially in the first year, and that the learning and relearning process (not only for the teacher but for many students who would come from a wide range of schools) would be a challenge, not only academically but also socially and emotionally. Teachers had to understand that opening a new school, although rewarding, is not an easy task. The candidates were presented the vision for the school: 21st-century learning involving a gradual release of the learning from the teacher to the students, with students actively participating in the learning process. This would be a major change for some.

A school principal wears many hats. When opening a new school, my vision for building college and career readiness needed to be at the forefront of all that we did in the first school year. After a review of the 60x30 reports and reflecting on my experience as a student in this border community and my experience as an educator from teacher to administrator, it was evident that the problems associated with the transition to college and career begin where they are least likely to be addressed: elementary schools. Therefore, the vision for the school was evident: moving forward together, creating college and career learning opportunities for all scholars at the new school, and doing so with concepts that support 21st-century learning.

### **Practical and Intellectual Goals**

The goal of this study is to support 21st-century development of college- and career-ready skills and strategies at a new elementary school that teachers and staff will use to provide a

strong foundation for the transition from elementary school to middle school, middle to high school, and from there to college. The opportunity to create a foundation of 21st-century learning skills and strategies that can be infused into a state-based curriculum was exciting and established a basis on which to prepare students early in their educational careers.

Many children in this community have not had extensive educational opportunities. I state this because the 21st-century skills and practices should be imbedded so they are evident. Through this autoethnographic journey, I provide personal and deep-rooted reasons for wanting to create more real 21st-century learning opportunities. Taking over an established school and establishing a school are two very different processes. As the principal of a new school, I can create a vision that educators will support so that all are together, educating children by infusing 21st-century learning methods into instruction. The new school's vision was to provide students opportunities—academic, social, and emotional, with college and career support—to succeed in life.

As a school principal, I can be considered a change agent. I remember one situation in which a new teacher whom I had interviewed and recommended for a position at the school had become upset. I heard from another staff member who worked with me at that time that the new teacher had been complaining to others that I was not fair in the way in which I had interviewed her, stating that she had spoken to other team members who had just been hired. She felt that I was not forthcoming about the new position and had not communicated all of the expectations related to the 21st-century expectations of PBL. As I reflected, I realized that I may have inadvertently misspoken. I had been on a district tour interviewing and observing potential candidates for teacher positions on our campus. I felt confident that my message to these individuals was firm and up front, but with so many visits and discussions, it is possible that this

was not true. Unfortunately, the teacher never expressed this to me and, in my attempt to keep confidential what the other staff member had told me, I hoped for the opportunity for the teacher to approach me so that I could discuss, clarify, and apologize if I had failed to be clear with the message. The discussion never materialized. I take ownership for the matter, even though I truly cannot recall how I conveyed the message at our initial interview. We were at the early stages of staffing, had not yet even moved into the new school, and already there was conflict. As I look back, I realize the many things that I could have changed, should have tweaked or never attempted at all, but the entire process allowed for learning and created opportunities to create efficient ways to provide opportunities for team members to become strong. As I reflect, I understand how quickly things can unravel, and it was certainly possible that I did not remain consistent in the staffing process. Bouncing ideas off of others and collaborating with the team members is important, especially in those situations. However, at the time, I did not yet have a team, so all we could do was move forward, which we did. While I might have been considered a change agent, a title that was put on me by some who had mentored me and guided me, it most definitely did not mean that change was always positive. By no means will one person create real change; by starting a movement and supporting the redirection that is needed, we are able to create a new way of thinking. By building a culture of buy-in and together following a vision of success for all children and being the leader who can create real change by redirecting everything back to the WHY we do what we do, student success, both academically, socially, and emotionally in a 21st-century era, the walls that might exist can be broken down. In brief, learning from the pitfalls and applying the research-based skills that we hoped would move our team forward and together build bridges across these pitfalls, real change could happen.

## **Research Questions**

Opening a new school is not an easy task. A school must open to hundreds of children on time, with systems in place and with a vision in mind. There is little research on what an elementary school administrator must do to open a new school in a border community to create 21st-century learning opportunities. It is evident that leadership and vision are important. A strong leader is the “culture builder” and the “talent manager” (Cawn et al., 2016). Even the strongest school leaders have struggled to maintain strong-performing schools in light of the college and career standards that were mandated to be infused into the curriculum (Cawn et al., 2016).

My reality is unique; I have lived through this educational system as a student and now as an educator. My background, my experiences as an educator, and the time afforded me to plan the opening of a new school are unique ingredients for a research study by a reflective practitioner.

The main purpose of opening the new school is to provide more opportunities for scholars in a borderland community to support college and career goals to overcome the local data. My goal, with the support of a school team, school educators, and staff, is to help students to move from high school to college with the skills that they need to stay enrolled and to finish. With that in mind, the following research questions were developed.

1. What experiences as a student, teacher, and school leader in this border community have influenced my attempts to build a framework for 21st-century learning at a new elementary school to prepare students for college and/or a career?



2. What administrative and personal processes support the advancement of three goals (academic success, college and career readiness, and social-emotional learning) at a new elementary school for 21st-century learning in a border community?

3. How might this study inform others who wish to open an elementary school that will support 21st-century instruction to facilitate the transition to college and career?

This study describes my journey as one way to support the opening of a new elementary school in a border community, providing structures, overarching goals, vision, and methods to provide other administrators of their school a basis for their own opening.

To support the overall self-study, the following chapters provide details that may be helpful in clarifying the journey. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature, supporting the three overarching goals to include, for example, information about PBL and the 4 Cs. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the self-study, including the methods and the resources. The importance of each overarching goal is relevant to the overall self-study, so Chapter 4 presents the way in which components such as social-emotional learning (SEL), PBL, and college and career objectives were used throughout the school year. The end-of-year STARR results are reported. Chapter 5 presents reflections and suggestions for those who may choose to use any part of this self-study to open a new school, re-establish systems or processes at an established school, or understand the data that led me to conduct this study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Growing up in a border city is special. My life and my experiences as a student and my endeavors to become an educator in this border community have provided insight into some of the needs of this community, specifically educational needs of elementary school students. Having left the border community for many years helped me to identify some of these unique needs. This dissertation is designed based on my life experiences, my journey, and my desire to create advantages in my community that I did not have when growing up. Therefore, the literature review is important as it provides the foundation to support the opening of the school. The literature review addresses the overarching goals in the research questions for this study—academic success, college and career readiness, and social and emotional learning (also known as social-emotional learning; SEL)—all supported by the 21st-century learning framework.

#### **Conceptual Ideality**

One important conceptual ideal that guided this study was that four Cs, or four concepts imbedded in socialization, prompt rigorous higher-level learning for problem solving. The 21st-century environment can invoke great learning power when teachers provide the opportunity to collaborate (C1), communicate (C2), create (C3), and critically think (C4)—learning support that provides access to college and career opportunities. The skills that are characteristic of 21st-century learning are supported by PBL theory (also known as project-based learning), which encourages collaboration, communication, and the skillsets needed to make a successful transition to college (Kim et al., 2019). In the new elementary school, PBL is the vehicle that promotes the four Cs to support 21st-century skills that students need in order to make the transition.

PBL supports the needed skills: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and communication in the classroom. The skills are supported by teachers as they release the instruction to students. In other words, teachers introduce the lesson to the students and then quickly allow them to move into groups to work on the four Cs—students teaching students. The skill sets are further described in the literature review. PBL creates a situation in which students choose a problem and then work together to find solutions to the problem. PBL allows students to work together to solve problems—a primary goal of the new school. PBL offers students cognitive strategies. Key cognitive strategies such as these offer problem formulation, research, interpretation, precision, and accuracy (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014).

In project-based learning, where the four Cs thrive, a definite objective of 21st-century learning, the teacher is a facilitator who must scaffold, explicitly model, coach, and move students to work through a project (Larmer et al., 2015). The facilitator plays an important role through outlook, previous experience, approaches, and academic resources (Bridges & Imafuku, 2020). Project-based learning is an opportunity for children to learn academic content and then apply it to real-world concepts. They become problem solvers, responsible critical thinkers, and confident learners (Larmer et al., 2015).

Elementary school students usually come with a high interest in learning. However, as they move to middle school and high school, interest falls. In a study using data from the High School Survey of Student Engagement, consisting of 275,925 students in the United States from 2006 to 2009, responses showed that 49% of the students were bored in class every day (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010, as cited in Larmer et al., 2015). Students who engage in PBL are motivated to collaborate, teach each other, recall, and make connections (Larmer et al., 2015). They are prompted to talk, communicate, and support the overall goal of solving the problem, a skill that

is very difficult for children. The new 21st-century school provides opportunities to learn in that manner and to develop skills to become problem solvers who will use their resources to make real-world decisions.

One major study found that, to make a successful transition to college, students must have acquired the following skills: critical thinking skills, analytical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, openness and use of critical feedback, openness to possible failures, and time management skills (Larmer et al., 2015). Studies have shown that students' perceptions of project-based learning are positive; qualitative studies have shown positive effects on student learning (Bridges & Imafuku, 2020). If students at the new school are to attain expectations of college and career readiness, they must be able to self-assess, plan, learn independently, and use feedback. This is the purpose of providing 21st-century learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2014).

Developing a vision for this new school was influenced by my own lived experiences and the conceptual framework of 21st-century learning, in support of this new school in this community. A vision incorporates a road map and a destination for a school. The vision outlines to stakeholders where they are going, how, and why. It attempts to define the long-term results of what the school is doing now. A vision statement for the school motivates stakeholders to be engaged, especially if they find it meaningful. The vision for the new school incorporates three important goals: academic success, college and career readiness, and social-emotional learning. First and foremost, the main purpose of any school is to support a student's academic progress. Students who learn and grow each year will be better able to learn the content offered in the next grade level and meet long-term goals: college or a career. College and career readiness is how students will gain academic success. Students learn when they are provided opportunities that

prompt problem solving. Collaborating, communicating, creating, and critically thinking prompt students at any level to think and to do so in many ways. These are the skills that they will use for the rest of their lives. To learn these skills early in their education career, elementary school, amplifies the ability to continue to do so in middle school, high school, and later in life. Although the main purpose of a school is to provide a method and place for learning, because children congregate in a school building and are expected to get along, attention to an SEL environment is needed. SEL provides methods by which a school team addresses students' ability to learn, given their unique backgrounds, living situations, and family structures. Academic success, college and career readiness, and SEL—the three overarching goals of the school's vision—are the basis for the literature review.

### **Academic Success**

Academic success, particularly in Texas, is measured by standardized assessments aligned with curriculum standards. It might be expected that an evaluation of some kind must take place to gauge the progress of students, but there are drawbacks. Education research has critiqued standardized testing and especially its impacts on underserved students, such as the students in this community, who are mostly considered at risk, economically disadvantaged, and bilingual. Critics argue that standardized testing promotes methods that “drill and kill” and that teacher pedagogy is compromised (Morgan, 2016). Standardized testing is considered to drive an inferior type of learning through memorization and problem solving; skills that support problem solving are essentially nonexistent (Morgan, 2016).

In the past 15 years, I have had the opportunity to serve on state-level standardized test vetting committees. My travels to Austin, Texas, to discuss standardized tests for elementary school children have been, at the very least, eye-opening experiences. The state of Texas is vast,

serving children from many backgrounds. East and Central Texas are very different from West Texas. Texas educators fail to take these differences into account (McNeil, 2000). Children in far West Texas communities have historically been held back due to scoring below average on standardized tests. Although standardized testing's stigma is real, my experience as an educator indicates the substantial consequences of test scores. As evidenced by the rate of Hispanic students who fail to complete postsecondary education, the significance of the link between early elementary intervention and higher rates of transition to postsecondary education is clear (Bach, 2020). Texas has made some changes to the test, allowing for growth and a college readiness emphasis. My goal is to support the links among 21st-century learning skills, SEL skills, and academic success due to their impact on grades and assessments at each grade level.

The TEA is the state agency that directs and drives the state's curriculum expectations. The TEA is located in Austin and is led by the Commissioner of Education to administer state and federal funds to schools, administer the statewide assessment and accountability system, and provide support, along with the State Board of Education (SBOE) in development of the statewide curriculum (TEA, 2020). The SBOE sets policies, standards, and systems for all public schools for graduation requirements, curriculum resources, and certification (TEA, 2020).

Together, these entities set that stage for students to advance to college and careers. Part of this responsibility is to create a state curriculum to support that transition. As students work through the school year, utilizing curriculum standards created by these two entities, the result is measured by assessment data from STAAR. STAAR assessments, when deconstructed to domain levels, define students who Did Not Meet, Approached, Met, or Mastered grade-level standards.

Masters Grade Level (passing): Previously known as Advanced, Masters Grade Level means that a student who earns this grade is expected to succeed in the next grade or course with little or no academic intervention. Students in this category demonstrate the ability to think critically and apply the assessed knowledge and skills in varied contexts, both familiar and unfamiliar.

Meets Grade Level (passing): Students at this performance level have a high likelihood of success in the next grade or course but may still need some short-term, targeted academic intervention. Students in this category generally demonstrate the ability to think critically and apply the assessed knowledge and skills in familiar contexts.

Approaches Grade Level (passing): This level was previously known as Satisfactory, and students at this level have met the assessment requirements for purposes of Student Success Initiative grade promotion and graduation and are considered to have met at least the minimum passing standard. A student achieving Approaches Grade Level is likely to succeed in the next grade or course with targeted academic intervention. Students in this category generally demonstrate the ability to apply the assessed knowledge and skills in familiar contexts.

Does Not Meet Grade Level (not passing): This performance category, formerly known as Unsatisfactory, applies to students scoring below Approaches Grade Level. Students at this level have not passed, since a performance at this level indicates a student is unlikely to succeed in the next grade or course without significant, ongoing academic intervention. Students in this category do not demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the assessed knowledge and skills (TEA, 2020, p. 14).

The goal for all students is to meet and master the assessment levels. The Masters domain supports the importance of college and career readiness. Scholars who are mastering STAAR assessments in content areas are not only on grade level but can think critically, a concept that is related to college and career readiness.

Therefore, the goal is to begin the process of educating students so that they learn how to think critically in pre-K and elementary school grade levels. Aligning this effort will allow students to make the transition to college and to remain in the college or career program of their choice. Further, the TEA (2020) stated that the Masters level shows mastery of the course content; therefore students who attain mastery are on track for college and career readiness. Although the STAAR assessment is provided to students as early as in Grade 3, students who are classified as Masters in Grade 3 or higher have benefited from the infusion of critical college and career learning skills at the earlier grade levels pre-K through Grade 2, which will help them to continue this trajectory. It is evident that, if students are to make the transition to college and career with success based on standardized assessments and academic achievement, vertical alignment must begin in the early grade levels, preferably pre-K.

### **College and Career Readiness**

College and career readiness, or 21st-century learning, is at its very core the ability to solve problems. Students must learn to work together, think critically, and utilize their ability to solve problems. These skills will enable students to enroll in college and finish their program of choice. After college, students will contribute to a workforce that is thinking critically, solving problems, and using technology to support those undertakings. “As a nation, we desperately need more citizens with postsecondary credentials . . . 65% of U.S. jobs will require some form of



postsecondary education by 2020” (Lumina Foundation, 2012, as cited in Turner & Dandridge, 2014, p. 2).

Pulliam and Bartek (2017) supported the position that elementary school exposure to college and career concepts provides support for what is to come: success in their respective future endeavors in college and career. At these early stages of life, students become aware of their strengths and limitations, developing a self-concept that is relevant to career aspirations. As the need for postsecondary education becomes greater, it is more critical for elementary educators to focus on college and career planning (Pulliam & Bartek, 2017).

At the forefront of college and career readiness is the process of learning between the teacher and the students in the classroom. As Turner and Dandridge (2014) argued, college and career readiness is not really about political discourse at various levels of education or about the current state of affairs; it is about the relationships and systems in place in the classroom. This leads to a discussion on how college and career readiness operates in classrooms at the new elementary school through Advanced Via Individual Determination (AVID).

College and career readiness is how academic success is supported. It includes learning skills that that can be applied at an early age to support preparation for life after high school. College and career readiness supports learning skills that are not necessarily academically based but are rather life skills that one learns as one matures, such as organization and note taking. Because the new school was created to support pre-K through fifth-grade students for college readiness, AVID was adopted as a framework for the school.

