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Systematization of Central Office Support for Schools in Need of Improvement in a South Texas School District

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SYSTEMATIZATION OF CENTRAL OFFICE SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS IN NEED OF

IMPROVEMENT IN A SOUTH TEXAS SCHOOL DISTRICT

LOUISA AGUIRRE-BAEZA

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the educators and those educated through public education. We have all been a part of labels, standards and an ever-changing system of accountability. The best teachers are learners and the best learners are leaders. I was motivated to share a small part of my story in hopes that future learners and leaders would share an even better one. Find the system that works for you or build one that's even better. The future deserves your diligence and the future of education needs your leadership.

SYSTEMATIZATION OF CENTRAL OFFICE SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS IN NEED OF

IMPROVEMENT IN A SOUTH TEXAS SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

LOUISA AGUIRRE-BAEZA, BA, M.Ed.

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership and Administration

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

August 2023

Acknowledgements

I am beyond blessed and grateful to all who I have had the pleasure of working and learning with throughout this process. I give all glory to God and my Catholic faith. I know He had a plan for me and I am fortunate to have had the serenity, courage and wisdom to finish this study. It was His grace that got me here.

I have to give many thanks to my family. Starting with my parents who encouraged me to pursue my education and for being my first teachers. To my father, thank you for instilling in me your work ethic and for being my constant reminder that you can fit it all in if you try hard enough. To my mother, I know how to love with all my heart and always take time to enjoy the many blessings we have because of your incredible examples. To my older brother, thank you for being the best big brother a girl could ever have. Last but not least, I would like to thank my girls. You taught me how to recognize that someone is always watching and learning. Thank you for all that you taught me and for letting me practice everything with you first.

I am beyond blessed and grateful to my one and only husband and my one and only son. I will never fully understand why God blessed me with you two. Your encouragement and unwavering love are what got me through this. You never let me quit and were my biggest advocates. I love you with all my heart and I thank you for allowing me to give so much to so many other students and educators. Ray, who would have thought? Only you and I will ever know. I will always love you too much! Son, thank you for being my very best teacher and student. I can't wait to call you Dr. CRAB and to see all the great things you will accomplish. You are the **center** of my world.

There are a number of additional family and friends to thank. If you know me as CRABs mom, Lou/LuLu, Coach, Comadre, Nina, Auntie, Niece, Cousin, Bestie or the like, I truly love

you and thank you for being in my life. I may have missed some special events in your life or skipped a few phone calls, but I assure you that your worth and value to me were never underestimated or taken for granted. I plan to make you a priority once again.

I am thankful for all my colleagues who have supported me throughout my studies and career to include the committee members that served on this dissertation with special thanks to Dr. Rincones for your tremendous guidance and leadership. I have loved every single job I have had and I have learned so much from all of you in our time together as learners and leaders. I am inspired by every professor, administrator, director, associate, teacher, instructional specialists or coach I have encountered along my journey and you have helped shape me as a leader and a learner. Without your support and encouragement, I would have never reached this milestone. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for being a part of this journey. I am most grateful and thankful for my current Superintendent of Schools and my Chief of Academics. As a product of the district and an employee, I have personally witnessed the incredible difference your leadership has made on our entire community. Your bold work speaks for itself and your legacy of excellence will forever be ingrained in the district's DNA as you have set this district on a championship path that will forge the future for years to come.

Abstract

Independent school district central office administrators were challenged with defining, detailing and disseminating systems of support and structure during the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic. To maintain focus on instruction during a pandemic that caused needed attention on quarantined environments and remote learning structures, campus administrators were tasked with making school happen without being in their school building environments that were structured for instruction. This research presents an intentional production of knowledge through actions and experiences of one Texas school district that provided effective instruction that earned them an A-rating from the Texas Education Agency. Through the leadership and transformation of the district's central office academic leadership, the effective leadership practices, procedures and outcomes are chronologically detailed from March 2020 through August 2022 when the district earned their A-Rating. Using an innovative methodological approach of systematization and interviews from campus administrators, I reconstruct my lived experiences as the acting associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction who was part of the central office leadership that made it all happen. I highlight the creation of instructional models, the use of the Effective Schools Framework and explain the support and professional development that was shared with our campus leaders.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On March 12, 2020, the El Paso Department of Public Health announced that school districts were to be closed to students until further notice due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Middle Independent School District (MISD) (pseudonym) central offices began planning meetings with academic directors to plan for instruction, maintenance and operations to plan for safety protocols, and cabinet members to ensure communication. As a member of the central office academics team in the district at the time but I realized that the work and planning ahead was going to have very little to do with my department and major shifts were going to have to occur as we planned for the unknown. With the role of public education evolving from merely creating productive citizens to ensuring that all students receive a high quality education (Center on Educational Policy, 2020), the MISD central office team had to quickly figure out how to "make school happen" when physical school buildings were not an option and Texas State Accountability would continue.

Although the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on education will continue to unfold and be the topic of potential studies for years to come, the process of the MISD central office to support identified schools in need of improvement during this unique time period is the focus of this study. I had been an ambassador of Service Excellence, a customer service initiative based off of the Disney Institute of Disney methods regarding leadership, engagement and service that the district initiated in 2015. Our standards of service excellence are safety, courtesy, innovation and accountability. As an ambassador, I started to realize that all four standards were going to shift as we created new learning places for our students and teachers. In February 2021, when we returned to our school buildings and welcomed back all students, I began to reflect on what we had done and what we would need to do to support our campuses. That is where this dissertation started to take shape. I was curious if we could get an A rating from the Texas Education Agency as part of

our accountability. Meaning, could the shift in our pre-COVID-19 instructional practices of strong tier 1 instruction, data driven decisions and professional learning communities still have a positive impact on our Texas State Accountability ratings even though all our typical practices were now altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic? I knew all of our campuses had to have some kind of support and guidance from the central office, but I was even more concerned about the campuses that struggled before COVID-19.

The personal attention and support campuses in need of improvement would receive centered around learning environments, academic connections for struggling teachers and learners, and observations from instructional rounds and campus visits. Our central office team could no longer go to a campus, model for an instructional coach or review a data wall. Our schools were empty, our offices were unoccupied, training materials were untouchable and our office walls were now our homes. The central office support would need to be redefined, detailed and disseminated to match our current situation.

Texas Accountability

Making "school happen" for purposes of the study means the district wanted to achieve an A-rating from the Texas Education Agency Accountability System as all Texas districts strive to do. The Texas Education Agency provides an overall rating to all Texas districts. The overall rating measures what students are learning in each grade and whether or not they are ready for the next grade level. Middle ISD did not want the pandemic to deter us from making sure every student showed growth in the knowledge and skills we were teaching regardless of their current circumstances. Achieving an A rating[1] would mean that our students achieved, made academic progress, and we as a district closed achievement gaps within our special populations ().

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[1] Explanation of A-Rating: http://tea4avcastro.tea.state.tx.us/A-F/overall-rating.pdf

The State Accountability System was adjusted to support the interrupted schooling caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic by keeping the 2019 ratings for the 2020-2021 school year because during the 2019-2020 school year all districts and all campuses were assigned a Not Rated: Declared State of Disaster for 2020 accountability (TEA, May 2020). The accountability ratings are determined as indicated below.

> Texas provides annual academic accountability ratings to its public school districts, charters and schools. The ratings are based on performance on state standardized tests; graduation rates; and college, career, and military readiness outcomes. The ratings examine student achievement, school progress, and whether districts and campuses are closing achievement gaps among various student groups. https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability

The 85th Texas Legislature passed House Bill 22 (HB22), establishing three domains for measuring the academic performance of districts and campuses: Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps. Districts and campuses receive a rating of A, B, C, D, or F for overall performance, as well as for performance in each domain. In 2019, Middle ISD received a district rating of B. This was a repeat rating from the 2018-2019 school year due to the fact that testing was halted in the 2019-2020 school year due to the March 12, 2020 COVID-19 Emergency. For the 2020 rating the report reads, "Not Rated: Declared State of Disaster." On August 18, 2022, the Texas Education Agency released the 2022 A-F accountability ratings. Middle ISD was among 25% of the Texas school districts that improved their letter grade. Middle ISD was rated an A (TEA, 2022). The systematic effort of central office honing in on processes and procedures for the identified schools in need of improvement in 2021 and continuing that process and adding to it through the 2021-2022 school year could have contributed to the A-rating. This research will focus on the analysis of the efforts made by the Middle Independent School District Central Office

specifically for campuses identified as in need of improvement during the 2019-2020 school year and through the 2021- 2022 school year.