The mission of AVID is to close the opportunity gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society (AVID Center, 2017). AVID is a platform for preparing students for college and careers. AVID supports closing the opportunity gap for underserved

students and all students by providing inquiry-based and student-centric instruction (AVID Center, 2017). AVID helps students to take responsibility for their learning, shifting the work from the teacher to the student, and assigning the teacher to the role of facilitator. AVID Schoolwide supports the transformation of the school by focusing on four key domains: instruction, systems, leadership, and culture. This is a 21st-century approach to teaching.

AVID instruction combines the tools of writing, inquiry, collaboration, organization, and reading (WICOR) to support teachers in the classroom, helping them to instill strategies that prepare students for college. Problem solving is invoked as students address complex issues. Learning must be organized so that students have ample opportunities to think, write, talk, read, and ask questions. AVID WICOR focuses on learning concepts as it leads the brain to create new pathways. WICOR is based on brain research about how children learn. During adolescence, the brain changes the most (Madigan & Gamino, 2011). Brain research indicates that the frontal lobe of the brain is used for critical thinking, reasoning, and higher-order thinking skills. These skills are optimized in learning environments that support WICOR (Madigan & Gamino, 2011). Questions stimulate the frontal lobe, causing the brain to mull over the questions, creating an opportunity for problem solving (Madigan & Gamino, 2011). Utilizing this brain research, WICOR via AVID emphasizes opportunities to create, think, and solve problems.

Annual summer institutes offered by AVID provide an opportunity for teams of educators to become teachers of teachers and, in essence, support the standards of WICOR, creating 21st-century learning outcomes (Drumright et al., 2016). The systems approach for AVID allows teachers to develop their instructional practice, which helps them to develop a way to reach out to students and parents in the community.

With AVID, leadership is important because it sets the tone or the vision for college readiness. It is a way to ensure that high expectations are set and met. AVID culture comes into play when all students have a mindset that they can learn at higher levels and benefit from challenging coursework. Related to this, a set of 10 practices endorsed by Dr. Pedro Noguera, Executive Director of the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, informs AVID's approach to providing support to educators around the world for culturally specific needs in schools (AVID Center, 2017). The 10 practices promote achievement by all students:

1. Challenge the normalization of failure. Race and class should not predict achievement.
2. Stand up and speak out for equity. Schools must confront how some students are denied learning opportunities.
3. Embrace immigrant students and their culture.
4. Provide students clear guidance on what it takes to succeed, including such things as study skills, code switching, and seeing models of excellent work. When excellence and equity are combined, the focus is on ensuring that students are exposed to high standards and quality teachers.
5. Build partnerships with parents based on shared interests. Teachers must communicate respectfully and effectively across race and class differences and work with parents to reinforce school objectives at home.
6. Align discipline practices to educational goals. Get buy-in from all staff on expectations, values, and norms that connect students to learning, rather than excluding them from learning. Teachers must make education matter to students.

7. Rethink remediation and focus on acceleration. Monitor learning and provide access to an enriched, rigorous curriculum with support and personalized interventions.

8. Implement evidence-based practices and evaluate them for effectiveness. Consider such things as block scheduling, peer study groups, content literacy, extracurricular activities, and mentoring.

9. Build partnerships in the community to address student needs.

10. Teach to the way that students learn, rather than expecting them to adjust their learning to a rigid, set way of teaching. Teachers should focus on evidence of mastery and performance, viewing the work that is produced as a reflection of their teaching.

Many of these practices were incorporated into professional development sessions on campus at the new elementary school. Project-based learning, SEL practices, and incorporation of the four Cs have helped to move the campus upward and onward toward these 10 practices. When the practices are followed with fidelity over time, the growth mindset is activated and the school is fueled for mastery, not intervention, moving proactively instead of reactively. High expectations and empowering students as learners will help to close achievement gaps (AVID Center, 2017).

AVID, which targeted high school students at its onset, has created opportunities for elementary schools. At the elementary school level, AVID provides professional development to educators to support students with notetaking, organization, time management, and critical thinking (AVID Center, 2017). This 21st-century school started the school year with two goals in mind at every grade level: organization and notetaking. AVID Summer Institutes present strategies and support systems to large groups of educators, and those were instilled at the beginning of the school year. For example, in pre-K, teachers begin the school year by teaching

students how to organize their desks and use their backpacks to store items for delivery to and from school. The use of color-coded notebooks in backpacks helps students to identify specific paperwork and items based on the color of the notebook. As students make their way through the school year, the process becomes like clockwork and children organize their items daily, with teachers and parents keeping track to ensure that items make their way home and back to the classroom. Every grade level uses a grade-appropriate form of organizing: backpacks, notebooks, binders, and other materials. Students are taught in pre-K how to draw pictures that support the notetaking process, while students in fifth grade use the 2-3-column notetaking approach. Each school year, a new goal is introduced to students. Inquiry is a goal for the next school year and will be aligned over time.

The AVID classroom promotes inquiry, movement, collaboration, critical thinking, and learning about learning. When children begin to promote their learning and teachers begin to facilitate this style of learning in the classroom, the 21st-century approach is in action. Children are preparing for college success in careers. The new school is on its way, having incorporated many of these strategies.

### **The Four Cs**

The four Cs is a reference to four learning skills that are necessary for learning to take place at higher levels to support the alignment process: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication. Bellanca and Brandt (2009) stated that global competition is spurred by communication and information technology. Doing well in school is no longer enough to support a long and successful career (Bellanca & Brandt, 2009). When I take myself back to elementary school, I remember straight rows of desks, independent work, and endless teacher talk. What resonates with students is hands-on problem solving and interaction. The best way to realize

success in 21st-century learning is for students to have materials that they have never seen before and to know what to do with them (Bellanca & Brandt, 2009).

What do the four Cs look like in the classroom? Instructionally, students are provided problem-solving outlets. Students are engaged, interacting, working together on problems by using life skills that they will use in college. Students are collaborating in groups, discussing the problem at hand, and relying on each other to make their way through projects and instructional assignments.

The National Education Agency (NEA), which helped to create the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) in 2002, established 21st-century learning goals that could be infused into instruction, teaching practices, and assessments (NEA, n.d.). P21 defines critical thinking as the ability to reason effectively, use systems thinking (parts of the whole coming together to produce overall outcomes), make judgments and decisions, and solve problems (NEA, n.d.). Critical thinking requires support, which is usually provided in elementary schools through collaborative efforts by students.

How do students collaborate? Students need to be taught how to work through problems and how to work with each other. Communication becomes key in this process. Communication is key to 21st-century learning skills that will support the transition to college and career. Communication, as defined by P21, is articulating ideas and thoughts effectively; listening effectively to decipher; using communication to inform, instruct, motivate, and persuade; and using multiple media and technologies, all in multilingual and multicultural environments (NEA, n.d.).

The world is shrinking. Technology has provided many opportunities to connect with others around the world in a just-in-time manner, making the way we live life, work, learn, and

move upward and onward very different. When I started my first year of teaching, if my students could turn on a computer, work through a word document, and insert images into a PowerPoint presentation, they were considered knowledgeable. Today, to turn on a computer is no longer considered a task; it is simply a way of life. Children must begin to work on college- and career-ready skills at the elementary grade levels; children who are provided these skills prior to Grade 8 are more likely to make a successful transition to college than if they wait until high school to prepare for the transition (Hanover Research, 2020).

### **Social-Emotional Learning**

School principalship offers a unique experience. I have led departments, people, and entire staff structures in the past. When I was a lead supervisor at a major network in Los Angeles, leadership meant directives, deadlines, policy references and checks, and balanced reviews. Much of that continues to be part of the day, but a principal works with human capital. As a school leader, I am committed to ensuring that all students make progress and that everyone provides a strong academic support system by infusing methods and strategies that will help children to grow into strong, ethical, law-abiding adults. Every decision must support this prime initiative. Leadership skills must be saturated in SEL. Most noteworthy, the goal at the new school is to provide SEL support in a 21st-century learning environment.

Cookson (2009) explained in the article “What Would Socrates Say?” the importance of meshing the past with the present to create an efficient future for students. Socrates offered clear insight into the importance of learning by asking questions and reflecting on the answers. Cookson noted that the current state of education was spawned from various eras of education: the agrarian revolution, the instruction revolution, and now the electronic revolution. To take the ideals of past generations and use them in the present allows people to move forward and create

a new generation of learning that supports scholars in the 21st century (Cookson, 2009). The new school must take from the traditional and incorporate from the present to create opportunities for the future, using the opportunities of inquiry.

What is SEL and how does it support the ideals of Socrates and the new digital revolution? SEL is widely utilized in many ways. SEL incorporates the ideals of inquiry, traditional learning, and current practices, which together offer the ability to self-reflect, self-regulate, and self-monitor. There are many definitions of SEL. Tantilillo (2016) defined SEL as the climate and culture of the classroom, with mindfulness included. She suggested that, while SEL is important, teachers and students must know how to use skills to build competency in mindfulness so that culture and climate in the classroom support academics.

Opening a new school requires specific resources and support for teachers, who in turn support students in the classroom to build a strong climate and culture with activities. The new team at this school engaged in a book study during the first school year, learning how to support each other collaboratively. The book invokes mindfulness, activities, and physical movement to create a practical method of implementing SEL, not only in the classroom but through a schoolwide collaborative book study (Tantilillo, 2016). The process addresses physical, mental, and emotional needs of students, without judgement, so they can move out of “survival mode.”

The book was noteworthy during the first few weeks of school. Children were moved from their previous schools, boundaries were adjusted to create a community for the new school, and teachers were challenged to work with students, other teachers, and staff whom they had not met while using unfamiliar protocols. The book study by teachers and staff began a few weeks prior to the opening of the new school. Summer professional development focused on SEL from Day 1 and throughout the first school year.



According to research, students who master the following skills are better prepared for college and career: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. SEL skills are building blocks to support mastery of abstract skills (Paolini, 2020). Intrapersonal skills are skills “within one’s own mind” that allow one to solve problems, learn, and understand one’s own strengths and weaknesses. Although there are several important intrapersonal skills, the one that was important for the new school was growth mindset, recognizing that skills are not set but can be learned over time (Paolini, 2020). SEL is important and supports college and career learning in a 21st-century learning environment as students strive to be successful early in elementary school as they prepare for their futures.

Over all, it was important to learn more about each of the overarching goals so that they could be infused in the school day and provide a strong road map for future school year endeavors and a successful end-of-school-year set of STARR results.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Education in the 21st century is more deliberate. The educational process that supports elementary school students to move to college and a career requires that students solve problems and utilize skills that rely, for example, on metacognition and thinking about thinking. These are higher-order forms of learning. All students are capable of learning, but the teacher models and scaffolds that learning explicitly. Opening a new school in the 21st century requires a distinct set of objectives. The purpose of this study is to relate my experiences as an elementary school principal striving to provide educational opportunities for students in a border community, but to do so in a way that is conducive to learning in a 21st-century environment. Their learning will support their future goals to enroll in college and/or undertake a career to be productive members of society. My experiences provide insight into how a school moved from idea and concept to a 21st-century learning school in a border community.

#### **What is an Autoethnography?**

A narrative approach was used to address the research questions for this study through autoethnography. Autoethnography, in its most simple form, is a study of the self (Reed-Danahay, 1997). An autoethnography is related to an autobiography or ethnography in narrative form, but it differs in that the researcher is also the subject of the study (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Mendez (2013) described autoethnography as a research method with advantages, limitations, and criticisms: The meaning is important, not the production of highly academic text. Mendez noted that the autoethnography provides ease of access to data as the researcher calls on personal experiences to investigate the phenomenon at hand.

The history of autoethnography is important. The autoethnography is like the self-narrative, the autobiography, and hermeneutics in that all explore the relationship between humans and the context of the socioculture and how people understand these. It is different in how an autoethnographer conducts the research, creates the focus, and analyzes the data (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Martinez (2017) stated that autoethnographic research as a method is highly suited to educational research and capable of expanding knowledge of educational practice and life in general. The autoethnographic approach was selected for a self-study to address the research questions below.

1. What experiences as a student, teacher, and school leader in this border community have influenced my attempts to build a framework for 21st-century learning at a new elementary school to prepare students for college and/or a career?

2. What administrative and personal processes support advancement of three goals (college and career readiness, academic success, and social-emotional learning) at a new elementary school for 21st-century learning in a border community?

3. How might this study support others who wish to open a school that will support 21st-century instruction to facilitate the transition to college and career?

### **Why Use Autoethnography?**

My experiences in life, education, and my career are important because they provide insight into life and educational processes in a border community. I can assess the plights of this area, the areas of need, the areas of strength, and possible solutions. As a practitioner-researcher, a school principal in far west Texas, born and raised in this area, I am situated to document and reflect on my experiences in opening a new 21st-century elementary school. With this approach, I feel confident about the ability to address the guiding questions. Reed-Danahay (1997)

suggested that personal narratives provide a connection from the personal to the cultural as the researcher reflects on personal experiences. In some ways, I am creating change and challenging the status quo. In some ways, I am a change agent—a school principal who can create a strong foundation for schools that will support students and their schooling in the 21st century. Cawn et al. (2016) agreed that a leader must be strong and hold a vision for instilling the practices that will lead to campus wide movement where educators know the standards and can teach them to be analytical and inquisitive. Living in a border community is challenging for many reasons, but the education of the children is a priority. Children will grow up to be members of society who will lead the community, performing a civic duty and giving back to the community. This study is self-reflective, focused on ideals that support a true 21st-century learning school. The methodology of autoethnography creates a relationship between the self and cultural and social discourses, which is an important way to analyze education (Starr, 2010).

I understand that others may not concur with my application of research and leadership practices. School principals across the country who are opening schools might not choose to open a school in the same way that I did. That is why it was important for me to use an autoethnographic approach because my experiences are unique and provide structures for this school in this part of the world. I hope that others will take value from I what I present, use it, and revise to support their unique attempts to open a new school.

### **The Site**

The new school is in a school district in El Paso, Texas. The school opened in July 2018 to provide educational opportunities to students in Grades pre-K through 5. The school was created to provide support to surrounding schools that were transferring students to neighboring campuses. This area is located far east in town, north of the interstate highway. The school is the

district's 29th elementary campus of 30 elementary schools and currently enrolls about 900 students. The school is a state-of-the-art facility built to (a) alleviate enrollment in the fast-growing community, and (b) provide elementary school students a 21st-century learning environment. The school's design is purposeful. It has an open concept and hub-based open areas to support project-based learning, 21st-century skills (communicating, collaborating, creating, and thinking creatively), and college and career readiness. The school is also a learning hub for many military families who have moved into the community. Because the area of town is one of the fastest growing in the country, overflow structures have been utilized to support this growth. The school is also home to Pre-K students. The vision for the new school is that students will succeed academically, socially, and emotionally by utilizing 21st-century learning skills and move on to college, a career, and life.

Most students at this school are Hispanic. The school opened with 270 bilingual students and 50 students with special needs. The ethnicity distribution is 82.22% Hispanic, 6.22% African American, 9.44% White, and 9.39% Other. The distributions of students prior to the school's opening are shown in Tables 2 through 4.

### **Data Collection**

Autoethnography is the method that I chose to tell my story, which is also a story about the opening of a new school. In my experience, there is a need to educate children so that they will one day succeed. I provide description and reflection of my experiences and I attempt to show the *how*. An autoethnography is not a methodology that supports only the literal; it supports the practice (Starr, 2010). Autoethnography supports this study as it exposes relationships and interactions among educators who live in a border community as they work to overcome ineffective teaching standards and inequity, not only within the community but

**Table 2***Ethnic Distribution of Students Prior to the School's Opening*

Ethnicity	F	M	Total
Hispanic	367	373	740
American Indian/Alaskan Native	9	7	16
American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American	1	0	1
American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, White	1	0	1
American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0	1
American Indian/Alaskan Native, White	1	1	2
Asian	6	4	10
Asian, White	1	1	2
Black/African American	14	12	26
Black/African American, White	8	7	15
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2	1	3
White	324	339	663
Non-Hispanic	72	75	147
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0	1	1
American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American	0	2	2
American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, White	4	3	7
American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	1	1
American Indian/Alaskan Native, White	1	0	1
Asian	0	1	1
Asian, White	21	20	41
Black/African American	1	1	2
Black/African American, White	1	4	5
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0	1
White	43	42	65
Total	439	448	887

*Note.* F = female, M = male.