Research Problem

Given the dynamics of work in public education and particularly in school districts such as Middle ISD, the pace of work does not allow to reflect upon what was done and the possible effect that the actions taken could have had on the performance of educators, student learning and academic achievement. When I joined the district in 2014, there was no manual or playbook to follow. I looked at the district's annual report, current state and federal guidelines and got to work. When we got word about COVID-19 on Friday, March 13, 2020, we did not realize we were not coming back to the district offices for the rest of the academic year. Everything that occurred from then on was based on moment to moment decisions. We did not know we were an A rated District until August 18, 2022. So, what did we do that was so significant that got us to the A rating? That question is so broad and can encompass several research studies, however, for purposes of my dissertation study, I want to specifically hone in on the central office academic support for our campuses that were in most need of improvement. This study is guided by one purpose, which is to analyze the central office support process for schools categorized as in need of improvement to determine the lessons learned and systematize the experiences because they led to a successful outcome. More specifically, I have the following objectives:

1. Analyze how the Effective Schools Framework was interpreted and implemented on the schools in need of improvement.

2. Analyze the perception of the central office support provided to the campuses in need of support during and post-COVID school years from 2020 through the end

of the 2021-2022 school year inclusive of opinions from campus principals that were direct recipients of the support and central office academic leaders.

3. Analyze the professional development that the central office academics delivered and enforced for the campuses in need of improvement.

All of the work that was done during a period of time the entire world was literally shut-down deserves to be captured and systematized. I may never experience another COVID-19 pandemic, but I do know that in my nearly thirty years in education, there are always schools in need of improvement and every district central office academics team should do whatever it takes to support them. The lived experiences during this period of time provided actions and reactions that affected the next action and the next reaction. The systematization of the work that was done will support future districts that serve campuses in need of improvement.

Context of the Study

On March 13, 2020, I was a director in the Middle Independent School District and had been with the district since 2014. I consider myself as someone who always works for the greater good regardless of my title or position. As every day unfolded after March 13, 2020, I felt my role as a central office academics team member was to make sure that schools could still function as schools and students could experience school even though we were not physically able to associate with each other as we had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Being an active member of the central office academics team that created and disseminated what we felt were necessary supports paved the way to the A rating even when that was not the goal. I chose to use systematization as my methodology because the lived experiences from March 13, 2020 through the moment in August 2022 when we found out we were an A Rated District had a different focus as various events unfolded and physical circumstances changed. Three main bodies of research informed the

development of this study: (a) the role of central office academics; (b) curriculum and instruction; and (c) the Effective Schools Framework. Each of these bodies of literature will be discussed in Chapter 2. In this chapter I will provide an overview of Middle ISDs central office dynamics, and how the curriculum and instruction focus changed over the COVID-19 time period. Then, conclude with why the Effective Schools Framework was used specifically for schools in need of improvement and the importance these three bodies of research have on this study.

On March 13, 2020, the Middle ISD Central Office Academics team was comprised of two Associate Superintendents of Elementary, one Associate Superintendent of Middle School and one Associate Superintendent of High School. Each associate superintendent was supervised by the Superintendent and each supervised an academic director. By June 2020, the Superintendent and the Board of Trustees agreed to a different Cabinet structure that would affect Central Office Academics. A Chief of Academics, an Associate of School Improvement, and an Associate of Curriculum and Instruction were added. Only one Associate of Elementary held the position and only the Associate of Middle School kept two academic directors. The grade specific academic directors were now under the new Associate of Curriculum and Instruction. This shift was a significant first step to transform the central office (Honig, 2008; Copland, 2003; Rainey, 2014; Honig, Lorton, and Copland, 2009). The new Cabinet structure would allow more oversight on academics as well as a more streamlined approach to academic systems of support. The addition of the Associate of School Improvement would designate a Cabinet member to oversee the schools that were labeled as in need of improvement and make decisions that would address the specific needs of those campuses. The addition of the Associate of Curriculum and Instruction would allow more oversight on core subject areas of Math, Science, English Language Arts and Social Studies

across all grade levels. These two positions and the work that was done under their leadership are key factors in this study and the systematization methodology that was used in this study.

The role of public education has evolved from merely creating productive citizens to ensuring that all students receive a high quality education (Center on Educational Policy, 2020). Although the standards that were to be taught at each grade level and content area in Texas did not change after March 13, 2020, the focus on specific standards as well as district guides were adjusted to accommodate online instruction in Middle ISD. Additionally, delivery methods were altered due to teachers and students' physical constraints. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)[2] are the Texas state standards for what students should know and be able to do. Middle ISD uses the TEKS and creates curriculum documents that allow for pacing of the standards as well as alignment to resources that every student and teacher in Middle ISD can access. The central office academics team is the team that is responsible for providing the curriculum documents to the entire district.

The Effective Schools Framework from the Texas Education Agency is a framework that was used by Middle ISD to support campuses in need of improvement. When the Associate Superintendent for School Improvement started reviewing the data that categorized campuses as in need of improvement, the choice was to use the Effective Schools Framework to guide the work of supporting the campuses. The professional development and support that was provided to schools in need of improvement was grounded mostly under lever five[3]: Effective Instruction, which consists of the district committing to providing campus leaders with initial and on-going

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[2] Full list of TEKS can be found at https://tea.texas.gov/academics/curriculum-standards/teks/texas-essential-knowledge-and-skills

[3] Full text of lever 5 can be found at https://texasesf.org/framework/prioritized-lever-5/

training and support on district academic and instructional initiatives and systems so that campus instructional teams could then provide the same at the campus level.

The COVID-19 pandemic initiated in Middle Independent School District on March 13, 2020 when the Superintendent of Schools organized an emergency leadership meeting at the MISD central office building for all campus principals and district leadership of the MISD. It was at this meeting that he announced it appeared that the COVID-19 pandemic may cause a potential shutdown of the city and therefore a closure of our schools and office. A timeline of COVID-19 developments in 2020 as reported by the American Journal of Managed Care (AJMC) reports the COVID-19 was headed toward pandemic status on February 25, 2020 and was declared a national emergency by then President Trump on March 13, 2020. California was the first state to issue a stay-at-home order on March 19, 2020. Middle ISD started their spring break district closure on Monday 16, 2020 as part of their regular academic calendar. The district remained closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic for several months thereafter. On May 28, 2020, US COVID-19 deaths pass the 100,000 mark and on June 10, US COVID-19 cases reached 2 million. On June 26th, the state of Texas decided to halt reopenings due o the rising cases in the southern part of the United States. Several other states reversed reopening initiatives on July 2nd. During this same month vaccine trials were initiated however the Trump administration reached it first deal with the Moderna vaccine on August 11th. On September 28th, AJMC reports global COVID-19 deaths surpass 1 million. On October 23, 2020, the Education Service Center for the region that Middle ISD pertained to[4] released a COVID-19 On Campus Attendance Plan that included four zones that would allow the city to reopen their schools. As long as the tri-county hospitalization rate was at

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[4] Please contact Louisa Aguirre-Baeza at crabsmom@gmail.com for specific reference as adding it would diminish the confidential integrity of the study.

20% or above, school systems in the region would be allowed to restrict on-campus instruction for all grade levels. The Middle ISD could not officially welcome back students to their school buildings until February 2021 however, priority populations that were allowed access to school buildings included students with no internet access or devices at home, students who lacked effective childcare access, students of parents of essential workers and students with special academic needs. Middle ISD among other districts began reopening their schools in January 2021 at only fifty percent capacity.

Significance

The research project is timely due to the COVID-19 emergency that started in March 2020. The Middle Independent School District (MISD) central office had to go into immediate action like all other districts in Texas and the entire world. However, only twenty-five percent of the districts in Texas were able to attain an A rating in accountability as part of the aftermath. Therefore, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fact that we have schools in need of improvement prior to the March 2020, the A rating indicates we did some good things to support our struggling campuses that allowed them to enhance the instructional focus and student academic achievement. What was done will have to be chronologically analyzed in order to understand the dynamics of what occurred (Francois Soulard, 2019). My professional connection to this research will play a significant role, as I assumed the position of Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction in June 2020 during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The use of the systematization approach to research is most significant because systematization is a process of analytical thinking and critical reflection over a development intervention. Therefore, this research will be organized by providing a chronology of events related to the support the central office provided to the campuses in need of improvement from March 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,

through July 2022, which is the end of the 2021-2022 school year, the first regular school year post COVID-19. The significance of this study will allow other districts to recognize, make and sustain instructional improvements that will lead to student growth by improving the role of central office. It will also present practical suggestions on how the central office can have a positive impact on academics by documenting how schools in need of improvement can be supported.