**Table 3***Student Enrollment by Grade Level*

Grade	<i>n</i>	%
pre-Kindergarten	187	24.6
Kindergarten	104	13.7
Grade 1	92	12.1
Grade 2	100	13.1
Grade 3	93	12.2
Grade 4	96	12.6
Grade 5	89	11.7

**Table 4***Distribution of Students by Special Designation*

Designation	<i>n</i>	%
Economically Disadvantaged	517	67.9
Non-Economically Disadvantaged	244	32.1
Section 504	18	2.4
English Learners	201	26.4
Disciplinary Placements (2017-2018)	0	0.0
Dyslexia	6	0.8
At Risk	371	48.8
Intellectual Disability	22	28.6
Physical Disability	33	42.9
Autism	14	18.2
Behavioral Disability	8	10.4

relative to the region and the state and, in many cases, unknown to the educator (Starr, 2010).

The methodology of autoethnography offers insight into real and attainable change.

Data for this study consisted of the traditional types used by autoethnographic researchers to focus on the self and self-observation (Martinez, 2017): mostly calendar notes, meeting notes, and self-observations. Self-experiences are the building blocks for the overall writing process. Adding artifacts provided the overall content (Chang, 2016). Other data sources were emails, telephone calls, and recollection of the interactions with the stakeholders who supported the opening of the new school; since these were sparse, they were not used.

When the school was close to its initial opening, some media outlets covered the story of its unique opening through interviews by local media outlets that visited me at the new school. I utilized a few recollections from these experiences, some of which are still available on YouTube and others of which are available in media outlet archives. The data supported my self-reflection of the process of opening a school while considering the culture of this area, which includes the norms and acts of resistance in the border area. At the onset, my personal recollections, my thoughts, and my experiences were listed in a timeline and then translated into the paper. This process allows one to make changes in the writing fluidly (Chang, 2016). The ability to use these life experiences to support the study created an investment opportunity because the result was an accounting of the fruits of my labor. The timeline also allowed me to look for patterns and associate the data to times in my life and educational background, both as a scholar and as a principal. While reviewing this timeline, I identified themes that were pertinent to the year before the opening of the new school, the beginning of the school, the middle of the school year, and the end of the school year: academic success, college and career readiness (the how), and social and emotional support. The timeline approach allows a researcher to organize thoughts so that they support the flow of the study. In this case, I started with the beginning (my childhood) and moved to the school opening, then the close of the new school's first school year. Sometimes, a timeline can be organized in other ways, as the researcher begins with the end in mind and works from there (Chang, 2016).

Data collection was ongoing throughout the school year, before opening and during the first school year. A few months into this endeavor, I worked with my dissertation chair to begin a review of how the opening of the new school might provide insight into the research to benefit



others who might do the same. I used Microsoft Word calendars to enter meeting dates and topics. I used notebooks to take minutes of the meetings.

To support the retrieval of data pertaining to the three goals of the school, I created four areas of data collection: (a) self-observations, (b) photo/social media observations, (c) calendar events, and (d) meeting minutes and notes.

It is important to note some ethical considerations that were used in the self-study. First and foremost, there is no identifying information about individual staff members or students. I ensured that the main focus of the self-study was to provide information that others might find important and useful. Also, university institutional review board and school district review committee approvals were secured. Exempt status was granted for this self-study.

### **Self-Observations**

In ethnographic research, the researcher relies on self-observations, or observations as a participant in the study (Martinez, 2017). The methods identify gaps to support the needed transformative experiences (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). The autoethnography allowed me to place myself in the research study as a participant (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). The school year 2017-2018 was important, as it was the school year in which I was hired as the principal of the new school. That year of implementation included many meetings. Although each meeting was important, only a few were milestones for this study. To ensure that the notes of the meetings served the purpose of self-observation, feelings and opinions that were important to me were included (Martinez, 2017).

I recollected some of my self-observations through photos. I used my iPhone to collect pictures of events and stored them on Photo Circle, an iPhone application that allows one to organize, store, and date photos in various ways, such as by event. The application allowed me to

review my day via time stamped photos. I reviewed the photos by date and reviewed areas for consideration. As one example of this approach, the new school opened to teachers and staff on the Saturday prior to the first day of school for students. It was important to review these data because it was one blip in time that stands out for many reasons, but mostly to create a landmark day for accomplishment. It also supports the importance of culture and relationships. Photos were also used to recollect information, such as the parent/teacher evening at the high school that provided valuable data on how to create culture at the new school.

Chang (2016) stated that data collection in autoethnographies is a qualitative approach and not one that should be defined in the same terms as data collected for a quantitative study, although it serves the same purpose: to provide a method that supports what, why, where, and how. As the first year of the new school unfolded, day by day, the overall journey was supported in this chronology of photos.

Names of individuals are not important for this study but their titles and the departments they represented are, so names are not included. Rather, if needed, I refer to all participants by their title and department. The same is true for staff members with whom I consulted and those who were hired to work in the new school. Student names were not used; only details that support the interaction were important. If a name was needed to relay the importance of an interaction, a pseudonym was used.

### **Photo/Social Media Observations**

Our world has quickly become small. In 2002, I began my educational journey, substituting for teachers on many campuses in grades Kindergarten through 12. I was a school substitute for teachers, physical education coaches, music teachers, and special education aides. Each year, technology was a staple of day-in/day-out procedures. In 2005, I was a technology

instructional specialist. I vividly remember working with my school principal to acquire technology for the school. Then, a rolling interactive whiteboard was unfamiliar to educators and quite scary when attempting to use it for presenting a lesson to students. Now, interactive whiteboards are in every classroom in every school in our district, including this new school. They are now a staple in the classroom, as chalkboards were in the past. Chatting via computers from classroom to classroom was not a common practice. Using email to communicate with staff and parents was unheard of. Paper flyers and newsletters would be a thing of the past at the new school. Social media allows schools to communicate broadly and quickly with text, photos, and videos. Each school year, technology becomes more important.

Photos, some posted on social media to mark the occasion, were used only when there was a need to remember the event or occasion vividly. They are easily accessible for remembering important events for this study. Through social media, I relived experiences throughout the school year and used those data as needed. Although field notes serve a purpose in a more traditional setting, social media provided another layer of recollection of the events and supported the qualitative nature of this study. I chose photos for social media that could be saved and revisited. As Martinez (2017) noted, lived experiences involve more than simply writing the facts on paper; lived experiences are important when they can be interpreted to make sense. The photos offered a supportive purpose in the transformative process as I moved from concept to opening to the end of the first school year. Autoethnography can bring together the past and the present, which allows one to look into the future (Belbase et al., 2008).

Reviewing photos provided qualitative data for this study. Photos, some posted on social media, allowed me to track a story, using the associated dates and varied hashtags for observations and recollection of the events that supported the successful opening of the new

school, as well as the first school year. Before opening the school, I created a social media hashtag and attached it to every post to create team spirit, a sense of family, and culture. For example, tweets were used to communicate updates, promotions, and perceptions to students and parents before opening the school and during the first school year. One tweet, specifically, invited parents to their first parent meeting. Parents met the principal, key staff members who would work with them, and key district stakeholders who would support the school. The hashtag that I created was #StartMascotStrong. It was my thought that this would not only help me to review this data later, but would also create team spirit, moving forward together, opening a new school together—a founding family who would be the first to enter the school’s hallways. It was multipurpose in nature but simple: “Dear mascot parents, time flies by quickly. I can’t believe we are on the verge of GREATNESS! Let’s meet to #StartMascotStrong and to review the opening of our beautiful new school.”

Although not a major data piece for this study, data from Twitter documented some of the important events discussed in this study, such as the first day of school. Students, parents, and teachers came together on the first day of instruction to begin a journey, a new chapter. Academic success is important in any school and this day provided insight into the interactions of the stakeholders. It was also a day to implement rituals and routines. Students came together from many communities to learn to work together. Teachers had been provided resources and training and campus counselors. That day would define the rest of that school year as it pertained to SEL—the way in which we would support stakeholders socially and emotionally.

### **Calendar Events**

Opening a new school is exciting but it comes with risks, concerns, and obstacles. Organization is key. Organizing a day and planning to be proactive involved setting goals daily,

weekly, and monthly. The calendar became an important factor in meeting the demands of opening a new school. Calendars provide reminders, but they also provide history and references. For example, March 18, 2018, was an important day: pre-K registration. Pre-K registration requires planning, staff support, and the ability to have every box checked. Parents expect their child to be enrolled in school and are required to provide specific documents. It takes an entire team at each campus to move hundreds of parents through enrollment stations. Some parents wait outside the school's front entrance for hours, just to be first. Why would parents want to be first? Space is limited at each campus. Overflow is a system that parents in this community know very well.

Registration during the summer before the school opened had to occur in an alternative location, complicating the process. The high school was close by and is the flagship of our area, so we used the high school for this purpose. Working with feeder pattern principals afforded the ability to find places for important events, since the school building would not open until the first day of school and meetings, professional development sessions, presentations, and more required a location. Pre-K registration at the high school was one such event. It is important to note that these are the youngest students. They are at the grade level that our team would align vertically, academically. They were the school's founding students, the first group to make their way from Pre-K to Grade 5. It was important to keep in mind the overarching goals: academic success, college and career readiness, and SEL.

This important event provided many more challenges. Not all staff had been hired, so volunteers and feeder school staff were important participants in this process. It was necessary to be proactive, plan months ahead to ensure that staff members were available to support parents, choose a location close to community parents, and create culture even before the school opened.

These dates and meetings were documented in the calendar. Even for pre-K registration, first impressions mattered. Every event, each detail, and each action created an opportunity to build trust. I encountered problems. We used the qualitative data from that event to make the next year's event bigger and better.

The calendar became important; it was saved in a collection of monthly calendars, online, in a master document simply called the Year at a Glance. At first, during my time at district headquarters, I kept my calendar. When my school secretary joined me, she helped me to add to the digital document. Later, as the team grew, the leadership team planned future events and academic events at Monday morning meetings. We discussed the calendar, upcoming events, and events that had occurred. I reviewed the calendar often, not only for upcoming reminders but later to document data past, present, and future that would help me to identify items that were supportive of the three themes: academic success, college and career support, and social and emotional support.

Through the calendar, we marked upcoming Friday assessments and pulse checks to ensure that we were monitoring progress by students. We also marked dates when SEL lessons would occur, twice a week, and created themes for each week or month. The calendar was a planning support system that allowed the team to identify important culture-building events for families, students, and staff, such as the Family Fall Festival and Career Day for students. Every entry was important, but some dates and times contributed more. As I reviewed the calendar to collect data, highlighting provided direction: green for academic success, yellow for college and career items, and blue for social and emotional support. Highlights and recollections of the calendared items provided support for the ongoing review of each area.

The lived experience provides evidence of my role as the school principal to create relationships with the community, a task that is important for any principal but more so for a principal who has not yet met the community to establish a culture and relationships before the opening of the new school.

### **Meeting Minutes and Notes**

While technology works well in supporting schools, business, and personal interests, it is not a substitute for in-person, face-to-face meetings. Meeting minutes were an important data component in this study, mostly because they were derived in conjunction with the calendar posts. Postings of meetings in my calendar and minutes of those meetings were helpful in the reflection process. On one occasion, I was invited to review the boundary lines for the new school. On December 14, 2017, I met with the Assistant Superintendent of Academic Services to review the community meeting schedule. Community meetings were to be organized at campuses where students would be transferred to the new school. The meeting with the Assistant Superintendent resulted in a sound schedule for meeting each community of parents and students to develop relationships and establish the culture of the new school.

To capture the parent community early was important. Parents are their child's main advocates. The meeting minutes recorded the following: Parents were comfortable with their assigned schools, yet there was a need to move and assimilate to a new one. These meetings about big events all tie into emotional and social contexts. They mean much more than a jot in a digital calendar; there is important context for their meaning toward the successful opening and closing of the school year. Planning, details, and support were created based on these meetings. Recalling these important details provides support for data collection. As each event unfolded, I marked it on the calendar to support implementation of the overarching goals, in turn supporting

preparation of students for the new school with needed resources, lessons, and teacher professional development.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

An autoethnographic approach to this study provided the opportunity to create a data plan and a line of analysis because my experiences were unique and supported my craftsmanship of the plan. Martinez (2017) stated that the ability to become one's craftsman of data analysis provides the opportunity to tell a story that contributes to research and provides personal and unique support to the educational community when opening a new school in a unique way.

All data sources were organized to support later analysis of data. Calendar updates on the Microsoft Calendar were used for all day-to-day business approaches. The calendar entries supported recollection of the milestones by date and time and allowed the researcher to weave them together. The minutes were color coded by theme. Minutes were not used extensively but were helpful to recall in detail an important event from the calendar. Social media and iPhone photos from the application Photo Circle provided data for analysis only when a more vivid recollection was needed. Some review of social media by dates and events allowed me to recall important details. The hashtag system (#StartMascoNameStrong, #StayMascotNameStrong, and #FinishMascotNameStrong) helped me to review a few Twitter posts and photos according to their purpose and time frame in the school year.

The main purpose of the analysis was to review and analyze the opening of the school through the first school year from its beginning to the middle and end. This allowed me to provide data that would support academic key milestones as they pertained to the opening of the school, the midyear review of the implementation of overarching goals to include academic data, and the review at the end of the school year, which in this case is marked by end-of-year



standardized assessment data—the pinnacle of the overall success of a school. More important, the data allowed me to tie the important points into the three overall themes: academic success, social and emotional support, and college and career readiness. It also allowed me to address the research question posed in this study.

Academic success, one of the themes and the most important over all as detailed in the literature review, relies heavily on standardized testing. In Texas, this process has evolved to provide a college and career component to testing. It also provides for the organization of data by score (TEA, 2018). Because the school was new, the evaluation of the first year was based on the state's standardized test, evaluated with support from the district's research and data department. The end of the year relied heavily on test results, mostly to review how the school performed according to the domain Progress. The domain "Progress at a Masters Level", according to TEA (2018), indicates that students are on track to college and career readiness goals, in line with the purpose of this study, which was to move students from Pre-K to Grade 5 so they can move to college and career.

Chang (2016) suggested that, in autoethnographic work, one may (a) search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns; (b) look for cultural themes; (c) identify exceptional occurrences; (d) analyze inclusion and omission; (e) connect the present with the past; (f) analyze relationships between self and others; (g) compare one's case with other people's cases; (h) contextualize broadly; (i) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and (j) frame with theories. Most of my analysis relied on themes and subthemes and followed the overall data collection process as it was documented by the overarching themes: academic success, college and career readiness, and social and emotional support. The patterns and relationships were noted as they pertained to how the data interweaved among the three themes. The three themes

were constant throughout the school year: beginning of year, middle of year, and end of year. The last was the most important because the overall process culminated in the state-mandated tests that signified our success or lack of it. Chang (2016) stated that, although there are many suggestions on how to collect data, personal experience is used most often, as all data collection is intertwined into a web of outcomes. Some autoethnographies have even been provided in poem or musical theme.

### **Limitations**

By placing myself as researcher and participant in this study, I identified the challenges and the opportunities of the study (Jahng, 2014). My experiences in growing up in a border community are real. Although autoethnography allows one to pinpoint the needs of the community and possible solutions, for example, the need for teachers to provide culturally responsive education that honors the students in our community, it also has limitations (Jahng, 2014). The first-person approach to writing is sometimes regarded as fiction, not science (McIlveen, 2008). The counterpoints to this are evident in the literature review: Autoethnography allowed me to be a researcher and part of the research. Having lived in this community and having been an educator in this community, I am able to provide feedback that can lead to real change in the community. Autoethnography provides an avenue for relaying the cultural and social aspects that envelop the area and its schools. Although there are similar stories and studies, some of which have been cited, they are not the same. This is a limitation. No matter the results, this school is unique, so not all of the results of the study can be used at other schools to produce the same results.

Research and the findings are important so that reflection and progress and other opportunities can be achieved. Although research supports many of the areas already outlined in

this study, as indicated in the literature review, and although, beyond the scope of this self-study, there are large bodies of research on the principalship and the many challenges that elementary schools face, research was not found about opening a new 21st-century elementary school located on the United States-Mexico border. To have the opportunity to open a new elementary school in this region, one that supports 21st-century learning, is important. Access to research on this topic would have strengthened the methods for opening the school.