It is my intention that this research will add to the growing body of literature regarding the academic impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on education (Basilaia, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Doucet, 2020; Petrie, 2020). However, the current body of research is more quantitative than qualitative focusing on the measurement of learning loss and instructional loss. This study is of significant importance because it will closely examine the support that was provided by the central office leadership of Middle Independent School District. The perceptions of leaders of campuses in need of improvement that were recipients of the support will be included as part of the analysis and effectiveness of the work that came from the central office leaders. It is my hope that other central office academic teams, principals, superintendents and other key stakeholders across the state of Texas will determine that my findings from this study can support their endeavors in improving academic performance and attaining positive state accountability ratings.

Roadmap

The unique approach to this research using systematization of what the central office did to attain the A-rating by specifically providing support to schools in need of improvement may require a roadmap as it slightly veers from the tradition dissertation. I kept the chapter integrity of a dissertation however chapter 4 will detail the support the district provided through a chronological perception of the lived experiences. Chapter 5 findings will include an analysis of the interviews from principals and central office leaders as part of the sense making and validation

of the chronological events. Lastly, chapter 6 will share the results of the research by providing the following:

1. Intentional production of knowledge through the actions and experiences as the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction;

2. Critical interpretation of chronological practices, procedures and outcomes through the perception and intention of central office;

3. Transformation of the central office academics team; and

4. Contributions to the greater good.

Systematization of the Middle ISD Central Office actions that occurred from the 2019-2020 school year when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred cannot be studied and connected to research without understanding the chronology of the events and the experiences that led to an A rating in August 2022. Additionally, it is of great importance to also understand my role with the district during this same time period and how it changed. In the process of systematization the critical first step was to create a layout of the process and procedures along a defined period of time so that it clearly identified what was done, when the interventions occurred and by whom (Francois Soulard, 2019). Therefore, a timeline of events was detailed which veers from the traditional dissertation format. Throughout the timeline, the analysis of the central office support process for the schools in need of improvement was detailed. The analysis of the professional development as well as the perceptions of the professional development derived chronologically and will be detailed. The analysis of the central office support for the identified schools in need of improvement will include a chronological analysis of the identified supports framed under the Effective Schools Framework.

Interviews with select principals and central office academics team members that were directly involved with the central office support will be conducted. Interviews were conducted to support the lived experiences and analysis and to remove any potential bias. An interview protocol was created specifically for this study and reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board processes from the university and the district. There were thirteen campuses that were considered schools in need of improvement by Middle ISD. This study will focus on campuses that served elementary grades as no comprehensive high schools were identified as needing improvement and the middle schools would be easily identifiable. The interviewees were voluntarily selected from a sampling of campus principals, academic directors and the associate superintendent of school improvement. Analysis was similar to qualitative analysis using systematization methodology through my lived experiences as a member of the Middle ISD academics team. The interviews were transcribed solely by me and were used to remove any potential bias of my lived experiences and to analyze the perceptions of the support provided by the central office academics team.

A glossary can be found immediately following the References to support terminology that is specific to this study and significant in public education.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In order to understand how the actual instructional day to day work in classrooms, schools, and districts can be improved, those that are currently doing the work resulting in positive outcomes must be able to test, refine and transform their experiences into a knowledge base that can be explained and structured so that those not experiencing success can glean from the models and systems of continuous improvement. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle stated, "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." This review of the literature was conducted to document concepts related to this research. I will define the curriculum for MISD and provide a brief historical perspective of curriculum and instruction. Next, I will provide a literature review of the Effective Schools Framework and continuous models of improvement. I will provide review of literature concerning sensemaking and improvement science in education to specifically address how I was influenced in the analysis of the chronological events. Lastly, and more importantly for the purposes of my study, this chapter will make clear the minimal literature on the role the central office plays on district success and has not thoroughly examined the importance of the relationship between the Central office and the campus principal leading schools in need of improvement.

Curriculum and Instruction

In this section of the literature review, I define curriculum and instruction within Middle Independent School District in order to provide the research relevant to the work of central office to support instruction.

Curriculum and Instruction for purposes of this study is defined as the state standards that are required to be part of every content-based course offered to students in an independent school district as well as the explicit instruction the teacher uses to convey the content. The Middle

Independent School District uses the Texas Curriculum Management Program Cooperation[5], to provide all viable curriculum and assessment components that are aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and support the formative and summative assessment items through their TCMPC TEKS Resource System. As part of the function of the central office academics team of Middle ISD, for the last several years, the team uses the TCMPC TEKS Resource System to develop a pacing guide, an assessment calendar and resource documents to support the day to day lesson delivery in each content area beginning in Prekindergarten through twelfth grade. Such documents are created by the central office instructional specialists assigned to the content area and grade level and the team of teachers and instructional coaches they work with. The additional team members the central office specialists work with come from campuses across the district. The curriculum documents are to be used by every content teacher at every campus based on the grade and subject they teach.

The curriculum documents were most recently developed and refined based on research provided by Robert J. Marzano (2003) in which he includes five action steps for a viable curriculum:

Action Step 1, identify and communicate the content considered essential for all students versus that considered supplemental or necessary only for those seeking postsecondary education; Action Step 2, ensure that the essential content can be addressed in the amount of time available for instruction; Action Step 3, sequence and organize the essential content in such a way that students have ample opportunity to learn in; Action Step 4, ensure that teachers address the essential content; Action Step 5, protect the instructional time that is available (Marzano, 2003).

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[5] Copyright © 2023 TCMPC

The goal for Middle ISD central office academics teams is to provide a viable curriculum to all campus leaders that is to be used for all core contents. The use of the district defined curriculum is considered a non-negotiable for all campus principals. The curriculum documents produced by the central office academics team have provide the essential content that is required to be taught, provide appropriate pacing to be completed within the academic school year, are sequenced and organized for maximum learning, are used as the primary resources for all teacher training and professional development and contain resources and supports for all learners to include references to district purchased instructional materials.

The role of public education has evolved from merely creating productive citizens to ensuring that all students receive a high quality education (Center on Educational Policy, 2020). Creating high quality instructional experiences for every student in every classroom has become the concern of many but ultimately the responsibility of a few. A group of researchers noted that when specifically meeting the challenges of curriculum and instruction, five challenges that dramatically influence curriculum and instruction were identified as 1) demographic changes, 2) policy changes, 3) emerging technologies, 4) globalization, and 5) refugee and immigration issues (Aydin , Ozfidan, & Carothers, 2017). Although a great deal of research exists on the topic of curriculum and instruction to include dimensions of thinking (Marzano et al., 1988), educating for democratic societies (Lafer and Aydin, 2012), and teaching for rigor (The Marzano Center, 2017), for the state of Texas, curriculum and instruction is based on standards known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)[6]. The TEKS are the state standards for what students should know and be able to do. The TEKS are available for grades Kindergarten through high

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[6] Full listing of the TEKS can be found here: https://tea.texas.gov/academics/curriculum-standards/teks/texas-essential-knowledge-and-skills

school graduation. They undergo a review and adoption process by the State Board of Education and they are publicly posted for access. Prior to 2017, Texas school districts were obligated to find instructional materials and resources that aligned to the state standards using district created reviews. In 2017, Texas legislators recognized a need to assist school districts in selecting instructional materials and have since provided the Texas Resource Review[7] to support districts in selecting high quality instructional materials. Regardless of demographics or any other factors, all Texas districts must use the TEKS.

In the Middle Independent School District, the use of the TEKS Resource System is what is used to manage the curriculum for the majority of our TEKS grades and courses. There are other resources and materials that also support the curriculum in specialized courses such as Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses that will not be part of this study. Additionally, because the TEKS Resource System is customizable, there are content areas like elementary math where the complete district defined curriculum is housed in digital grade specific classrooms to support the customization and addition of additional resources. The TEKS Resource System is a licensed platform and all of the Middle ISD teachers and administrators have accessibility to it and all the other curriculum components that are part of the TEKS Resource System.