Despite these limitations, this study can inform educators in marginalized communities and principals who wish to use the findings to open new schools that support children in attaining the goals of 21st-century learning or who wish to use ideas from an established campus.

Data analysis is important as it allows for direction, planning, and creating outcomes that can be monitored for progress to achieve better outcomes in the following school year. It is important to review the school year formatively and for summative purposes so the school can continue to move forward successfully.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **GROUND ZERO AND MORE**

Much work must be accomplished if a new school is to open successfully to children and parents on the first day. First impressions resonate with parents. The year in which I worked at the district's main offices was important because it helped me to set the stage for first impressions and provided an opportunity to review important details about staffing, furniture, and data, as well as to hold meetings with architects and staff in various departments that support the district's schools. It also provided the opportunity to create a plan for culture and climate. The three overarching goals were created to work together to support students and all stakeholders in that first year. It is important to review each goal as it functioned throughout the school year separately so that the value of each goal is made clear. In this chapter I present each goal as it contributed to the overall outcome and supported the school at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year, ultimately defined by the state-mandated STAAR.

#### **Central Office Support**

The main goal for ground zero was to create staffing opportunities that would support the opening of the new school, so working with the many departments that supported this effort was important. Many people had a direct impact on the successful opening of the school. Each, working with others in their department, made opportunities for the new school lasting and sound. The HR department supported staffing of the school and the Finance department worked to support purchase of resources, furniture, supplies, and more. Academic Services provided input and support by arranging community meetings months before the school opened to begin the process of disseminating information on boundary lines that would determine the school's student population and its new constituents. Maintenance and Operations departments helped to

secure delivery of modern furniture. The department of design played an important role, setting up meetings with architects and construction teams to settle on details that would support the opening of the school on time, in July 2018. The academics department provided demographic and instructional data to select teachers and identify new students. Each departmental team upheld the integrity of the school district, providing support so that I could provide a school that would support scholars in this community with short- and long-term goals to propel them into a 21st-century learning world.

Although the overall experience brings back many wonderful memories, planning support from the various department heads and staff was not always without problems or concerns. I met with the director of the purchasing department. He was efficient and supported by a strong staff, but he had never worked on a campus. Most meetings were cordial, professional, and supportive. However, one meeting was instrumental in how the school was provided adequate resources. Each morning, I arrived to work to review my calendar of meetings for the day. On that day, a meeting was scheduled with the purchasing department. I had prepared questions and notes and had researched furniture items online, mostly reviewing websites of high schools that were considered 21st-century learning schools. I had contacted a couple of principals who oversaw their own campuses. These short review and research sessions were fruitful, and I learned much regarding what I had envisioned for the school. The vendors who were approved by the purchasing department had provided catalogues, which I had reviewed in length for many weeks prior. Although the furniture was outstanding, the furniture items were very traditional, various shades of brown, beige, and cherry, and mostly, in my opinion, supportive of a traditional classroom, the ones that I had come to know very well. The meeting with the purchasing department would be one in a series of meetings that would help to

determine the purchase of classroom teacher desks, office furniture, open-hub area items, and student tables and chairs. As we met in the department's conference room, filled with cherry wood furniture, carpet, and beige walls, but a few feet away from my cubicle, I sat quietly as I was presented items that the department "team" considered would be perfect for the new school. The choices were unacceptable to me, based on my research. Students' desks and seats would have to be mobile, lightweight, and with accessibility to books and supplies beneath the desktop. Desks would be modular in nature and would fit together in a variety of ways, mostly to accommodate collaboration and purposeful talk. The desks would offer the opportunity for students to write on the tops as they discussed math, reading, and PBL ideas. Color choices were important: greys, blues, silver, white, chrome, and any color that was just the right shade of bright. Teacher desks would be mobile, as well, and would need to accommodate technology, instruction, and the same look and feel. The learning hubs would be furnished with modular items attractive to students in Pre-K through Grade 5. Office furniture, which would be visible to parents, guests, and district personnel as they entered the front doors and moving from office to office, would have to exude modern ideas, the antithesis of traditional. Gray would marry wood and the flooring would be modern, supportive of environmental concerns, and capable of recycling. All in all, the look and feel were important and would become items to be used for any future school in our school district. After the presentation, a few well-thought-out rhetorical questions were posed to the team to gauge their interest. Then I presented some of the ideas and thoughts that I had envisioned for the new school based on my research. The team had evidently also practiced and were quite ready with a multitude of responses to questions that I might pose. I was disappointed because it was evident that the battle would be uphill from that moment on, more than likely with other department teams, as well. Fortunately, principalship thickens skin

and creates persistence. The discussion soon moved to an argument, but I did not succumb to pressure nor did I settle for anything less than what a 21st-century learning facility would offer. We eventually agreed to review a few more approved vendor catalogues, online and in interactive mode, with new vendors approved through their in-house processes for approving vendors. Ultimately, after a few trips to these offices, the furniture for classrooms was found and furniture for offices and conferences rooms was chosen. The series of meetings with the purchasing department were not comfortable, but each allowed me to move forward with what was envisioned. Eventually, students and parents who walked on the new campus were impressed and were attracted to the 21st-century vision.

### **Centrality of Teachers**

In April 2018, most staff members had been recommended. Teachers were given grade-level assignments. Staff are the key to a successful school year if the school is to attain the goals and objectives created at the onset, in this case, academic success in a college and career learning environment utilizing 21st-century skills supported by social and emotional support. Staffing is the most important activity of a school principal in opening a new school. Teaching means that the teacher takes control of the lesson and provides the lesson to students, most of whom are there to listen and learn through teacher guidance. A 21st-century school requires that teachers release instruction, in some ways, to the students in the classroom, utilizing the four Cs to move instruction, with students as part of the teaching process. This is a strange concept to some teachers. Control can be everything to a teacher, but the days of “drill and kill” no longer support successful outcomes for children in this community, who will compete with others for the 21st-century jobs that await them.

Cohen-Vogel (2011) explained a teacher effect that determines how far and to what levels a child can learn. The teacher effect is simply the added value that a teacher can provide to a student's learning ability. In the era of No Child Left Behind and state-mandated testing, teachers were gearing resources toward methods to meet the demands of state testing. The teacher effect was not considered an important factor in student success. Today, with the new state-mandated tests focused on progress and college and career readiness, it behooves a new school principal to hire staff who will have that teacher effect on children, providing the added value in the classroom that will create long-lasting effects for children who will grow up in this community and choose to go to college.

Goldring et al. (2013) stated that administrators are involved in staffing decisions 75% of the time, on average. In opening a new school, I had 100% of the decision-making opportunity. Goldring et al. also stated that administrators in general tend to focus on organizational skills when hiring teachers and rarely focus on quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Opening a 21st-century school required that the opposite of this hold true. Quality of teaching in the classroom, supported by the 21st-century learning attributes as outlined in this study, is of major importance to provide a trajectory toward a successful college transition, which includes the ability to remain in college, meeting all degree mandates.

In opening a new school, one might think that the placement of each teacher in the new school is of little importance. Goldring et al. (2013) identified the concept of out-of-field teaching, as teachers are often hired to teach in areas in which they are not skilled, in which they have no real background knowledge, or in which they are not fully certified. However, placement is very important and, as Goldring et al. (2013) pointed out, placement of teachers creates opportunities for real learning that will support positive outcomes for learners. Today, all



teachers are required to teach only in the areas in which they are fully certified. In opening the new school, the strategy was to acquire teachers who had been successful at their campus, not only with local and state data outcomes and data acquired through interviews and unannounced observations, but with the skills, attitudes, and adaptability that they would need to support a new school. The teachers were strategically placed in their prior grade levels. This secured integrity of the standards that would be taught and the outcomes that could be generated.

### **Move Mountains**

Once staff were secured, it was important to remember that they be asked to work together to do one thing: educate children. Because children are human capital and children will one day become adults who give back to this community, it was important to create a team or a family who loved what they do and where they do it so they could “move mountains.” Relationship building, culture, and climate would need to be addressed and would have to be priority at every opportunity. Teachers and staff were not allowed to join me at district headquarters during the planning year. The new team was required to wait until summer break to be together. However, we found opportunities to meet and work on plans for the opening of the new school.

To build relationships with teachers at distant campuses, I created group emails and sent them to each grade-level team, introducing team members, making suggestions for teams to meet and get to know each other. Every team replied promptly and created meeting times and dates at local locations, mostly restaurants. From there, each team began its journey. It was quite simple—a group email with a suggestion. But it was strong in what it accomplished: relationships that resulted in families by the end of the first school year. Such a simple activity—and email—created a world of difference before the opening of the school.

In May of that year, we held a teacher meet-and-greet at a neighboring campus after school hours. Everyone who had been brought on board attended. Staff and teachers came together to introduce themselves. They discussed their experiences and their reasons for applying. The meeting included food, music, and ice breaker activities. Also in May, we held our first parent meet-and-greet at our feeder high school. Our Public Relations (PR) department helped me to create the invitations. We utilized the call-out system to create a series of messages to parents, inviting them to the event. We invited the cheerleading and band drum line from the feeder high school to perform as parents and staff entered the high school theater. It was with great fanfare that we created an amazing first and lasting impression. Trust had to be earned.

To support our parental community, I invited the directors of the key departments that supported the new school as liaisons to my efforts during that preparation year. They discussed their roles with regard to supporting the new school and the parents. The area board member provided feedback to the entire team. In the high school gym, each school district department set up a booth with information packets; grade-level teachers set up booths to be available to parents. The new school logo was prominently displayed on a large screen and music played as parents, teachers, staff, and district personnel mingled and discussed the wonderful opportunities that awaited the students. We had on display for all stakeholders a wooden beam that would be placed at the school entrance, prominently listing the names of the founding family who had helped to open the new school.

### **Culture Matters**

In summer 2018, I solicited help to create a few short-term committees to support the creation of the new school. The various committees dedicated their time to creating the school's chant, revisions to the school's vision and mission statements, and culture objectives. Time was

provided to each grade-level team to meet and review grade-level specific goals, such as lesson plans, project-based learning plans, professional development opportunities, resources, and needs. Over the summer, these activities led the new staff to become a team.

*Culture* can be defined as the norms, characteristics, unwritten rules, and expectations that envelop a schoolwide community, including teachers, staff, students, and parents (Gan & Alkaher, 2021). At this new school, culture would be supported by the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) that would guide the entire team to form a culture and climate that would promote success in all areas, specifically academic success, college and career readiness, and social and emotional areas (El-Amin, 2017).

PBIS supports are those that schools use to create systems for building culture, climate, and safety. They are a byproduct of the SEL objective, where teachers and students work together to support positive or negative behaviors. One example is the formation of the four standards that our school would follow through the school day: (a) be safe, (b) be responsible, (c) be respectful, and (d) be hungry for knowledge. Every decision and discussion, no matter the reason, was to be associated to these standards. Many of the school's teachers and the administration team had been trained in PBIS standards at their prior campus, so a committee that included our school counselors met before the school's opening to construct the systems to be used. The plan can include functional behavioral assessments, the student support teaming process, cultural proficiency, and evidenced-based practices (Bradshaw et al., 2012).

Culture and climate are important in any setting. To create these at a new school can be daunting as teachers, staff, students, and parents came to the new school from a diversity of areas, schools, and locations.

Creating culture is not any one thing; it is a set of unwritten rules and norms of the entity. With no prior history, first impressions and early expectations initially drove this effort. Culture affected each group in this school in various ways. For example, children came together from different places and were expected to cooperate. Teachers had to get along with each other, love what they did, support their parental community, and be successful at what they were hired to do: teach. Time is of the essence when opening a new school, and the initial activities, opportunities, and strategies were the beginning of the overall process. To keep culture growing, a plan was needed. The new school would be driven toward positive culture and climate by PBIS. The interventions and supports are important and affect the culture of a school in ways that promote success in the themed areas; when done correctly, they can have long-lasting effects on everyone in the school, while in school and later.

As detailed by El-Amin (2017), PBIS has a few imbedded assumptions. First, it is a set of best practices that can be used to intervene before problems arise. Second, faculty and staff would have to know that PBIS is a framework to be used to address social behavior and academic achievement, based on data, conducive to successful student outcomes, and used with high fidelity by all team members. Third, a PBIS team is responsible for implementation and monitoring of the expectations. Fourth, if all team members know the expectations, then the ability to abide by these expectations is reinforceable.

### **The Field Trip**

Students love field trips. Field trips are an extension of the learning lesson but created so as to allow students to experience learning in an environment outside of the classroom when resources are not readily available in a classroom. Teachers, staff, and adults are just as easily excited by field trips, which promote relationship building, culture, and support for the vision.

The small staff whom I had recruited during my time at district headquarters worked as a team to plan our first teacher field trip. On the first day of our 2-week professional development session, 2 weeks before the first day of school, the entire teacher and administrative team embarked on a field trip to the local university. We started early in the morning, meeting at the high school in our feeder area, where we boarded district buses. As we drove across town, we made new friends. Upon arrival, the team was greeted by university staff members, who created a quick welcome and orientation in the school's bookstore. We were offered coffee, snacks, water, and school gifts. We embarked on a scavenger hunt, coordinated by our team, which included photo taking, tweeting, and meeting a checklist of items. The new spirit stick would be provided to our winners. We ate lunch in the university commons and were welcomed to the college of education, where we would use one of their meeting rooms to attend district-mandated professional development sessions. The experience was unforgettable and the theme was monumental. If we were to attempt to create a strong foundation for 21st-century learning that supported students' goals to go to college, it was important to walk on a university campus again. We learned and we had fun as we experienced the 4 Cs.

### **First Day of School**

Autoethnography provides the ability to use personal experiences to reflect on an overall concern or problem. In this case, the problem was that, even today, there are gaps when using 21st-century learning supports at the elementary school level for students in a border community that in some ways continue the pitfalls of the past.

A new building is a wonderful place to be, but there are challenges. The building was opened in phases and the only areas available to the team were the classrooms and the cafeteria; the library, the gymnasium, administrative offices, and other areas would open later in that

school year. Construction of the school happened over the course of that first year. On the first day of school, after parents had left, the cafeteria staff provided breakfast for the students. Normally, students in our school district have breakfast in the classroom. The cafeteria team, hand in hand with the custodial crew, would deliver breakfast to each classroom. Unfortunately, our team was met with a roadblock. The school had two floors and the elevator did not work. Normally, when the elevator does not work, the stairways are used. However, as easy as that might seem, there were far too many students on the second floor. After many attempts to move heavy coolers up the stairs, safety became a concern. The team was forced create a breakfast schedule in the cafeteria for students on the second floor. Moving an entire floor of second, third, fourth, and fifth graders to the cafeteria when they were scheduled to attend to instructional goals mean a loss of instruction every day. It was months before our elevator worked and months before we would understand the importance of a working elevator in an elementary school with a second floor.

It had rained hard on the weekend before the Monday of the first day of school. The new roof leaked, so staff were called in to patch, clean, and create band aids. The elevator did not work, so breakfast, which normally would have been served in each classroom, was served in the cafeteria, resulting in lost instructional time. Construction crews were on site and would be there for the next few months. Fire walkers were hired to walk the campus, ensuring safety for the staff and students who occupied parts of the building that were fully functioning. All staff were forced to share closets, book rooms, and other spaces as offices until the administrative areas opened. Tarantulas, snakes, and bugs were frequently seen on walls and in hallways, the result of continued groundbreaking activities. Books and some furniture were still to arrive, much on back

order. The first day of school and the many weeks that followed were irregular, but we survived, and we did so mostly on reliance on each other.

On September 1, 2018, I came upon a photo of our staff. We had reached the end of our day and many of us in the immediate area stopped to pose on the steps leading to the second floor. The stairs were instrumental in those first few months; the elevator did not work and breakfast had to be served in the cafeteria. As we posed, we recalled and joked about the steps that we had put in going up and down those stairs. It was a nice moment. We were becoming a team; unfortunately, we were losing instructional time. Bringing all students from the second floor downstairs to eat breakfast in the cafeteria was time consuming and took away from instructional time. All in all, we quickly became reliant and trusting of each other.