The Texas Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath presented at the 2021 Texas Assessment Conference a presentation entitled, "TEA's Response to COVID-19". The third slide of his presentation stated, "With all the operational disruptions of COVID, remaining focused on academics is difficult but necessary." Within this same presentation, he provided two data charts that quantify learning loss as depicted in Figure 1.1. The first was a student achievement and

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[7] Texas Resource Review located at http://texasresourcereview.org/

attainment summary that provided a comparison of the most recent year of available data to the most recent prior year of available data. The chart indicates a 7% drop in third grade reading, 18% drop in third grade math, an 8% decrease in eighth grade reading and 19% decrease in eighth grade math. Additionally, he presented a chart that showed the fact that COVID-19 erased years of academic gains.
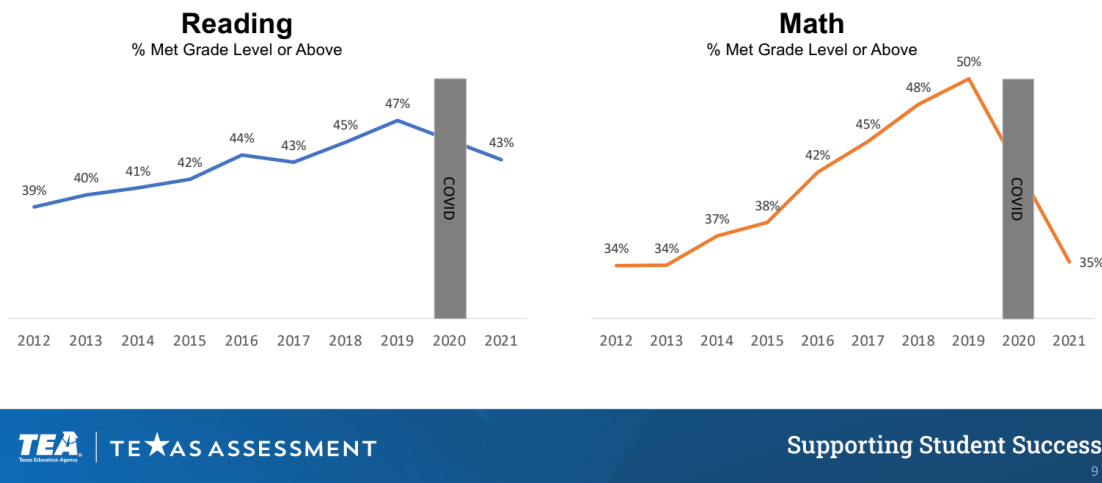
Figures 2.1: Effects of COVID-19 on Reading and Math

In an August 12, 2021 article on Forbes.com, author of *The Knowledge Gap: What it is and How to Narrow It*, Natalie Wexler provided the following: " The data is clear: students haven't been learning at the same rate as in a normal, pre-pandemic year. According to one estimate they've lost four to five months of learning, on average. The figures are significantly worse for students from lower-income families. And because those students are less likely to have been

tested recently, the available evidence probably underestimates the extent of the problem[8]"

(Wexler, 2021). Ironically, the title of her article is, *Learning Loss: Urgent Crisis Or Harmful*

Myth? It may be too soon to provide a concrete definition of learning loss, but it cannot be argued

that current data, both quantitative and qualitative, indicate that less students are mastering the

curriculum that is being taught, and teachers are struggling to determine how to remedy the

situation.

In the Middle ISD Strategic Plan[9], the three goals for the district are 1) Our Future, 2) Our

People and 3) Our Investment. The plan delineates the goals of the district and includes the

implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The current strategic plan for MISD provides baseline

data along with goals related to specific academic measurements that are to be implemented over

five school years, beginning with 2020-2021 academic school year and ending in 2023. Targets

identified in strategic plan are objective, informative, and relevant to the Board goals, but also set

a higher bar for student performance. Implementation, monitoring, and evaluation will require new

approaches by the district, due to a combination of 2019 legislation and a better understanding of

how efforts and performance are captured through accountability measures:

- Every year, each campus and the district are assigned an A-F grade based on designated criteria;
- Teachers and principals are evaluated using standardized systems;
- Student academic performance is monitored constantly through a variety of data collection;
- Evaluation will take place by reviewing scorecards for each campus and the district, comparing actual performance to performance targets;
- Data reflecting campus and student safety will be captured through Anonymous Alerts and student information systems; and

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[8] https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliewexler/2021/08/12/learning-loss-urgent-crisis-or-harmful-myth/?sh=16c0dd0b77a2

[9] Actual reference will disrupt the confidential integrity of the study. Contact Louisa Aguirre-Baeza at crabsmom@gmail.com for more information.

- Goals regarding Service Excellence, employee engagement, and parent satisfaction are measured through annual surveys conducted by the Studer Group, and direct input from stakeholders who submit surveys on Service Excellence kiosks.

The strategic action plan references the challenges and the COVID-19 Emergency. The purpose of the strategic framework has written, "Stakeholders revealed a desire for the district to avoid complacency, and widely and consistently deliver excellence. This requires Middle ISD to hold its course, focus on key goals, and push harder." For purposes of this study, goal 1, Our Future, along with the proposed target will be the framework for how curriculum and instruction and how Middle ISD operates in the area of curriculum and instruction. Additionally, part of the review of literature must include defining effectiveness under the state accountability system. Achieving an A Rating for Middle ISD is considered effective.

The state of Texas provides annual academic accountability ratings to its public school districts, charters and schools. The ratings are based on performance on state standardized tests; graduation rates; and college, career, and military readiness outcomes. The ratings examine student achievement, school progress, and whether districts and campuses are closing achievement gaps among various student groups. Districts and campuses are provided a letter grade rating of A, B, C, D or F. (https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2022-accountability-system-overview.pdf)

The Texas Education Agency Commissioner Rules on Reporting Requirements provides all districts with a Texas Academic Performance Report that is intended to inform the public about the educational performance of the district and each campus in the district in relation to the district, the state and a comparable group of schools (https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/ch061bb.pdf). In addition, each campus is provided with a School Report Card regarding the specific school's performance. The Texas Education Agency Strategic Plan, as shown in Figure 2.1 below, is currently grounded on an effort to support rapid improvements in student outcomes in obtaining

postsecondary credentials through an adopted 60x30TX[10] goal which includes sixty percent of the 25 to 34 year old Texas population to hold a certificate or degree by the year 2030.

Figures 2.2: Texas Education Agency Strategic Plan for 2019-2023[11]

Effective Schools Framework and Continuous Models of Improvement

The Effective Schools Framework is used by the Middle ISD to provide a clear vision of what we do in the realm of curriculum and instruction to ensure excellence for all students. It was developed by the Texas Education Agency. The Effective Schools Framework (ESF) consists of a set of district commitments and, for schools, essential actions. The district commitments describe what should be done to ensure that schools are set up for success. The Essential Actions describe

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[10] TEA reference: https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/welcome-and-overview/tea-strategic-plan
[11] Explanation of the graphic from TEA can be found at
https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/TEA%20Strategic%20Plan_2019-2023.pdf

what the most effective schools do to support powerful teaching and learning. The ESF is grounded on five levers:

- Lever 1 - Strong School Leadership and Planning
- Lever 2 - Strategic Staffing
- Lever 3 - Positive School Culture
- Lever 4 - High Quality Instructional Materials and Assessments
- Lever 5 - Effective Instruction

The Effective Schools Framework puts Lever 5 Instruction at the core. Within the lever there are four essential actions that are described with key practices and success criteria. Additionally there are district commitments. For purposes of this study, Lever 5 will be the focus as it defines what effective instruction is and how it occurs in effective schools. When Middle ISD defined the schools in need of improvement, the central office Cabinet leadership determined that effective instruction needed to be a focal point for the principals that were leading schools in need of improvement. The Associate Superintendent of School Improvement was charged with overseeing the schools in need of improvement and getting the campuses to attaining the strategic plan goals by working with each campus principal to create a plan of action and set campus goals.

Lever 5, Effective Instruction provides essential actions that specifically support campus leaders guidance on consideration for delivering instruction that meet the needs of all students through professional development support and time for teachers to reflect, adjust and deliver instruction. The district commitments are:

- The district ensures that campus instructional leaders receive initial training and ongoing coaching to support the implementation of instructional leadership systems (feedback on instructional materials alignment and use, data-driven instruction, and observation and feedback).
- For assessments that are district provided and graded, the district ensures that schools receive detailed reports within two instructional days.
- The district provides schools with access to student academic, behavioral, and on-track to graduate data (present and historical).
- The district has effective systems for identifying and supporting struggling learners.

- District policies and practices support effective instruction in schools.

There are four essential actions within Lever 5 that include:

- Effective classroom routines and instructional strategies
- Build teacher capacity through observation and feedback cycles
- Data-drive instruction
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for student with learning gaps

The Effective Schools Framework (ESF) is one of the five identified steps in the School Improvement Theory of Action as reported by the Texas Education Agency. In the School Improvement Theory of Action Snapshot[12] it reads: "This cyclical process includes consistent assessment of current practices, prioritizing gaps in system/practices, capacity building, and ongoing plan implementation support, around a common vision of the highest leverage practices."

The Middle ISD central office academics team did not pick the ESF merely because it was grounded in research and supported by the Texas Education Agency. The district commitment to continuous improvement and models of excellence were part of the district's structure prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. When trying to improve customer service, the district sent a team to the Disney Institute in Orlando, Florida to learn from one of the most recognized names in professional development, the Walt Disney Company. In 2015 The search for continuous models of improvement is supported by the Shingo Model. The model is based on five principles:

1. Seek Perfection

2. Embrace Scientific Thinking

3. Focus on Process

4. Assure Quality at the Source

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[12] Full report can be found at https://texasesf.org/download/11550/

5. Improve Flow and Pull

Walking down the hallways of the Middle ISD central office building, you can often hear phrases such as the gold standard, Fortune 500, or excellence by design. The district also passed a significant bond in 2015 and then another one in 2019 for renovations and innovations across the district despite its declining enrollment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-2021 school year was branded with Reimagine Learning. The district sought to create a perfect learning environment under the most imperfect conditions. For the start of the 2021-2022 school year, the district flipped the Steven Covey line of "begin with the end in mind"[13] and created their staff development for by ending the previous year with "end with the beginning in mind" knowing that they would get to end an unorthodox year of COVID-19 restrictions with the vision of starting a better year ahead. The Shingo Model states,

> All ten of the Shingo Guiding Principles support human development by striving to create an environment that is both physically and emotionally safe; where employees feel secure in their jobs; and, in the context of continuous improvement, where all employees are presented with the professional challenge of providing perfect customer satisfaction every minute of every day (Anderson, L. et al, 2021).

The sense of continuous improvement within the central office leadership is a shared message through their Service Excellence initiative and their continuous pursuit of improvement.

Improvement Science and Sensemaking

As a classroom teacher, I would teach my students how important it was that they get better at what they were doing. Whatever vocabulary we knew at the beginning of the year, the goal was that we would know even more vocabulary and be able to use it in their listening, speaking, reading and writing at an even higher level by the end of the school year. My students did not care what I called what I was teaching, they just cared that I made it fun and that they could understand it and

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[13] Taken from, The Seven Habit of Highly Effective People, 2020, pg. 109

hopefully get a good grade. That is a little of the premise here for this part of the literature review. Systematization relies on documentation and materials that are reviewed to identify useful information. It is a collection of data from opinions, reflections and testimonials of the experience compiled through lived experiences and semi-structured interviews. Therefore, the research piece of this study needs to produce some kind of knowledge that brings the systematization process together to improve. For purposes of this study, I seek to improve the systems and practices of central office teams so that they can positively impact the effectiveness of the schools they serve. The Middle Independent School District curriculum was previously referenced in this chapter as was the use of the Effective Schools Framework to support how MISD used the ESF to attain academic effectiveness. The quest for improvement was backed by the research that effective organizations strive for perfection through continuous improvement models such as the Shingo Model. How I eventually put all of this together in chapters 4 through 6 was done through the practices of improvement science and sensemaking. Improvement science is guided by three foundational questions:

1. What am I trying to accomplish?
2. What change might I introduce to solve it (and why)?
3. How will I know that change is an improvement?

Chapter 4 of this study will chronologically detail the events that occurred while Middle ISD was maneuvering through the COVID-19 pandemic. Improvement science tells us how and under what conditions the interventions worked. Therefore, my reflection pieces will be detailed through external validity and generalizability of the events that unfolded. In chapter 5 the findings that I share address the improvement that occurred through the lens of the campus principals that received the interventions the central office provided. Sharing the improvements through chapters 4 and 5 are in direct agreement with improvement science as explained by Perla et al, 2013:

> Much of science, especially the applied sciences, has an eye on improving something, yet not all attempts at improving something are scientific. Furthermore, all other sciences focus on a better understanding and improvement of some specific phenomenon that fall within the scope of their discipline (e.g., molecular biology, aviation, food production, education),

but the science of improvement is focused on how improvement is done in general. (p. 173)

In the case of this study, changes had to occur due to the time period of the COVID-19 pandemic and the systemic changes that had to occur in order to adjust to the environmental restrictions. The central office team provided interventions that had a positive impact on their schools which ultimately had a positive impact on enough students to attain an A rating. The improvements that occurred required the change once the schools reopened however, not all the changes were improvements. This is where sensemaking comes into play.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about changes that were not anticipated and many that were not even predicted including the pandemic itself. Therefore, throughout the paper, there are many occasions where I had to cope with ambiguities, incomplete information and facts based on perceptions and the lived experiences. These realities based on perceptions and my own unintentional bias of being a member of the central office leadership have to have some kind of sensible structure to make meaning of the events and interventions that were provided by the central office team. Sensemaking is just that. It is a real-time process in which we give meaning to our experience and socially construct the world around us and the actions we take. I attempt to remove the ambiguity through the chronological events, various figures of evidence from actual professional development and support documents and use the interviews of campus principals to bring more comprehension, pattern and realism to the improvement that occurred.

Central Office

On March 13, 2020, the efforts of providing such high quality instructional opportunities to the students of the Middle Independent School District in El Paso, Texas were redefined for the next several months due to COVID-19 circumstances. With students and teachers not able to be in their usual campuses and classrooms, Central Office had to navigate the district and redefine how

we did school. With no roadmap to guide our campuses, central office district leaders needed to quickly determine their current reality and put instant practices and procedures in place to make school happen.

It can be logically stated that teachers need to know what is expected of them to teach, campus leaders need to monitor what is being taught, and district leaders need to provide the resources to make this possible. However, the responsibility of making sure all students are learning and benefitting from the teaching is not limited to one. Tongeri and Aderson published a 2003 study of 5 school districts. They identified the importance of redefining leadership roles as instructional reform required multiple stakeholders (Tongeri and Anderson, 2003). For Middle ISD, the central office that will be used as part of this study is responsible for the oversight of the curriculum and instruction. The Chief of Academics is responsible for overseeing the elementary, middle, high school, and academic support programs. Under her leadership are three Associate Superintendents that oversee all academic programs and provide instructional leadership for development and establishment of high academic standards at the elementary, middle and high school campuses assigned. The Chief also oversees two additional Associate Superintendents. One provides support for the academic achievement of low performing campuses (Associate Superintendent of School Improvement) and the other oversees the district level curriculum and instruction for all grade levels (Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction).

To respond to the significance of this study, which is to help other districts recognize and make instructional improvements that will lead to student growth by improving the role of central office, my role as the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction is at the core of this study. In my job description it is written:

Oversee district level curriculum and instruction for grades PREK-12. Establish instructional programs to achieve standards district-wide for all program types and all students. Review and evaluate the effectiveness of the district curriculum. Assist the Chief Academic Officer with the development, implementation and assessment of district instructional programs. Adhere to federal, state laws and regulations, as well as, district policies, regulations and procedures. Provide leadership, direction and support in the coordination and alignment of effective research-based programs that result in high achievement and growth for all student groups.

Central Office Transformation has been defined as the day in and day out interactions that directly support teaching and learning across the district through five dimensions that include instructional leadership practice, principal partnerships, reorganization, stewardship, and the use of evidence to support continual improvement of work practices (Honing, Copeland, Rainey, Lorton and Newton, 2010). While various researchers examine the role of the central office (Saphier & Dunkin, 2011, Honig, Copeland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010), for purposes of this study we will examine the role of the Middle ISD central office as it exists to support the Texas academic accountability ratings and the overall academic function of the district.

In a *History and Evolution of Public Education* paper written by the Center on Education Policy (CEP), it was reported that in 1970, the high school completion rate was only 55% but in April 2017, 90% of Americans, aged 25 and older, had a high school degree (https://census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2017/educational-attainment-2017.html).
Considering the Texas Education Agency's Strategic Plan of 60x30TX wanting sixty percent of Texans aged 25 and older in the year 2030 to have postsecondary degrees, the Middle Independent School District exists to provide a high quality education to all students so that growth in student achievement and increases in students' college, career, and/or military readiness remains the instructional focus for all of our campuses. With a Chief of Academics, four Associate Superintendents that oversee the 52 campus administrators and one Associate Superintendent of

Curriculum and Instruction; attaining positive accountability ratings with data driven results aligned to federal and state accountability and the Middle ISD strategic plan goals and targets, is what drives the work of the central office.