### **Embarking on Year 1**

Before opening the school, I had collected data with the support of district resources. The data included attendance, state-mandated results for each student from the prior school year at their home campus, and other data to support the research. The data provided a starting point. Students came to the school from many other schools in the school district. Although this new school was created to alleviate population growth at the school just down the road, that school had for years been sending students to other schools because capacity had been reached. Many of the overflow students lived in our boundary lines. Creating spreadsheets and reviewing various reports allowed me to organize student assessment data by grade level and teacher. This also provided an opportunity to create classes that were balanced, as much as possible. I usually leave the process of class building to teachers at each grade level, in a room where administrators and teachers collaborate to form these groups; I did not have the staff to do this at that time. On February 14, 2018, I met with my supervisor, the Assistant Superintendent, to discuss class-

building ideas. The meeting notes indicated that we met in my cubicle and reviewed the data that I had organized. She suggested contacting the various campuses, which should have their own class-building cards. Because students would be moving to the new school, they would not need the cards that they had meticulously created, assuming every campus had used and kept them. I was able to obtain all of these cards. As I sat in the back supply room to organize them, I realized the importance of having a staff team working together to move us forward. The cards were important because they contained hand-written information provided by the teacher, including assessment results, demographic information, and notes about the student. Although the process was tedious and took a few days, it was helpful. Other data included special education, bilingual, gender, and other important details. The data collection process supported me to a certain to a certain degree as I also reviewed the three overarching goals. Preparing these data by hand, fumbling through various reports and spreadsheets, leading to days of card sorting, the process began to tell a story.

For academic purposes, the academic data to which I was privy consisted solely of state-mandated data for every scholar for whom we had a record of their prior school year. Data were not available for some students who had moved into our community, but I had access to state scores of most students who would attend the new school. Table 5 is a sample of the spreadsheet that I created to organize the data, which I then used for class-building purposes. The data were also provided to each teacher as soon as they were on board. This data review was our first attempt to understand the academic standing of our campus at the beginning of the school year.

All preparations, as imperfect or as efficient as they were, collectively, supported the ability to open the new school to students and the community. I remember that first day of school. The moment is not anything that one can document or do justice by putting the



**Table 5***New School Data: State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, 2017*

Student	Special education	English learner	Grade level	Testing campus	Raw score	Percent score	Approaches	Meets	Masters
1	No	No	3	1	27	79%	Yes	Yes	No
2	No	No	3	2	25	74%	Yes	No	No

experience on paper because it is a moment in time that happens once and is real and unique to the observer. The first day of school at the new school was different, to say the least. It was important to ensure that strong systems were in place. The fact that this school was a new school and would open in phases throughout that first year created alarm in many ways. I remember parents arriving early that morning and flooding the school's hallways with chatter, excitement, anxiety, and some concern. Parking lots were not fully developed, and parents were forced to park in vacant lots. Even with a school map, instructions for parking, and details regarding protocols and routines, some parents were lost. The school staff gave feedback, as they had practiced during the previous weekend. The district team members who were sent to help that day had updates and expectations, but even they seemed to be unsure. The day moved on, parents left the building after dropping off their children, and school started.

### **Social and Emotional Learning for Beginning of Year 1**

A new school opens to students who come together to create a new set of traditions, a new culture, and a new climate. In our school district, a school will open to a cluster of students who have moved from the same school. In this case, our school opened to students who were attending six other schools. After review of the data, it was clear that our special education population, bilingual population, at-risk population, and economically disadvantaged population

would be high. Also, military families moving into our neighborhood would account for 30% of our student population in Year 1. Our school was, literally, the one standing structure in that area of the desert. Home building would begin in Year 1. Taking all of this into account, it was clear that students and staff would need to be provided an abundance of care and social and emotional support. The devotion to ample amounts of SEL support was crucial to the opening of this new school. The ability to empower students with life-long skills that support their goals was important and to do so right from the beginning would create a way for everyone to come together quickly so that we could embark on the academic journey together (Tantillo, 2016).

Our teachers moved into the building on the Saturday before the first day of school. Our school facility was built in three phases, so the school was being constructed around us during the first school year. Much of the community was also being built up around us during the first year. Prior to the first day of school, our team had met to discuss plans for the school year to include a vision, a mission, and the incorporation of the three overarching goals. The data were shared with teachers and staff during the summer before opening the school and, with the data in hand, we discussed plans for SEL. The critical factors have been detailed regarding the school: new school, three phases of construction, students enrolling from various schools, teachers arriving from various schools, state-mandated data, and demographics. Taking these factors into account, the team met during the summer, forming committees to discuss these factors. The team met to review the school vision and mission and the overarching goals. We also met to review social and emotional support details that would create a strong opening. How we presented SEL to parents and staff has been detailed, so the team concentrated on the students. Figure 1 shows the team's discussion about the plan for SEL support for the first few weeks of school. We also kept in mind the importance of looking for specific factors that would support SEL in the

classroom. Lawson et al. (2019) identified components of SEL that supported evidence-based SEL: social skills, identifying others' feelings, identifying one's own feelings, and behavioral coping skills/relaxation. With these in mind, a formative program can be built.

The plan was powerful in that it provided a way to bring many people together as a team, most of whom had not worked together before. The list also provided the opportunity to create the beginnings of a school culture.

Monday, September 17, 2018, my calendar note stated that our leadership team would visit every classroom, allocating the visits by leadership team member and grade level. These walkthroughs were conducted every week in the early morning during the mandated SEL lessons that teachers were to present to students. The purpose was to ensure that the lessons were being delivered and to ensure that the teachers and students felt supported. There are many more ideas and ideals that can be incorporated into the school day, but it was important to tie this together in a simple yet effective rollout starting on Day 1. The first day of school and the first week of school were dedicated to SEL and some academics. It was important to learn, but it was more important to learn to be kind to each other during that first week.

### **Academics for Beginning of Year 1**

There are two overarching reasons that schools exist, based on my experience: to provide academic foundations for the success of all students and to create opportunities for SEL.

Opening a new school is quite the experience. It is hard work, extensive planning, and continuous review. The data reviews conducted in Year 0 were effective and allowed the team to open with classes that were as evenly balanced as possible with regard to gender, demographics, prior year assessment data, special program association, and more.

1. Review the staff that had been trained in Social and Emotional Learning
2. Provide a book study to our team, *Everyday SEL In Elementary School* (Tantillo, 2016)
3. Review of the data regarding attendance, grades, demographics, and prior school enrollment
4. By grade level, review class building reports
5. Create expectations following the PBIS system: Be SAFE, Be Responsible, Be Respectful and Be Hungry for Knowledge
6. Review of calendar and first week's activities
7. Block week 1 and 2 for SEL activities to include first day of school opening activities, week 1 ongoing and week 2 ongoing
8. Activities would include those very few provided by our book study *Everyday SEL In Elementary School* (Tantillo, 2016)
9. Counselor lesson plans, which were provided to our teachers who would present to student twice per week
10. Circle time, everyday week one and 1 x per week after week 1, which would allow students to form a circle in the classroom and discuss various topics with each other
11. Counseling sessions on a calendar starting day 2 of school, which included whole group, small group and as needed one on one check ins
12. Counselor minute meetings where counselors would visit each classroom over the course of two weeks to speak with each student in each classroom to discuss 1-minute sets of questions and answers, marked and documented
13. Daily morning announcements by the school principal which incorporated the FOUR Bs in #5 in this list and to include mention of our overarching goals, using our CORE values and our school chant.
14. Teacher activities were created by the grade level for day 1, week 1 and week 2 and were planned during our 9 weeks planning session in the summer. Each grade level used the resources they collectively had used in years past and were structured into the overall day of learning.
15. Open House was created the weekend before school opened on that same Saturday to allow students to visit their classrooms and allowed teachers to mingle with their new parents and students, also providing a power point of the activities, expectations and more to our new families.

**Figure 1.** *Plan for Social and Emotional Learning During the First Few Weeks of School*

### **College and Career Readiness for Beginning of Year 1**

Academics are important, but the way in which the new school would approach academics was critical. The use of strategies, resources, and pedagogical techniques imbedded in

21st-century learning methods became the way in which the team addressed learning at the opening of the school year. Working in district headquarter offices provided me the opportunity to meet with various directors of departments who would facilitate the opening of the new school. Below is a synopsis of these meetings from meeting minutes, calendar review, and notes.

1. August 2017 through August 2018, I met with the directors of departments that would support this area, college and career readiness, creating meeting opportunities along the way to discuss, develop and implement specific PD moments for the teachers and staff during summer professional development weeks, Summer/July 2018.

2. Most meetings involved the following entities: Academics and Instruction team consisting of district instructional specialists who each worked with the different content areas, content areas required to be addressed and taught in the state of Texas; Instructional Technology specialists who supported the instructional officers and the school district with how they support instruction and academics; bilingual department for support and guidance in academic professional development recommendations; and special education department for the same.

3. September 17, 2017, I met with technology instructional specialists in the district computer labs to research the state high school endorsements. The endorsements are a series of aligned clusters of courses that are grouped together by interest or skill set and which should be taken starting in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The 5 Endorsement areas are Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM); Business and Industry, Public Service, Arts and Humanities, and Multidisciplinary Studies. These endorsement cluster of sessions are imbedded with the state standards, which align down to middle school and from there elementary school (Texas Workforce Commission, 2018). The purpose of the meeting

was to review how and if these endorsement standards could feasibly be aligned to elementary school to create Project Based Learning (PBL) projects that would support not only academic goals, but the way teachers and staff could teach it. The purpose for the meeting was create a college and career readiness approach to teaching. Changing the mindset of teachers teaching methods, especially teachers who would come to the new school from different campuses required an approach to teach teachers that would be manageable, yet effective. Team members discussed the initial findings and future dates to meet to further plan. Meetings continued throughout the school year, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018 and June 2018. In June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018, the team finalized professional development plans, locations for PD (the school did not yet exist for meeting) and to finalize roll out plans which included a brief lesson plan and the themes for each grade level with the actual project based learning project ready to begin the school year. Effectively, the PBL approach to learning year 1 would infuse the four Cs into everyday learning and would provide teachers with the ability to use these techniques in the school day: collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking.

4. The bilingual and special education department leads helped me to define important professional development sessions for teachers that would support review of items they had been expected to learn previously and to support new teachers to teaching and our school district. On January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, I met with the Bilingual Departments director to review bilingual data available, beyond STAAR scores already mentioned. The data discussions was in regards to projected numbers of bilingual students in each grade level and the amount of bilingual teachers needed in each grade level. The

information was important for many reasons, but specifically for staffing and professional development future opportunities, specifically for summer PD. After discussing the need to have teachers engage students in learning that would be supported by the four Cs, we concluded that PD could be developed to refresh and support strategies that could be used in the classroom, mostly Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model. SIOP is a framework that offers teachers strategies that support learning for all students, specifically English Language Learners. The strategies allow students to engage in the learning with the teacher and each other. These strategies are supportive of the four Cs (Echevarria et al., 2011).

5. The school purchased specific resources for the first school year, which would support instruction and a 21<sup>st</sup> Century, College and Career Readiness approach, all programs specifically aligned to the state standards, all reviewed by district teams and approved for purchase. On July 11, 2018, I met with the instructional specialists of each content area to review my choices for resources. We discussed alignment to state standards, the online and offline features for teachers and staff, monitoring reports capability, and other factors that support student learning in a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environment. After meeting opportunities, I contacted vendors and followed purchasing requirements to acquire items before the school year opened. Mostly, resources supported the four Cs.

6. The academic instructional officers provided support with planning procedures and guidance for 9 weeks planning and review. These TEKS (Texas Essential of Knowledge and Skills) 9 weeks sessions included planning time, review of the standards, calendar of

instructional goals and timelines and implementation of the items learned from the PD sessions.

7. On July 20, 2018, my administrative team met with teachers to review the 1<sup>st</sup> 9 weeks of school. We discussed lesson plan templates, lesson plan requirements, calendar pacing goals, standard specificity, PBL infusion, and the inclusion of strategies provided at PD sessions along the way. Teachers met by grade level and were supported by curriculum coach, administration, and other leadership team members.

8. The technology department supported all our efforts with PD sessions that addressed specific district goals to support instruction and communication.

The time frame at district headquarters helped to develop teacher support goals for the beginning of the school year.

### **Onward to Middle of Year 1**

A year at school district headquarters provided many opportunities to plan and learn, although rarely is a plan perfectly realized. Trials and tribulations are part of the equation. The first 9 weeks of school had pitfalls, but it was successful over all. The preplanning opportunities were supportive and allowed teachers and staff to start strong. The first day and week of school were challenging. As I had predicted, students came together and quickly clashed for many reasons. Some students were new to the area. A few students were new to the state. Many students were new to each other, having come from different schools. I remember one incident in which two male students, Grade 3, were caught in the restroom fighting. One student had yelled at the other and that student had punched him in the face. Both students claimed that they were defending themselves. The two boys had come from two different schools, each with their own opinion about which school was better. We had not yet instilled in these students that the school



that they currently attended together was the best school. Our amazing grade-level teachers had had the opportunity to get to know each other the summer before school but our students had not.

### **Social and Emotional Learning for Middle of Year 1**

The first semester of the school year comprised two 9-week periods. This time frame is important because it is the foundation where culture, traditions, strengths, and success are created. The middle of the school year is also important but in different ways. Comparing the two is possible because data are available.

At the beginning of the school year, the school opened successfully. Challenges were met but SEL strategies, as planned before and during the beginning of the school year, were effective. Progress, regression, success, or failure can be measured through collection of data that may be quantitative in nature. For example, attendance data may indicate that children are happy coming to school and that parents are satisfied with the school's service to their children. Office referrals, which are indicative of student behavior and SEL, were high that first year, although not as high as our team had predicted. My experience at other schools allowed me to create comparisons; although the data indicated that office referrals were high for the first year, they were lower than at three previous schools that I had attended. Our middle of Year 1 provided an opportunity to review data and analyze how we might continue to move forward.

Initially at the beginning of Year 1, SEL observation opportunities were created by using a walkthrough schedule, which coincided with the days on which teachers were expected to provide SEL lessons and the day of each week on which students were given the opportunity to engage in circle time discussions. These observations were laser focused on the culture, climate, and relationships in the classroom. These observations are critical and should not focus on what the teacher has learned or what practice the teacher has gained from professional development,

but rather on what the teacher is doing in the classroom as it pertains to culture and climate (Kim et al., 2019). SEL observations were a very different set of observations compared to the academic walkthroughs that were discussed previously. Circle time, for example, allowed the teacher to provide a topic to which each student would contribute thoughts based on their respective real-world experiences. Documenting the notes of the observation and review of the observation data with the leadership team helped us with continuous monitoring. By the middle of Year 1, we were able to collect these data and review them continuously.

On January 17, 2019, I entered Teacher V's class. As I entered, I noticed that students were engaged in learning and were reviewing a short video about being friendly. Ms. V asked the class, "How have you been a friend to others?" The students had the opportunity to answer the question using their comrades' feedback from collaborative groups. The students discussed the question and provided feedback to each other. Ms. V. called students back and asked each group to choose one person (the person with the shortest hair in the group) to give a response. The students were engaged and interacting. They were not aware that they were using some of the four Cs to support SEL. One student responded that, in his group, one student had stated that she had helped a new student in their classroom. Another student in another group stated that he had given his friend a compliment because his friend was sad one day. These observed SEL moments were important because the team had to grow and become family if we were to continue to move forward

On February 19, 2019, I met with my leadership team. Our weekly morning leadership meetings are important. During this meeting, the team discussed attendance and discipline on campus. In line with these topics, we discussed the weekly SEL walkthroughs. The leadership team performed SEL walkthroughs each week. We took turns visiting entire grade levels,

looking for consistency vertically and horizontally with grade levels. The counselors concluded that all teachers were engaged in the SEL lesson; each had a grade level to observe. I discussed that I had walked into a teacher's class to see circle time. The teacher was using a ball to support the discussion. She threw the ball to a student, indicating that it was his turn to discuss the topic. In this case, students were discussing a time when they had been afraid and why. Each student then threw the ball to another student in the large circle. When I walked in, one student threw the ball to me. There was laughter, and I participated. I stated that I had been scared when I left my last school to open our new school, but I was happy to be helping more students in our community. Students asked questions: "Why were you scared?" "Do you miss your old school?" "How did you get over your fear?" It was quite a wonderful experience and I could see that students loved engaging with each other and telling their own stories. That was a very proud moment for me because we were making progress, we were moving forward, and we were getting to know each other. We were becoming a family.