The purpose of this research study is to systematize and critically reflect on the experiences carried out in the transformation of the central office in the west Texas school district, Middle Independent School District. The timeframe of the central office transformation that occurred was as a result of the COVID-19 emergency in 2020 therefore this research is timely and will require a unique research methodology to systematize what actually occurred and makes the findings valuable to future research.

Conclusion

The chapter contained a quote from Aristotle about learning by doing in the first paragraph. In relation to this study, one can conclude the following in regards to the review of literature. First, curriculum and instruction can be defined as the what. It is the standards, the pacing, the ideas and lessons of what should be taught at every grade level. Second, the Effective Schools Framework was chosen by Middle ISD to provide a road map for principals leading campuses in need of improvement of what needed to be monitored. It allowed for goals to be set and strategic plans on how to achieve the goals. Lastly, the role of the central office is paramount if change is needed. If a campus is labeled as in need of improvement, then there has to be an outside entity that can analyze the campus, the leadership of the campus, and the instructional practices that are occurring within the campus and determine and provide the needed support. How curriculum and instruction, the ESF and central office come together deserves to be analyzed and systematized as the process to get to improvement will support the intended outcome versus the actual outcome.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

In chapter 3, I discuss the research design and methods used in this study. Analyzing the central office support process for schools in need of improvement in the Middle Independent School District (MISD) requires a chronological account of the events that occurred. The methodology of systematization was selected in order to analyze the systems of support provided by the MISD central office and how those systems were interpreted and implemented with an analysis as to why such actions were taken. This chapter also describes the analysis process, interview protocol, limitations of the study and includes a section of my positionality in relation to the research.

Research Design

This research is grounded in improvement science in education to improve practices that occur to get schools to get better at getting better (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and Lemahieu, 2015). This research project was conducted using the systematization methodology. Systematization aims at assisting those that have participated in transformative processes in local contexts to reconstruct their lived experiences and recover the knowledge therein (Falkembach & Carrillo, 2015).

The project utilizes a qualitative approach because qualitative research converges on exploring and describing the experiences of a group (Durdella, 2019). I specifically chose systematization or systematizing the actions of the Middle Independent School District (MISD) central office because what occurred in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic started to affect the MISD, was reactionary and organic based on the experiences of the moment. Because of my unique position as Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, a position I

earned four months into the COVID-19 emergency, I can attest, most actions and activities were not pre-planned or scripted in any way. There were no instructional models, pieces of research, specific theories of action or manuals that were labeled, "Use this in case of COVID-19 Emergency." Therefore, this study was the attempt to define the actions and processes through the analysis conducted. Systematization of the experiences that occurred from March 2020 through July 2022 allowed for the exploration of policies and processes that can be shared with other education agencies as they strive for positive accountability ratings or positive instructional results particularly when working with schools in need of improvement. Additionally, elaboration on considerations for sustained positive outcomes for campuses that typically struggle or are labeled as in need of improvement. The study was guided by the purpose to analyze the central office support process for schools categorized as in need of improvement and determine the lessons learned in order to systematize the experiences. More specifically, I have the following objectives:

1. Analyze how the Effective Schools Framework was interpreted and implemented on the schools in need of improvement.

2. Analyze the perception of the central office support provided to the campuses in need of support during and post-COVID school years from 2020 through the end of the 2021-2022 school year inclusive of opinions from campus principals that were direct recipients of the support.

3. Analyze the professional development that the central office academics delivered and enforced for the campuses in need of improvement.

Systematization

In March 2021, a brief by The World Bank was published with the following title "Mission: Recovering Education in 2021" (https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/mission-recovering-education-in-2021). There is no particular author or references, which not only made it challenging to cite, but it brought another note of awareness, that no matter how praiseworthy our efforts were for the teaching and learning that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not as valuable as in-person learning. However, what has not been proven is the actual teaching and learning that occurred during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This is why I chose systematization. Every classroom is unique, every teacher is unique and every student is unique. When each of those three unique entities is now in its own unique setting with nothing but a computer screen to unite us, it is important to find patterns, procedures, and processes beyond the screen. Therefore it was important to me to determine the actions that were taken by the Middle Independent School District central office academics team, the perceptions of such actions, and analyze the academic effects on our school leaders, teachers and students of the campuses that were in need of improvement pre-pandemic. Something we did worked because in August 2022, when all was said and done, the Middle ISD attained an A Rating in Accountability from the Texas Education Agency. In order to understand what occurred prior, systematizing what occurred from March 2020 to July 2022 is relevant.

> The systematization approach is a multi-stakeholder evaluation tool developed in Latin America that emphasizes in-depth comprehension of processes and shared learning among the participants of development experiences as they unfold. The approach is based on the notion that experiences can be used to generate on-going understanding(s), and that lessons learned in real-time can improve both ongoing implementation and also contribute to a wider body of knowledge (Tapella and Rodriguez-Biella, 2014).

In this research, I will provide a chronological description of the actions and processes that occurred within the central office academics team of the MISD as they provided support to schools identified as in need of improvement. Because of my position as Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, I have first hand knowledge of the how and why certain supports were initiated. The chronology of the events provided lessons learned that specifically affected the next event which impacted the next and so forth. Insight into the challenges in implementing such actions and processes and reflections on how these challenges were resolved will be included for ongoing implementation and to support a wider body of knowledge through the analysis of the effect such practices and policies had on the schools identified as in need of improvement. District and campus leadership specifically involved with the curriculum and instruction of schools in need of improvement in MISD were interviewed for accuracy and perceptions of the actions taken.

Timeline

In a 2021 article titled, "Do what is known, think was was done," written by Alfonso Torres-Carrillo, he justifies the systematization of experiences as an intentional production of knowledge of participatory nature, which from the narrative reconstruction and critical interpretation of the dimensions being studied, seeks to promote the participating entity and contribute to the policies and practices within the field (Torres-Carrillo, 2021). Therefore, the research method consisted of the following phases:

- Phase 1: Create an intentional production of knowledge - Provide a chronologically detailed description of actions that were taken between March 2020 through July 2022 when the COVID-19 emergency was initiated through the first academic school year that started under normal conditions. The detailed description were derived from a review of calendars such as professional learning calendars and assessment calendars. Agendas

determined what meetings were held, what the focus of those meetings was and what follow-up was provided. Central office and campus leadership documentation influenced patterns, frameworks, and/or expectations as part of the analysis.

- Phase 2: Critically interpret the logic and meanings that constitute the experience - an analysis of outcomes in comparison to the actual experiences is a challenging piece as intention, perception and reality differ within the roles of central office players and campus leadership. This is the relevance of systematization. Although the Effective Schools Framework provides "a clear vision for what districts and schools across the state do to ensure an excellent education for all Texas students," (texasesf.org, 2022), it is the district and campuses that are responsible for the outcomes. In order to critically interpret the logic and meanings of the lived experiences, systematization focuses on the dynamics of the experiences forcing me as the researcher to interpret and analyze qualitative and quantitative data within the specified time frame. Therefore, I linked the knowledge gained directly from my lived experiences to reach practical conclusions on how the support of MISD central office affected the outcomes that derived from the campuses in need of improvement during the COVID-19 pandemic and the year after. We know the majority of the outcomes were favorable as the Middle ISD attained an A-Rating from the Texas Education Agency in August 2022.

- Phase 3: Enhance the transformative capacity of the practice - Although it is clear that Middle ISD is an A-rated district and that the COVID-19 emergency may not be exactly replicated, systematization allowed for overall improvement to central office roles and generated necessary changes and adjustments that needed to occur in order to meet academic success under accountability measures.

- Phase 4: Contribute to the greater good. Different from participatory action research, this study will not simply analyze how the district used the Effective Schools Framework to achieve the A-rating. It will focus on the experiences of making school happen despite the challenges from the COVID-19 Emergency particularly in schools in need of improvement. The transformations that occurred and how the district presently continues to pursue supporting campuses in need of improvement. This phase of the study allowed focus to the question of now what? What is to follow? And, how can this transformation be defined and sustained for the district and for other education agencies that have campuses in need of improvement. The goal being to contribute to the greater good in a methodical and systematic way and so the results can be compared and contrasted in order to create transferability. The majority of this phase will be reported in the findings of chapter 5 and conclusions of chapter 6.

Setting

The Middle Independent School District is located in the southwest tip of Texas in the city of El Paso. The MISD is the number one school district in El Paso, according to the 2022 Niche® rankings. Middle ISD is the third-largest school district in El Paso, Texas with approximately 37,000 students and 52 campuses that stretch from northeast El Paso to the east and southeast areas of the city. The campuses are aligned into seven learning communities or feeder patterns to better serve the needs of students. The district has established an "open enrollment" policy that allows schools to open their doors to students from neighboring districts. MISD follows a year-round school year calendar with classes beginning in August and ending the first part of June. Table 3.1 shows descriptive data for Middle ISD demographics from Pre-COVID in the 2018-2019 school year to Post-COVID through the 2021-2022 school year.

Table 3.1 Middle Independent School District Description Data

	2018-2019	2019-2020 (COVID emergency initiated in March 2020)	2020-2021	2021-2022 (first school year with no COVID emergency restrictions)	October 2022 (current school year)
Number of elementary schools	38	38	36	35	32
Number of middle schools	10	9	10	8	7
Number of high schools	12	12	12	12	12
Student enrollment	41064	40428	38390	37244	36174
Economically Disadvantaged	79%	78%	77%	78.75%	78.26%
Limited English Proficient	27%	28.71%	29.85%	30.98%	32.11%
Special Education	12%	13.80%	14.18%	14.46%	15.14%
Hispanic	94%	94%	94.96%	94.96%	95.11%
White	3.14%	3.06%	2.80%	2.80%	3.05%
African American	1.40%	1.42%	1.42%	1.41%	1.13%
Early Ed through 5th grade	16026	18422	16486	16206	15775
6th grade through 8th grade	9340	9288	9006	8507	8080
9th grade through 12th grade	12710	12718	12898	12831	12319
Admin Support and Teacher Employees	3756	3657	3569	3450	*not available

There were thirteen campuses that were considered schools in need of improvement by Middle ISD during the timeframe of this study. This study focused on campuses that served elementary grades as no comprehensive high schools were identified as needing improvement and the middle schools classified as in need of improvement can easily be identified. Campuses are classified as schools in need of improvement when the federal and state accountability measures indicate that they are the lowest in the district and/or below state and federal standards. Due to the March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the Texas Education Agency replicated 2018-2019 campus ratings for the 2019-2020 school year since students were unable to complete state assessments. For the 2020-2021 school year, the MISD identified seven elementary campuses and three middle school campuses as in need of improvement.

There are several departments within the Central Office, however, for purposes of this research, the Academics Department from the Middle ISD Central Office was the focus. As is the case for most school districts, the MISD is led by a Superintendent and an Executive Cabinet. The Chief of Academics leads the entire curriculum and instruction departments alongside five Associate Superintendents as depicted in the figure 3.1.
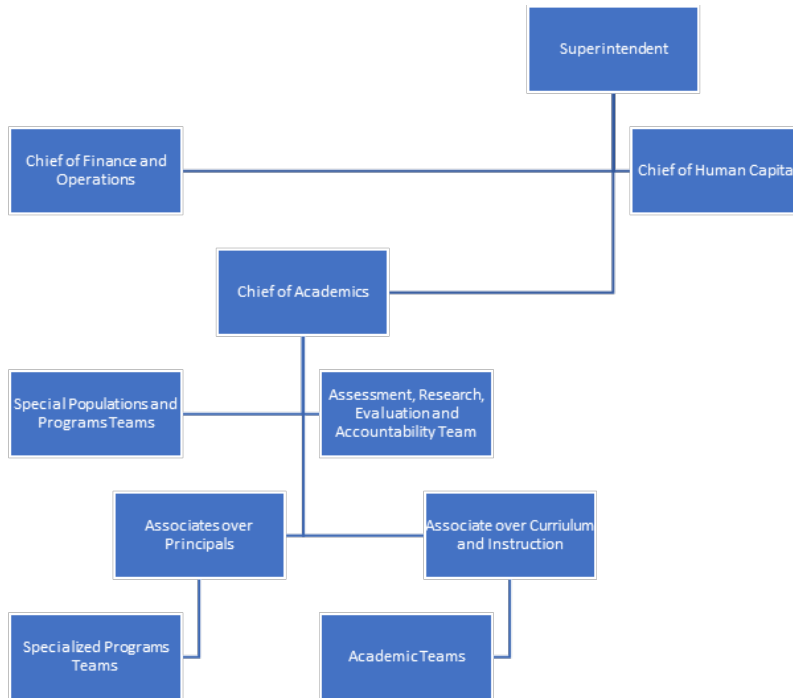
Figure 3.1: Middle ISD Central Office Academics Organizational Chart

I currently work in the district, therefore access to district resources and participants are accessible. I completed the Institutional Review Board process for the University of Texas at El Paso as well as for the school district. My study was discussed with my supervisor and the district's superintendent of schools and they both were in full support of my study. My expertise and interest is on curriculum and instruction and support, therefore my position in the district as well as the positive relationships I have established throughout the district and most especially with the academics team and the principals of the campuses in need of support is another factor for accessibility.

Interviews

While the methodology of systematization is based on lived experiences, interviews were conducted to support the lived experiences and analysis and to remove any potential bias. I thought carefully about the interview process in order to tie the interviews specifically to the research even

though I personally lived through the research. An interview protocol was created specifically for this study. I used an active interviewing approach which Holstein and Gubrium (2003) describe as "Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself." (p. 68) I used the active approach to the interview in order to uncover the hows and whats of the principals, directors and associate superintendent's experiences and perceptions. The active subjects that participated in the interview needed to have firsthand knowledge and experience of being part of the central office support as contributors of the support, deliverers of the support and decision makers of the campuses that were labeled as in need of improvement. The interview questions were shared with the participants prior to the interview in order to develop the interview interaction. The interview protocol has open-ended questions but I did stray from the set of questions based on the responses and themes that were emerging throughout. I recorded each of the interviews and logged responses actively throughout the interview and immediately following in order to actively collect data and begin analysis and congruence as recommended by Powney and Watts (2018). Systematization is centered around lived experiences and perceptions of the what and how that occurred, therefore congruence was created through my interview protocol to match the how and what of the research. The interviewees were voluntarily selected from a group of ten campus principals that were principals of campuses in need of improvement. Three agreed to the interviews, three no longer work for the district and four opted not to participate. The participating principal from the middle school was removed due to easily identifiable results that would fracture the confidentiality of the participant. Additional interviews were conducted with the academic directors and the associate superintendent of school improvement. Analysis was similar to qualitative analysis using

systematization methodology through lived experiences as a member of the Middle ISD academics team. The interviews were transcribed from the recordings using transcription software. The interviews were part of the analysis and perceptions that support the goal of the study. For integrity of the research, participants used pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and for purposes of confidentiality.

The interview protocol was specifically designed for this study and is included in Appendix A. The detailed information is within the interview protocol and included the following inquiry topics:

- Introduction of Study
- Requested Consent
- Indication of Recording
- Open-ended Questions
- Statement of Anonymity
- Request for Pseudonym

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to analyze the Middle ISD central office support process for schools in need of improvement. This is beyond an evaluation of what occurred due to the fact that evaluations are immediate after a specific action whereas with systematization, there is emphasis on the critical reflection by the very people that lived through the experiences with the goal of improving the quality of the practices (Jara Holliday, 2012). To accomplish this, I critically examined and reflected on the professional development and support that was provided to the campuses in need of improvement through the chronological events that occurred during March 2020 through July 2022. I used a sensemaking approach as the MISD Central Office academics team did not perceive the COVID-19 emergency nor our academic problems that were occurring

equally or alike to the principals leading campuses that were in need of improvement; yet both entities had to act effectively simply by making sense of our circumstances in ways that appeared to move toward academic success through our district accountability rating (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The sensemaking came from the chronological organization of what occurred, understanding the why of the lived experiences and determining if the lived experiences were perceived as they were intended.

Limitations

Potential limitations of the study begin with my personal connection to the district. As the current Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, I played an obvious role in the decision-making, development, and dissemination of many of the actions. My role within the district is to support and create systems that lead to academic growth and achievement by looking at data, creating systems or processes for positive outcomes, and using data to support any interventions for continued improvement. The process of systematization involves linking the experience of the activities with the outputs or outcomes accounting for why a certain relationship exists, and unraveling the underlying connections, in order to understand the how and why the change has happened or not (Tapella and Rodriguez-Bilella, 2014).