On January 19, 2019, I met with our SEL/Attendance/Safety committee. The team reviewed attendance data and briefly discussed referrals to the office, two items on a long agenda. Attendance is documented by the school district, reported at the beginning of each month for the prior month. Each campus is ranked on overall attendance by monthly percentages. Our school continued to remain in the top 3 of 30 campuses, to that date, which seemed to indicate that the data were substantiating my observations. Discipline referrals for the month were minimal, at a total of three. Not every observation or review of the data was positive. There were times outside at lunch duty when students argued and pushed each other. In our upper-grade restrooms, graffiti adorned some of the stall doors. One day, someone called 911. We had

some parent complaints along the way and, of course, some students were accused of bullying. Nothing is perfect, but we continued to stay the course.

Our team created walkthrough to review the lessons and to understand how the overall lessons were supporting culture. Walkthroughs were also made to review how SEL was supporting scholars in their academic endeavors. As the administrative team made academic walkthroughs, they took into account how teachers were using SEL to move students toward academic success.

### **Academic Success for Middle of Year 1**

In summer 2018, during teacher and staff professional development sessions, a few nonnegotiables were presented to the team: Part of opening a new school required a strong commitment to the vision and mission. Creating culture and buy-in are certainly important and a priority for any new team, but there must be an infusion of requirements and expectations. These expectations must be implemented from the beginning go because to attempt to establish them later when everyone is set in their ways is difficult. As I know from previous experience as a first-year principal at an established campus, making changes where culture and tradition already exist is challenging and can take years to accomplish. But creating awareness with a team of teachers and staff who very much want to be part of the new school made people more open to change. Therefore, the ideals that will become second nature one day, even when the uncomfortable becomes comfortable, will be quite supportive of the success that will be reaped and expected.

My expectations for teachers and staff were consistent from the beginning of the staffing process through the middle and end of the school year. Figure 2 shows nonnegotiables for staff and teachers. When I began the staffing process before the school year, I imbedded a focus on

these nonnegotiables, all of which supported foundations of 21st-century learning and the four Cs.

1. Project-Based Learning (PBL) was to be included in lesson plans and in the school day, daily.
2. A PBL project would be expected at the end of each 9 week period and presented to our parents as a gallery walk, which many times would coincide with parent/teacher conference nights.
3. Student tables and seats would be organized in small group format.
4. Lesson objectives would be posted on the front white board weekly or by end of lesson plan pacing dates in student-friendly terms.
5. Word walls would be up and would also address specific content areas like math and science.
6. The gradual of the lesson from teacher to student where the four Cs would be used throughout the school day would be outlined in the lesson plan and used for these types of walkthroughs.
7. Student data tracker folders would be created at the beginning of the school year and students would be required to track their own data after every district or state assessments, Pre K through 5<sup>th</sup> grades and would be sent home with 9 week report cards to parents for parent signature.
8. Teachers would meet weekly to review data, instruction and observe professional development specific to the need of the grade level or school.
9. Teachers would use our new school's lesson plan template, created to accommodate items like PBL, SEL and more.

**Figure 2.** *Nonnegotiables for Staff and Teachers*

In one middle-of-year observation that I reviewed in my notes, the teacher was sitting at his desk. He was discussing the importance of place value with his second-grade students. Upon my entry, he quickly stood up and began to move around the classroom. My notes indicated that this was a classroom that I should visit often for this and other reasons. The teacher had not stated his objective; he was lecturing for most of the time that I was present. Students were not engaged and were not collaborating. Students were sitting in rows instead in the expected group format. The furniture that I had requested for the school was acquired to create a collaborative classroom environment where groups of students (4 or 5) would have the opportunity to discuss the topic and pose questions. The classroom teacher was not providing this opportunity. I noticed that the lesson was mostly teacher led. I also noticed a plethora of handouts on student tables, on

the teacher's desk, and on the small group intervention teacher table where the teacher is expected to pull out small groups to support students who are struggling (Observation Notes, January 9, 2019). Although I could not find a previous observation note regarding this specific teacher's classroom structures at the beginning of the school year, I remembered two important things. First, this teacher had amazed me when I entered his room before the school year to consider him for the new school. Second, the teacher had impressed me many times as I observed his teaching techniques at the beginning of the school year. On January 9, at the end of the day, I met with the teacher, who explained that he was making a few changes in the classroom because he was trying them out. I quickly addressed how the changes were not consistent with the four Cs. We discussed how the decision to change the structure and format of instruction in his classroom was creating a step backward, not forward. We discussed the plan, including the nonnegotiables, to remain on target and continue toward the long-term goal for these students: college and career readiness. The teacher was supportive and made the needed changes.

On the same day, I entered another teacher's classroom. She was walking around the classroom as her students sat at their desks. Desks were arranged to facilitate collaboration and communication. Objectives were posted on the front white board. Students were working on inferences and were discussing what they knew about the topic. As she walked around the room, she met with each group and redirected them, and she provided explicit directions. She stopped at one point, having realized that there was a misconception at more than one of the tables. She redirected everyone's attention back to her, explained the misconception and the correction. She then began to walk around the classroom again as they continued their discussions. I also noticed that her word wall and anchor charts were prominently placed around the classroom and I

observed some students pointing to and referring to one anchor chart. As I left the room, I gave her a thumbs up. I met with her briefly the next day. The conversation was supported by the same message, which was to move forward and continue to support students' long-term goals of becoming college and career ready, using the four Cs.

These are but two observations; many more reflected the same type of opportunity. In fact, I learned much in that first year just by having been in classrooms and meeting with teachers. Not every observation and every conversation after the observation was perfect; we did not agree every time. The reality is that some conversations, unfortunately, did not result in agreement, but it was important to stay the course. Some conversations led to more walkthroughs and, as might be expected, more time and effort, but it was vital that the team stay true to the expectations. There were few negative experiences, a fact that I attribute to the fact that the team was excited and proud to have opened the new school. The willingness to change and take constructive feedback is healthier in this type of learning environment (a new school). Through consistent attempts in walking through classrooms, the team managed to continue to learn and provide more opportunities to support the four Cs.

### **Middle of Year PBL**

As I reviewed notes and calendar entries and recalled on my own the unfolding of events in that first school year, I realized that there is an extreme amount of data, so extensive that it is important to narrow the review and focus on important events, especially as they pertained to this study. The overarching themes for this purpose continued to be academic success, SEL support, and college and career readiness approaches to learning. In this section, I focus on academic success. A major part of our attempts to be academically successful relied on infusion of PBL.

PBL is the process of creating opportunities for students to learn through doing and to learn by using the four Cs. The overall goal is to learn to solve problems so students can be successful in college, in their careers, and in life. PBL is a student-led attempt to create a project that will result in outcomes that are far reaching and related to prior experiences, real-world experiences, and the ability to apply the four Cs. The purpose of using PBL support in the first year was to support teaching and learning. Teachers and staff who had not been exposed to this type of learning in the past or who were resistant at one time were expected to take every opportunity to learn during that first year. The purpose of PBL was not to have students and teachers create perfect projects nor teachers instruct at a perfect level; it was simply a way to start and grow from there. Therefore, PBL created the opportunity for students to enrich their learning so that they were pushed to higher academic levels and could attain mastery in their learning. Mastery on the Texas state-mandated and end-of-year assessments is that summative area that indicates college and career readiness.

### **Middle of Year Data**

In 2018/2019, our first school year would be under the watchful eye of the Texas formative assessments. It did not matter that we had recruited teachers and staff from many other schools, nor that our school enrolled students who had attended other schools. It did not matter that our school building was built in phases. What mattered were the results at the end of the school year. So, to support those upcoming results, the team's data were reviewed through formative and pulse check assessments.

In December 2018, the school district provided a fall benchmark that assessed the learning of students in grades Kindergarten through 5 in the first semester of that school year in all core content areas. The results of this assessment were scanned into a district database, which



generates various reports. Our team quickly began the process of data analysis. With nothing with which to compare the data except formative data collected along the way, we relied on the district's ranking of the district-mandated progress monitoring formative assessments given at 3, 6 and 9 weeks during each 9-week period. The rankings were indicators of success and failure. Of course, the data in our lower grade levels (Kindergarten through Grade 2) were important for identifying gaps or gains. For the purpose of the state assessments at the end of the school year, the data for Grades 3 through 5 were of key importance. Figure 3 describes the process that our team pursued.

1. Students prepare for the benchmark assessments and are progress monitored along the way, weekly.
2. Students are prepared academically and socially and emotionally along the way.
3. Teachers, counselors, administration, and others all review and support the findings through review and data talks.
4. Teachers were required to pull their own reports.
5. Teachers and supporting staff were provided with an opportunity to review the data and collaboratively look for the grows and glows.
6. Teachers were provided with a one-on-one data talk with administration, curriculum coach and counselors. The purpose, to identify the findings for each student, identifying the student's grows and glows as they pertained to each data set.

**Figure 3.** *New School Progress Monitor*

This process might be similar to the processes used at other schools, but this would be our first attempt to implement systems, strategies, and overall protocols based on 21st-century learning and the three overarching goals. The infusion of the four Cs for 21st-century learning would be critiqued at the end of the school year based on how it supported or did not support our end-of-year goals and our overall goals.

After the Christmas break, the middle of the school year would soon end. There is not an identified date range for the middle of a school year; it is simply a point in time during the school year that provides educators the opportunity to review, both quantitatively and qualitatively. For

many areas, it is usually the time just before and after the holiday break. Each school district designates its own middle of the year for testing purposes and analysis of data.

My calendar meeting notes for Monday, January 14, indicate that our leadership team met to review data. We discussed items on the agenda and tentative dates for teacher collaboration on data and one-on-one review with teachers. We also discussed plans for after-school and Saturday school intervention and enrichment camps (Calendar/Notes, 1/18). The series of agendas with notes like this were instrumental in shaping the work ahead, such as (a) evolution of the structure for weekly teacher meetings, (b) important data discussions, and (c) professional development sessions based on where the data indicated areas of need. After instruction and assessment, the data and discussions brought to the light various suggestions, strategies, and solutions that would support the entire grade level regarding gaps in learning. These meetings provided direction for the leadership team to navigate the school year, supporting instruction that was driven by data and data analysis.

The data shown in Figure 4, a synopsis of the results from our benchmark for the semester, are indicators of progress and/or regression and the support systems needed to move in the right direction (Data Report, 12/18).

- 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading: Approaches – 83.33%, Meets – 26.67%, Masters – 12.22%
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Math: Approaches – 80%, Meets – 50%, Masters – 11%
- 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading: Approaches – 82.30%, Meets – 47.09%, Masters – 12.22%
- 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Math: Approaches – 84.95%, Meets – 53.76%, Masters – 31.18%
- 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Writing: Approaches – 74.19%, Meets – 39.78%, Masters – 9.68%
- 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading: Approaches – 82.35%, Meets – 50.59%, Masters – 10.59%
- 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Math: Approaches – 88.24%, Meets – 38.82%, Masters – 15.28%
- 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Science: Approaches – 88.24%, Meets – 47.06%, Masters – 21.18%

**Figure 4.** *New School Middle-of-the-Year Benchmark Data*

State assessment data are categorized into four domains: Did Not Meet, Approaches, Meets, and Masters. The overall goal for the school was to attain a 90%/60%/30% status by the

end of the school year on the state-mandated test: at least 90% or more of students testing in Grades 3 to 5 overall would be in the Approaches domain, at least 60% of the overall 90% would be in the Meets domain, and at least 30% of the overall 90% would be in the Masters domain. The three averaged (90/60/30) equals 60% or our preferred overall student achievement because the magic percentage of 60% equates to an A (Exemplary) status in the state of Texas. There are many more components to the way in which Texas evaluates the data; for this study, I focus on these details because they align with our overall goals, which are purposely infused to create college and career success. Overall student achievement evaluates performance across all subjects for all students on both general and alternative special education assessments: College, Career and Military Readiness (CCMR) indicators and graduation rates (TEA, 2022a). Moving all students toward mastery supports the goal of moving many more students toward a college- and career-ready future. Over all, the assessment is built to challenge students because they must think critically if they are to meet these domains. The four Cs also support these goals. The students who are making progress and moving forward should be provided academic enrichment opportunities.

In review of the benchmark reported above, it is evident that the school was moving student towards the 90% goal. As we continued to do so, we focused academic enrichment activities on moving students from Approaches to Meets (60%) and Masters (30%) areas.

### **End of the Year**

The end of the school year is a time to rejoice, wind down, and reflect, but only for the literal purpose of leaving for a summer break. Although students and teachers leave for summer break to rejuvenate and refresh, business is conducted until the last day of school. Everything that has been accomplished is celebrated and everything that is in need of support is reviewed

and redesigned if necessary. Therefore, all of our systems had to continue to the end. One very important area that would need to be continued was professional development and the continuous process of attempting to hone one's skills, especially when opening a new school and attempting to close that school year to open again the next school year successfully. Learning to teach is an ongoing process; therefore, it is important to provide professional development opportunities that are specific and tied to academics, SEL, and college and career readiness skills. The only way to reflect on the school and implement needed professional development during the summer was to review the end-of-year data, in this case our STAAR results.

### **End-of-the-Year Data Review**

Academic standards provided by the state of Texas are rigorous and require a strict study of the standards that students are expected to learn. Specifically, teachers must review the specificity of each standard (learning objective) provided to students in the content areas of Mathematics, English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Reading. Of equal importance was monitoring the learning and progression or regression of each student during the first year based on their learning of the standards. During the school year, teachers and staff who had an indirect impact of student learning were expected to monitor core content areas each week. This progress monitoring provided the team the opportunity to review weekly mini-assessments that would provide guidance for instruction. Some teachers had never been required to utilize a weekly procedure for progress monitoring. For many of the teachers, this was a shift in thinking, another adjustment.

My reflection on this matter took me back to my time as a classroom teacher. I had taken full advantage of the opportunity to monitor progress of all students weekly, creating short mini-assessments that included learning objectives for the week and objectives from past weeks. The

fruits of my labor were evident. Instruction was targeted and explicit and was provided to whole groups, small groups, and individual students, all based on findings from these formative assessments. End-of-year results were, in my experience, consistently successful from year to year. Based on these experiences throughout my teaching and administrative career, I shared with the team a short list of important nonnegotiables regarding mini-assessments, formatively, weekly throughout the school year as they pertained to the three overarching themes: academic success supported by SEL through a college and career readiness approach. The list was shared before the school year began, during the school year, and at the end of the year: (a) weekly progress monitoring, (b) use of the four Cs, and (c) inclusion of PBL.

At the middle of the year, the team could officially begin to review home-grown and district-initiated assessment data. Along the way, students were expected to take weekly short pulse-check assessments, 3-, 6- and 9-week district-initiated assessments, and a semester benchmark assessment.

Because opening a new school was a new experience for most of our team, it was important to keep things simple yet productive. Instead of using multiple data reports and a large ensemble of protocols, we experimented with three simple data reports generated from a district online resource and we continued weekly meetings, data reviews, and walkthroughs.

### **End-of-Year State Results and the Texas Education Agency**

The TEA creates the various accountability standards supported by state assessments (TEA, 2022a, 2022b). The TEA is also responsible to report assessment results to school districts through the Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR), which discloses final state assessment findings by school, district, region, and state based on student groups and students (TEA, 2022a).

Throughout our first school year, the team worked to create systems and structures that would support us in the short run and that would provide substance to review for Year 2. We also evolved school culture and climate based on our experience in Year 1.

A school's main purpose is to provide opportunities for students to succeed academically. However, the school must teach beyond the academics, mostly the social and emotional skills that are needed to interact with others in order to succeed. The state of Texas has used many tests in the past to support students in that place and time. The STAAR tests are the most current version to provide educators and state overseers data and feedback needed to develop instructional goals in support of students. Although educators wear many hats in providing SEL support, counseling support, and being role models for some students who have no one else to look up to at home, in some cases, the real measure of a successful school or school district is results from this state-mandated test. Educators strive to do so much more for students, in the sense of creating well-rounded students who will one day lead communities and become successful in their own right. Supporting qualitative or quantitative data at the school level can be used to celebrate other successes. However, the success of the school for parents, district leaders, and state leaders always returns to the STAAR. The school's three overarching goals were created to create success in many ways, especially to create success for students as it pertains to STAAR.

After the Christmas break, the middle of the school year would soon end. There is not an identified date range for the middle of a school year; it is simply a point in time during the school year that provides educators the opportunity to review, both quantitatively and qualitatively. For many areas, it is usually the time just before and after the holiday break. Each school district outlines its own middle of the year for testing purposes and analysis of data.

The end of our first school year was bittersweet due to personal matters that were out of my control. Supporting a new school where the objective is to show academic success by students, it was an inopportune time for the principal of a new school to be in such a state. I have vivid memories of growing up in El Paso. My father was a postal worker; he made a good living at that time. We lived paycheck to paycheck, but we always managed to have just enough. My father put food on the table, kept a roof over our heads, and provided everything we needed. He was a hero in many regards, even though he and I did not usually “get along.” In everything that I strived to be or to achieve, academically and in life, I felt opposition and, in some ways, oppression. He invoked his authority based on his beliefs. If not for his problem with alcohol, we might have been able to move past the many negative encounters over the years. Whether or not he knew it, he stayed true to his opinions and consistently opposed me. He valued tradition, manual hard work, and our Mexican culture, and was strict on these matters. His addiction to alcohol made for a dysfunctional family at best. He was hindered academically, having discussed the discriminatory actions that he had encountered. He was unique. At the time, I did not appreciate him. But he is to be commended for ensuring that his family had everything that we needed and some of what we wanted.

He passed away February 2019 and my life was changed forever. It was the first time that I had ever witnessed the cold and brutal attack of death upon family or friend. As he was passing, I asked for forgiveness, and I forgave him for those things in which we did not see eye to eye. In those last few days of his life, I was in shock. I was numb and I do not remember much about my feelings at the time. That experience took a toll on my mental well-being, and I mourned and was depressed for a very long time after his death. However, I managed to pick myself up and dust myself off just long enough to finish the first school year as principal.

Day in and day out, after my father's passing and for quite some time, I forced myself into two states of being: workaholic and homebody. At work, I was professional, and I carried myself well, seemingly put together; inside, I was scared. Looking back, I should have taken just a few more days to recover; 5 school days was not enough. I was also working toward attaining the doctorate and only had what felt like seconds each day to attend to writing. I looked at life through different lenses.

As I made my way forward, I was dually impacted by the other unknown at the time for our new school: STAAR assessment results. At one point after my father's passing, one of my co-workers stopped mid-statement to point out that my hands were shaking. She asked whether I was OK. I knee-jerk reacted and played it off as nothing, with a laugh and a quick and intentional redirection of the conversation. In the face of the anticipation of scores and life in general, I was an emotional wreck.

For April 8 through 18, 2019, I had written on my calendar the words *tomorrow*, *test*, and *day*. It was the beginning of what I assume most every principal dreads: STAAR test-taking season. The window for testing changes almost yearly; in 2019, the window for Grade 4 writing opened on April 9. This test-taking season is one of the very few times in the school year when school principals have absolutely no control. Students whom we have supported, taught, and monitored during the school year take tests without any assistance; they either do well or they do not. My notes indicated the following details: arrive to campus by 6:30 am, support distribution of tests and materials. Each morning our administrative team arrived early to work, ensuring that teachers would be given the official STAAR tests, paper booklets, sealed and each one a potential golden opportunity to show overall success for the school year. Our assistant principal oversaw coordinating the assessment as campus testing coordinator. I helped her to distribute and



monitor assessments. On that first morning of the few days of testing, we located ourselves in our front office conference room and distributed each bin of assessments and materials to the teachers who were conducting testing on that day. After assessments were distributed, the day was spent in monitoring, troubleshooting, and supporting the testing stakeholders.

Testing in reading, mathematics, writing, and science continued through the first weeks of May for Grades 3, 4, and 5. I posted a tweet on Twitter at our school's STAAR rally the week before, Friday April 5, 2019: "Our MASCOT students will conquer the STAAR, #StayMASCOTStrong." This hash-tag statement was modified from the beginning to the middle to the end of year to remind everyone that we would continue to be strong after we had to #StartMASCOTStrong on our first days of school and #StayMASCOTStrong through the middle of that year.

The results of STAAR tests are provided to every Texas district and campus administrator on the same day. Waiting for results and opening STAAR digital reports is a traumatic experience, specifically the anticipation of results to be read after digitally opening these reports. From one minute to the next, the entire school year is defined; in many ways, the school principal is defined. Table 6 presents the results of the STAAR tests for the first year of the school.

While this study was not intended as an analysis of quantitative data, the data show the fruits of our labor. There are strengths and weaknesses in the data; however, over all, the results support our hard work, our plans for success, and our focus on the three overarching goals: academic success with social and emotional support through a college and career readiness approach.

The results are telling in various ways. An overall review shows that the school was moving in the right direction and was creating opportunities for students to be successful. Many students had made progress from one year to the next, a very important matter because students had moved from many schools. The results also provided the team with enthusiasm, hope, and a desire to do more because students were moving to those desired domains of Meets and Masters.

Although we were happy with the overall results, the team quickly began to review the data by grade level, teacher, and student. The deeper we dug, the more we understood the areas of strengths and weaknesses. This was important for the transition to the next school year.

**Table 6***Results of the State of Texas Academic Assessments Report for Year 1*

Test	Domain	State	District	Campus	African American	Hispanic	White	Special education	Economically disadvantaged	English learner
Grade 3 Reading	Approaches	76%	81%	89%	100%	89%	81%	80%	90%	96%
	Meets	45%	49%	55%	67%	57%	29%	73%	53%	61%
	Masters	27%	30%	25%	17%	28%	0%	27%	25%	30%
Grade 3 Mathematics	Approaches	75%	86%	93%	100%	92%	100%	87%	91%	96%
	Meets	49%	55%	62%	67%	61%	71%	73%	59%	65%
	Masters	25%	27%	30%	33%	32%	14%	40%	28%	22%
Grade 4 Reading	Approaches	75%	82%	95%		97%	100%	100%	94%	96%
	Meets	44%	51%	60%						
	Masters	22%	25%	22%		24%	30%	21%	21%	26%
Grade 4 Mathematics	Approaches	75%	82%	88%		89%	100%	92%	84%	93%
	Meets	48%	53%	66%		69%	50%	92%	62%	74%
	Masters	28%	40%	39%		51%	40%	77%	48%	48%
Grade 4 Writing	Approaches	67%	76%	89%		90%	90%	92%	87%	85%
	Meets	35%	42%	46%		49%	50%	54%	45%	41%
	Masters	11%	12%	6%		7%	0%	15%	3%	7%
Grade 5 Reading	Approaches	86%	90%	95%		96%	100%	92%	97%	95%
	Meets	54%	55%	60%		61%	20%	58%	60%	48%
	Masters	29%	29%	28%		31%	20%	25%	25%	34%

**Table 6 (Continued)**

Test	Domain	State	District	Campus	African American	Hispanic	White	Special education	Economically disadvantaged	English learner
Grade 5 Mathematics	Approaches	90%	95%	99%		99%	100%	100%	98%	100%
	Meets	58%	65%	82%		83%	100%	75%	83%	95%
	Masters	36%	39%	52%		55%	40%	42%	46%	62%
Grade 5 Science	Approaches	75%	80%	91%		91%	100%	92%	90%	90%
	Meets	49%	52%	62%		61%	60%	75%	62%	43%
	Masters	24%	23%	20%		16%	20%	17%	17%	10%
Overall	Approaches	78%	84%	92%	88%	93%	95%	91%	91%	94%
	Meets	50%	54%	62%	56%	63%	54%	72%	60%	62%
	Masters	24%	24%	29%	19%	30%	19%	34%	27%	28%

*Note.* From *Texas Academic Performance Reports*, by Texas Education Agency, 2022b, <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/texas-academic-performance-reports>

The data provided important information about bilingual and special education groups of students. When these two important groups are not addressed or are not provided resources and instruction to advance to Meets and Masters, the school will not achieve overall success as determined by STARR standards. In other words, the school will be considered unsuccessful in this regard and support systems are considered at both the district and state level, depending on these results. The results showed that both groups were successful in this regard. Then, we immediately began planning for the next school year.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

This study is a very personal account of my experiences as a student in a borderland elementary educational setting, my transition to college, and my experiences as an educator. Because of these experiences, when the opportunity was presented, I opened a new elementary school that would support 21st-century learning. Although I worked with people whom I adore and to whom I will be forever grateful, the journey was personal. The purpose of this study was to reflect on my journey so that students who live in this borderland region might prosper. I believe that this account of my experiences will provide other educators the opportunity to do the same, providing a learning environment that is conducive to success in the 21st century.

I chose to take an autoethnographic approach to this study because it offered the opportunity to tell a story through the eyes of someone who has experienced both sides of the educational journey, as a student and educator, in the same borderland community. Through my own experiences and observation of accounts, I suggested ideas, strategies, and a place to start when opening a new school or when attempting to move the learning process from traditional methods to innovative techniques.

My understanding was derived chiefly from reflection of observations and my experiences, some documented in notes from meetings, notes in calendars, and agendas or minutes of meetings. Photos and tweets on Twitter offered opportunities to elaborate on details from the moment. In this chapter, I present the research questions that guided this process, the themes that emerged for each of the objectives, and the reflections that support the importance of 21st-century learning.

Initially, I was focused on the destination, the results of the first year together at the new school, STAAR scores and state-mandated tests. But it was the journey that was important to this study. Many details can be presented, and each one can tell its own story. My attempt was to present key points throughout the journey that helped to open a new school that would provide educators, leaders, and students in this region and beyond ideas and opportunities to succeed in their endeavors to open a new school or redefine some current school practices that might be hindering progress toward college and career readiness, making the transition to college and/or career a successful life outcome. The themes are intertwined with the feedback on the research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

What experiences as a student, teacher, and school leader in this border community influenced my attempts to build a framework for 21st-century learning at a new elementary school to prepare students for college and/or a career? From a very young age, I knew that I wanted to learn. My thirst for exploring the unknown drove me to move forward. Some teachers in elementary school were, for lack of a better word, boring. Day in and day out, I went to school, I sat at my desk, I listened to teachers talk, and I waited anxiously for the school day to end. I hated the whole elementary school experience, but I loved learning. My fourth-grade teacher was absent, not physically but in other ways that made school a bore. That school year was a self-instructed and learning school year. We sat, read textbooks, answered the questions at the end of the passage, and did more of the same for homework. I ask myself often, why? Why were teachers allowed to teach us in that way? Why were principals allowed to run a school in that way? Bass (1985) stated that leadership is the ability to unite a team or group of people who will follow and gather for purposes that will motivate others to create and attain organizational

goals where the stakeholders are performing at a high level, with minimal levels of enforcement or punitive persuasion. It was not until I was a teacher and later a principal that I realized that it simply did not have to be that way.

One project in one teacher's classroom resonated with me, moved me, and made me want to know more. The thematic unit was a gift. It was the opportunity to collaborate on a project that inspired me and led me to yearn for more. Learning was fun in her classroom. Unfortunately, these opportunities were few, so growing up in this border region was challenging in one sense but not challenging in another sense. Middle school and high school were no different. Not until I joined band in high school did I enjoy being in school. I often reflect on why one teacher during all of my elementary and middle school years was so outstanding; only after living life and being an educator did I realize that it is the teacher who instructs who makes the difference—not only the teacher but the best practices that motivate students to think and engage. This leads me to believe that, in my own experience, most teachers were not critically and fully observed on a daily or weekly basis and provided constructive feedback. Observation is a powerful tool. It is vital that a school principal walk-through classrooms on a regular basis in order to see instruction and determine how that instruction is supporting students. A laser focus must be placed on classroom practices that center on the how, not the what, regarding instruction (Kim et al., 2019).

It is evident, not through this research but through my experiences as a student and educator in this region, that it is supportive to have the opportunity to move away and return. Some of our students will never have that opportunity. Many of my friends never left El Paso. If not for my family's enthusiasm for traveling, my story might not have been different from theirs. It was the ability to leave and to appreciate what had been left behind that moved me to become an educator, wanting the same for all others, specifically children in this region. Although it is a



cliché, moving away offers the opportunity to learn, experience, and appreciate the many things that one left behind. The worldly experience adds to the tool belt of experience.

My experiences both as a student and as an educator in this region have given me insights; although not always positive ones. These experiences have afforded me the many opportunities to be where I am today.

As I learned to teach, I learned how to learn. Learning to learn and thinking about thinking are skills that can be taught. The crux of the type of learning that I continue to support is learning that is derived from using a 21st-century learning approach, which includes infusion of the four Cs. The ability to collaborate and communicate provides opportunities to share backgrounds and real-world experiences and, by doing so, to learn from each other. Discussion leads to critical thinking as the group attempts to resolve an issue; when it is planned and organized, the group can find a creative solution. Kim et al. (2019) noted that teachers learn how to learn; if the learning process incorporates 21st-century skills, the 4 Cs, and higher-order skills instead of rote skills that can be found in some classrooms in the region, those students will learn to learn and will thrive. Classrooms where the teacher's pedagogy is focused not only on the higher-order learning skills (the 4 Cs) and on the facilitation approach rather than lecture will move students.

A principal wears many hats, working with human capital as it pertains to managing the school where learning can take place in the classroom. Although there is much business to attend to, the school principal should first be an instructional leader. A principal's vision is only as good as the people who are willing to share that vision. Although the school principal is the principle decision maker, it is important to offer opportunities to collaborate and gain feedback from constituents. However, at the end of the school day, the principal will live and die by the

decisions that are made and implemented. A principal is successful because of strategic daily decision making. A principal holds that vision, much like a flame in a lantern, consistently ensuring that the flame flickers; it must be guarded so that it never goes out.

I reflected on my time in transition from the established campus to the new campus when I set out to hire new staff. The interview process was purposely and strategically laced with questions and comments that created several opportunities to engage in 21st-century learning. Teachers and staff were prepared from the onset to enter a school where learning would include rigor and infusion of higher-order thinking. It was also clear that the goal was to learn, as teachers, during that first year so that the next school year would result in more of the same, more success stories for students. Students want to learn, and they want to participate in their own learning. Because they do not know how, it is the responsibility of educators to teach them. In the first year together, our team was expected to use the four Cs; this was nonnegotiable. With ongoing professional development opportunities beginning in the summer before opening the school and continuing throughout the school year, we immersed ourselves in learning. It was also understood that the first year together for teachers and staff would be a year of learning.

Having met with the teachers and having acquired support from the instructional team at the district office, the teachers were provided with the “how.” At one defining professional development session, the teachers were shown how the teacher could gradually release the learning from the teacher to the student and, in so doing, infuse the four Cs. In short, teachers would learn to begin with the explicit “first teach,” move to student group collaboration, and end the lesson with a closing task that supports the student’s attempt to master the objective. The session was much more involved, but the overall explanation was important because it provided teachers with the how. Professional development is only as successful as the integrity to use it;

after the sessions, walkthrough observations (both announced and unannounced) by the administrative team and the curriculum coach were essential. The walkthroughs allowed for review of the lesson, feedback on the lesson, and corrective action for mistakes. At the same time, the walkthroughs served to support and confirm appropriately presented lessons.

In the first year, the team experienced three phases of construction. The administrative offices were one of the last areas to be erected. Our administrative team occupied areas that served as offices in the main building, which housed students. This was, in many ways, a blessing. It placed us in the middle of the learning, allowing us to build relationships and visit classrooms to ensure that the four Cs were being infused. In one walkthrough, a second-grade teacher was delivering the lesson from her desk. Upon my entry, she stood and continued. Immediately, students were more engaged and she could support the thinking and learning at each group table.

### **Research Question 2**

What administrative and personal processes support the advancement of three goals (academic success, college and career readiness, and SEL) at a new elementary school for 21st-century learning in a border community? My role as an administrator is to exert an indirect impact on the education of students. But this indirect relationship creates opportunities to support instruction, teachers, students, and the processes that promote efficient learning: 21st-century learning. Efficient learning is learning by the student that is supported by the four Cs. The principal is the holder of the school's vision. While being an administrator is at times complicated and confusing, it is a rewarding experience in this borderland community.

## **School Business**

Another process that was important to the success of the new school was for the school principal to manage the day-to-day business activities. The importance of making sound business-based decisions and knowing how to navigate these waters became paramount in the first school year because many of the decisions supported staffing, purchase of furniture, and more for the new school. I was fortunate to have attained a business degree. This helped me in many of the decisions made along the way.

This, then, is a recurring theme. Staffing, hiring, time clock employees, school budget, state and federal funds, intervention extra duty pay, and maintenance and operation of the building all fall under this umbrella. Although these duties are not directly correlated with instruction, they have an indirect impact. I strongly recommend that every administrator partake in this type of learning. The knowledge that is gained creates clarity in managing the daily demands of school business.

## **Culture**

I have had the great opportunity to have worked for the public sector, for privately owned companies, and for various types of companies. Each job included a team with a unique culture. Our new school would build a culture, with intention or not. This is a theme that resonated with me throughout the first-year process. Previously, I described the events that helped us to build relationships. SEL was very important. Our team come together during the summer before school started, most of us never having worked together, but we quickly became a family. We had bad and awful times working together, but we moved forward for the sake of the students. Inclusion of team members in all that we planned moved our team toward a common goal.

The students were no different. They were pushed into an unknown situation. Some students knew each other, having attended the same school prior to moving to the new school, but many did not. Preplanning the SEL methods that we would use in the first 2 weeks of school was intended to have students learn how to come together emotionally and socially. In that same respect, for the students' families to do the same, the time spent driving from one community meeting to another at the various feeder schools was a worthwhile set of journeys that were rich in parental buy-in and support of the new school. In one community school meeting that would be contributing many of our students, I was nervous as I presented to our future families. I fumbled on the first slide, and I realized at that moment that my first impression would be the only one that mattered. So, as I presented to the parents, I moved from the lecture position up front and began to walk through the aisles, purposely attempting to engage with the parents, hoping that they would trust and support the transition. Many of the future families were skeptical and asked whether they could remain at their current school. In our district, it was the expectation that all students who live in the new school's boundaries would attend the new school and under no circumstance would students be allowed to remain at the current school. A new school must open, on time and with students, these types of requests would have to be denied. But the ability to communicate and engage with parents would create support to make that transition. In so many ways, parents would be taking a leap of faith, and it was our team's responsibility not to disappoint. One parent stopped me after the session and discussed his reason for wanting to stay at his current school. One of his children had recently passed away from disease. He was emotional and explained that his other children were grieving, and that consistency was vital to the healing process. They loved their school and, although I knew that they would come to love the new school and although I knew the district expectations were firm,

I approved his request. The passing of his child and the requirement to change schools would compound the problem for his entire family. The exception was made.

Planning family information nights and open house events and providing a school newsletter to parents before the school year opened were strategies that we used to create trust. I met our art teacher, who had just been hired. On April 3, 2018, at our district headquarters, my calendar notes listed the words “SEL and art project.” Meeting notes supported my recollection of the meeting. The art teacher planned to visit the other schools that housed our future students and provide them with an art project that would require some research about the new school’s mascot. Students were asked to bring the finished product to the family night event at the feeder pattern high school. The ability to learn about their mascot and present it to their new family and the opportunity for parents to be proud of their child’s participation were key to creating trust and support for their new school. I looked through my Photo Circle application to find a picture of this moment. The photo brought back vivid memories of that evening and how proud parents were to see their children on stage with our art teacher showcasing their mascot art projects.

At a parents night, staff members and I positioned ourselves at the exit to the high school theater. We wore our newly purchased polo shirts with school colors and mascot prominently placed. As parents walked out, they stopped to thank us, smiled, and asked questions about extracurricular activities. For the most part, the parent night was successful. Photos from the event were shared on Twitter and the parents who had joined Twitter to follow our staff and school replied. It was clear that all stakeholders were making a connection and that the culture building process had begun.

### **Research Question 3**

How might this study inform others who wish to open an elementary school that will support 21st-century instruction to facilitate the transition to college and career? Earlier in this study, I mentioned that I, too, am a statistic. Growing up in this region, it was clear how quickly one might fall by the wayside. Most of my friends and family still reside in my old neighborhood. Many, unfortunately, were not so lucky, never making the transition to college. When I visit my mother in the house where we grew up, I see my old friends and I realize that I am one of the lucky ones. The statistics offered earlier, presented by CREEED, identify a significant concern. Students in our region are academically underperforming, compared to students in other areas of Texas, the nation, and the world. This problem affects the local and economic community. Data do not lie. After reviewing the data from CREEED and having lived most of my life in this area, I reflected on my experiences about the systemic problem in this area: moving more students to college and a career. For all of the reasons discussed previously, moving educators and students into the 21st century sooner rather than later is key to overcoming. Having worked in three of the largest districts in this area, I find my current school district to be much more progressive, affording the opportunity to pursue 21st-century learning at this new school. Although every school is unique, it is my intention that this study provides ideas, approaches, and methods that might be used to start a movement in this regard.

### **Demographic Implications**

The new school enrolled students who resided in the new community but who had attended other schools. The new school was in an area of town familiar to and well liked by military families. Our students came from many different places, each with a personal background and each categorized in one of the state's subpopulations of students. The

demographic implications that materialized helped to define the school, the first year, and the end-of-year results.

Culture clash took place when these children came together under one roof. On the one hand, we had students who had grown up in the border area. They were accustomed to authentic Mexican traditions that had been passed from generation to generation. Some students were Mexican American but lived with their families in nontraditional ways. Some students had traveled the country and, in some cases, the world. Some students were from military families. All would have to become part of the family if instruction and learning were to start strong at the new school. Students who required special education services and students of other ethnic backgrounds who had moved into the borderland community added to the overall diversity. The future implication was that this would result in a richly diverse community. The diversity and the ability to create successful outcomes for all students are critical because, historically, children in this community—bilingual students, students in special education, and students who are economically disadvantaged—have lagged behind their White and military peers. To move all students from elementary school to middle school, to high school, and then to college would be an accomplishment.

Based on data presented by CREEED at the beginning of this study, the local economic community will benefit, releasing more college graduates into the to enhance the underlying growth rate of the local economy, living standards, and productivity in general. My hope is that there will be more research by our local university to provide support and alignment from Prekindergarten to college, not only with the problem-solving component but with academic alignment that supports a college transition.



This borderland is unique, beautiful in many ways and still with challenges. A small-town atmosphere seems to permeate the community where people revel in Mexican traditions. In many ways, the traditional aspects of our community are comforting. My life experiences have provided some insight into the unfortunate struggles of many children who are educated in the school systems in this region. My father and his father before him had similar stories of what education was like in our borderland. It is not coincidence that these similarities have existed and many decades. Therefore, with all due respect to many wonderful educators, politicians, and leaders in our community, change is needed. I suppose that we are in a far better place today, but some of the same problems still exist. Economically disadvantaged and at-risk students might drop out of high school. The data indicate that the problems are mostly affecting Hispanic children. I become angry and frustrated when I review these data, as they tell a story about our community that is not complimentary and almost hopeless. By creating a learning atmosphere that is conducive to the needs of the 21st century and mandating that instructional goals be aligned to the best practices that support this type of learning, the problem can be overcome. When I review STAAR assessment data for the end of Year 1, hope is alive. Overall, the data indicate that the students in our new school are performing at higher levels. We hope to move all students into the Masters domain. To have so many students move in that direction and recognize the progress made throughout the year and from school year to school year reflects opportunities for attaining college and career readiness goals. Our hope is to stay on this trajectory.

### **Military Student Implications**

The new school resides in an area where many military families live. Our military population was high, reaching 30% of the total population at one time or another. Some military families move often, so mobility rates at the school can be high. Military deployment affects the

entire family. Children miss their parents and spouses are alone in a new city with no one to help them as their family would if they were at home. Military students are sometimes scared and reserved, and some have problems with learning, attendance, and discipline. The learning gaps are the most concerning in some of the students who experience military life because each time the family moves, the children attend a new school in a new district, state, or country.

The implementation of SEL that occurred in our school year was critical for all children, but especially for military students. SEL lessons and counselor support on campus were critical to these students adapting to their new situation. The STAAR scores at the end of the school year indicated that these students were academically successful. Therefore, the information that is provided in this self-study might be beneficial to the military base that supports the many students who attend public schools in this region. The help that might be provided would create strong promotion of the learning that can be attained and the ways in which military partners in education can create more pathways to facilitate 21st-century learning and the advantages that are the result of the outcomes.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on the CREEED (2015) findings, it is exciting that state-mandated tests are moving in a direction that supports college and career readiness and values individual progress of the student from year to year. The information that I have presented could be extended to mixed-methods research where quantitative data are supplemented with qualitative data to explore questions about approaches to college and career readiness and student achievement, associating state data with the longitudinal successes of these endeavors.

Local universities would benefit from research in this regard, creating pathways for students to move to college in higher numbers, creating opportunities for the local economy to

retain a skilled workforce and to support development of industry in the region. The university and colleges in the region might offer stronger support to local school districts through alignment of college and career readiness goals across elementary school, middle school, high school, and college.

Our community continues to grow. We are expanding and, as we do, more schools will be built. This research provides a baseline for educators to reform their systems or to open a new school. Communities would benefit from interest in creating more pathways to college and career readiness at younger ages. The best practices and the 21st-century attempts to support learning are important to consider for current, new, and future schools in this region or elsewhere.

### **Final Reflections**

Principalship is a privilege. The position allows one to support students who will one day embark on their own personal journeys. Looking back at my journey, it was telling how much support I required along the way. It was just as telling how much support I did not receive from some stakeholders. Growing up, I was somewhat shy. Although I considered myself to be book smart, I lacked in other areas. Leaving family and home behind allowed me to grow up and embrace independence, creating a bridge to adulthood.

### **Future Plans as a Principal**

I am honored and blessed to be an elementary school principal. The journey afforded me the chance to start as a teacher in the west Texas borderland where I now have had the pleasure to support teacher and a multitude of students, which is a true blessing, I continue to look for guidance in the way that I now indirectly educate the students in my new school. My goal is to continue to seek practices, lessons, professional development, systems, and 21st-century supports

that will provide students greater chances for stronger outcomes. It is my opinion that the borderland educational community should support 21st-century practices for the same reasons. Although I have had many trials and tribulations, these life moments have allowed me to become strong and experienced—traits that are important for the 21st-century educator.

Reflecting on my practices, the many people with and for whom I have worked have provided a hand, pulling me up and moving me forward. It is my duty to do the same for others. Many times, specifically early in my teaching career, I sought to convince others about the opportunities that are imbedded in 21st-century skills that are research based and promoted by experts. I struggled with the problem (that, in many ways, still exists), that some educators wait until high school to address the importance of the transition to college. But I have found great comfort in the opportunity to move forward with my vision for this new school. It is to be hoped that, in a few years, these students will make that transition. But it is vital that the alignment continues through middle school and high school. This is where the higher educational community can make the most impact, by collaborating with this and other school districts in the region to find ways in which this alignment might be formalized.

Attaining a doctorate was but a dream when I was growing up. I remember thinking at an early age about going to college. Although I hated elementary school, I loved learning, so I continued on this journey. I was forced to compromise many times, but the tradeoffs and the disappointments have been worth it. Going through the university's doctoral program has been challenging and stressful. I knew that it would be a struggle, but I never imagined that the process of attaining this degree would be as difficult as it was. However, attaining this goal has created a new outlook, a more efficient way to assemble the methods and skills that will create more 21st-century opportunities for students who, I hope, will remain in our community and give

back. This dissertation experience has influenced my practices, allowing me more clarity on how to review the data that exist or that can be extracted to drive instruction and culture. The dissertation experience has also given me a new hope for our community. I know that that our educators care and want the best for our students. In order to provide the best, all must be willing to be open to change and learning.

This self-study has opened many new doors, allowing me to explore the strategies, skills, and systems that support a college and career readiness. I still have much to learn and I realize that there are still many gaps and holes in what I know in this regard, but I am better able to lead my school in that direction. My love for teaching has grown, which is important for a school principal. It is vital that pedagogical practices be continuously addressed if change and meeting goals are possible.

Early in this dissertation study, I mentioned that I looked at life through a different lens after my father died. The revelations that evolve from life-changing moments are important because they provide clarity and motivation to continue to create ways to work with a team to move students in the college and career readiness direction. Moving through this dissertation process has done the same for me. I have been provided a lens that reverberates the message that there are many ways to support student learning and that, by researching, reviewing, and inspecting methods that exist or that might be created to support this overall goal, the opportunities for our community are endless, both for our students and our future economy. I am confident that I have learned and evolved because I know more about what I want to accomplish. I plan to continue to review teaching practices that will continuously improve the areas addressed in this self-study to create future payoffs. The dissertation process is a revelation because it

provided guidance and knowledge in an area that I wish to continue to support: education in our borderland community.

If I am to be honest and quite vulnerable regarding what I did not know before I worked through this dissertation process, it is evident that I had much to learn. The experience and knowledge that I had developed as a school teacher created a strong foundation as I moved from Assistant Principal to Principal, and I learned so much in opening a new school. But I did not know what I did not know, so I made many mistakes and sometimes miscalculated how to meet some of the objectives. For instance, I reflect on our first day at our new school. At the end of that first day, as many times as our team reviewed and practiced dismissal, we realized that we had failed. A parent could not find her child at dismissal. There are no words to explain that feeling of failure and guilt. The mother looked to me, not the assistant principals, not the teacher, nor even the security officer. She yelled at me in the presence of staff and other parents because she could not find her child. Shortly after, the child was found; she was with an aide. Later, we learned that the mother had requested that her child use the bus but had failed to communicate to the teacher that she would pick up the child on the first day. I listened and did not interrupt the mother in her moment of anger. But I knew at that point that I was the principal, responsible, in the eyes of the parents, teachers, and district stakeholders, for everything that occurred on the campus. The experience was stark; I had failed. I went home that day and I cried because I had failed to create the safest dismissal process possible. I contemplated removing myself from the position. I feared returning to the school the next day, but I did. The next school day was a new day. The parent approached me and apologized. I knew at that point that I was moving in the right direction. I had not expected an apology from her, as the fact was that her child had been

missing. I accepted her apology and then gave one of my own, on behalf of the school. Dismissal systems were addressed early that second day.

This process has affected my leadership style and decision-making processes. I have grown as a person, as an educator, and as a leader of a school. This process has allowed me to define our overarching goals of academic success, SEL support, and college and career readiness. I also realize that continued self-learning must be part of my everyday approach to leading the school. This experience has helped me to look at other positions in education, those that will support more schools, whether in my district or another. So, in many ways, this process is the steppingstone to helping more students in our community.

Becoming an educator has given me the ability to live through some of the best years of my life. Because I have lived the life that many of our students live today as a borderlander, I understand the importance of providing more opportunities for success in the community and in public schools. I implore educators to continue efforts to make education a better experience. All in all, although I experienced grief, frustration, problems, and concerns along the way, I love and respect the journey.

This self-study was intended to find a way towards student successes. It is a self-reflective study to provide feedback to others who might find it valuable for supporting their own schools. There are many wonderful schools in the borderland, and there are wonderful and fine educators who continue to make a difference. The local Tier I university continues to create opportunities for the local school district and community so that students will attain college and career readiness success; it is evident that many professors at the university care and want the same outcomes for our students. This self-study represents an honest and heartfelt approach to creating awareness, support, and success for borderland students so that one day they too will

make the transition to college, thrive, and use their talents and skills to add value to their local economy. In many ways, I hope for all of these elementary school students to give back to their own community one day.



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## **VITA**

Jesse Antonio Sepulveda was born in El Paso, Texas, and lived many years in California, where he attended San Diego State University, worked as an Account Executive in charge of television sales for CBS Television in the second largest market in the United States, and was employed at Warner Bros Records as an online marketing director. He is currently the principal of a 21st-century school in far west Texas. He earned Bachelor of Business and Master of Business degrees in 2007 from the University of Texas at El Paso. After obtaining teacher and mid-management certifications at the University of Texas at El Paso, he enrolled in the College of Education's doctoral program, Educational Leadership and Administration.

Mr. Sepulveda has been the recipient of honors, scholarships, and awards, including membership in the Mortar Board Honor Society and the Alpha Chi Honors Fraternity. He has been included on the Dean's List and Who's Who among American College Students.

Mr. Sepulveda worked as a second-grade teacher and Instructional Technology Leader. In 2005, he was awarded Teacher of the Year honors as a fourth-grade teacher. He was promoted to Assistant Principal at two elementary schools. He served as School Principal of his district's Summer School Academy and as principal of two elementary schools, including the district's newest school, which opened in the 2018 school year. The 21st-century learning school was rated exemplary by the Texas Education Agency in its first year of existence.

Mr. Sepulveda will continue the Legacy of Excellence established at previous elementary schools in the district by ensuring that students at the new elementary campus become college and career ready.