The study is also limited by the focus on only the campuses classified as in need of improvement as opposed to all the campuses within the district. Additionally, the participants that were interviewed were not representative of all campuses that were classified as in need of improvement due to campus consolidations that have occurred as well as administrative changes. This study did not include representation from high school principals as no comprehensive high schools were classified as in need of improvement. Middle School campuses were not part of the study due to the limited number that are identified as in need of improvement and the easily identifiable outcomes that would break confidentiality. Finally, my position in the district might

make some of my interviewees feel they cannot trust me or give me honest feedback because I supervise some of them and I support some of them. However, being the associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction provides the subjectivity and positionality needed for this study due to my lived experiences.

Positionality

I have already stated that I am a member of the Cabinet for Middle Independent School District as I hold the position of Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. I am the director supervisor to the director of PreKinder through 8th grade and I work directly under the Chief of Academics. My entire career has been in education primarily working in the region in which this study takes place. This community serves a unique group of pupils, personnel, parents and partners that are primarily born and raised within our borders. Our district does border Mexico and one-third of our students are classified as emergent bilinguals and 15% are classified as special education. My first language was not English and I was born and raised in the Middle ISD school district and attended Kindergarten through high school graduation at the very schools I now serve. I recognize that I am personally and professionally biased about this community and our work. The bias is based on personal and professional experiences that have shaped me and have allowed me to have a successful career that I love. This positionality allowed me to have first hand access to material, people and trust that I believe supported honest participation and feedback.

During the study it was important for me to remain focused on the evidence and events that actually occurred and use an interview protocol and recordings to capture the truth so as to remove myself and my expertise from the integrity of the data collection and analysis. The documents that were reviewed and analyzed were also from original presentation and supports that were created and developed through the central office academics and leadership teams and were not recreated or altered in any way.

Chapter 4: Chronology of Events as part of Systematization

Chapter 4 provides the chronology of events that occurred from March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began through July 2022 when the Middle Independent School District considers was the first post-COVID school year. As part of my systematization research process, I detail the academic events that occurred during the time period and the actions that were taken by the central office academics team. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the events to explain the transformative process and to recover the knowledge gained from the experience.

March 2020 entering the COVID-19 Pandemic

Middle ISD received their B Rating in December of 2019. We were well aware of how close we were to an A, but we were even more aware of the areas that we needed to improve academically. Our district Strategic Plan included five goals that we wanted to achieve as a district, strategic initiatives and goals that were to be met by the end of the 2019-2020 school year, and progress indicators and targets for the goals. Schools that were classified as in need of improvement typically ranked below the goals which was an indicator of being labeled as in need of improvement. Therefore, when the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, the schools in need of improvement became even more of a focal point for the central office academics team.

For Goal 1 - Student Achievement, we wanted to increase student performance in all assessed areas to ensure that all students were provided the opportunity to graduate college and career ready. This was going to be accomplished by the 2019-2020 school year. I was one of the contributors to the MISD Strategic Plan when it was written in 2015 and we were well on our way to accomplishing the following goals:

- District and campus will be rated a C or better in state accountability
- Increase the percent of PreK students as identified ready for reading and math

- Increase the percent of students in grades 1-3 who show growth in reading competency

- Increase the percent of LEP and SPED students rated Meets Grade Level in English Language Arts

- Increase the percent of students rated Meets Grade Level in STAAR/EOC in any subject

- Increase the percent of students achieving growth as measured on STAAR/EOC

- Increase the percent of graduates considered college, career, or military-ready as defined by state accountability

The rating for the 2019-2020 school year would have been based on the assessment data collected from April through June 2020 from the STAAR/EOC assessments. March 12, 2020, all schools shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The official end of the 2019-2020 school year was set for June 5, 2020. The official end of the school year was due to the COVID-19 shutdown and therefore no state assessments were taken and no end of year assessments for PreK, first or second grades were completed. State accountability was also halted therefore a true measure for the goals that were to be accomplished by the end of the 2019-2020 school year was not possible.

June 2020 – Preparation for the 2020-2021 School Year

I was announced as Interim Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction on June 11, 2020 during a virtual Cabinet Meeting. The agenda items included:

- It's about to get more exciting

- TEA funding

- Year-round Calendar

- 3 things that are going to be key:

○ Attitude

○ Re-Design of Organizational Model - Old to New Vision 2025 The Encore

○ Be bold in all that we do!

By this time, being in a virtual meeting was not an anomaly. However, the agenda items, especially the first one, were not common to summer topics for central office leadership. The exciting topic was the June 3, 2020 Executive Order, indicating establishments could now open at fifty percent occupancy and summer school could be provided with various provisions and distance protocols that had come from the Texas Education Agency (Commissioners Update Notes from June 9, 2020*). To sum it up, the district could not deny a student from coming to school, however, the school that students were welcomed to had to have a completely different configuration from just three months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The district now had new and reconfigured leadership and new directives from the Texas Education Agency. The priorities during this time were based on time. A quick virtual graduation was put together to honor the high school graduates of 2020. The priority of time was based on the fact that the students were no longer ours once the 2019-2020 school year had officially ended. However, honoring our students is part of MISD's DNA and therefore was not canceled. Much of what occurred thereafter had to have the same focus; students. New guidelines and environments did not deter MISD from going above and beyond for student success. Teachers were equipped with technology resources through organized drive by parade events so they could provide virtual support to our students during the summer and in preparation for the new school year. The same process was used for students and families by providing technology, school supplies, food and any other instructional resources through the same drive by parades. For parents and students that could

not come to the school, campus principals and leadership teams provide home deliveries to ensure that all students have access to online virtual learning.

On June 22, 2020, fifty percent of the central office academics team was scheduled to return to their office spaces while the other half continued to work remotely. The priority for this time period was to create instructional models that MISD schools would follow, provide professional development on how to provide academic instruction within the models and monitor student progress and provide intervention within the new instructional models.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provided guidelines and Middle ISD defined how the models would work within each campus. Figure 4.1 depicts the summary of options for MISD.

There are two new methods to fund remote instruction:

Method A
- **Synchronous Instruction** - Requires all participants to be present at the same time, virtually
- Examples: Live interactive classes with students and teachers participating real-time, teacher supported work time on video conference calls, scheduled and timed online tests

Method B
- **Asynchronous Instruction** - Does not require all participants to be virtually present at the same time
- Examples: Self-paced online courses with intermittent teacher instruction, pre-assigned work with formative assessments on paper or in LMS, watching pre-recorded videos of instruction with guided support

Both instructional delivery formats must cover the required curriculum per TEC, §28.002.

TEA

Figure 4.1: Texas Education Agency Methods of Instruction[14]

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) also provided three options to provide the instruction through an On-campus experience, a Remote experience or a Hybrid experience. Figure 4.2

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[14] Taken from the Texas Education Agency, 2020

provides a summary along with notes from Middle ISD regarding attendance and grade level specifics.

Our options

On-campus	Remote	Hybrid
District develops option for students to participate on-campus instruction 100% of the time	District develops option for students to participate in remote learning 100% of the time	District develops option for students to participate in an intentionally-designed mix of on-campus and remote learning

TEA

Attendance and option have to match!
All students will be REMOTE for first 3 weeks
- **A blend of synchronous and asynchronous 3rd – 12th**
- **Asynchronous PreK- 2**

Figure 4.2: Middle ISD Instructional Model Options Defined by TEA[15]

With the three instructional models defined, MISD had to develop how the daily academic schooling of students would work within the models. Again, the Texas Education Agency provided guidelines that districts were required to work within and the district had to make them occur across each campus. Figure 4.3 depicts the key design elements provided by TEA.

[15] Taken from the Texas Education Agency, 2020

Every school model, whether on-campus, remote, or hybrid must address key design elements:

Curriculum and Progress Monitoring
- What will the curriculum / instructional tools be?
- How will the curriculum span remote and in-person?

Academic Delivery
- What will the academic approach be?
- Synchronous, asynchronous, project based, etc.?

Schedule
- What will schedules look like?
- If needed, how will schedules vary based on grade-level?
- Will students alternate A/B days or weeks on campus?

Staff Deployment
- How will educators and staff be assigned?
- Based on core/non-core, past performance, other?

Family Engagement
- How will families be engaged in supporting remote learning?
- How will engagement be differentiated?
- How will schools get feedback?

Student experience & school culture
- How will schools create a positive learning environment?
- How will school ensure that students with the most needs, such as special education students, are well served and supported?

All designs should prioritize the needs of high need student populations

TEA

Figure 4.3: TEA Key Design Elements for Campus Instructional Models

The central office academics team led by the newly appointed Chief of Academics and Associate Superintendents began the instructional priorities and support designs for MISD based on the guidelines from TEA. All plans had to be approved by the TEA and had to be well defined for successful principal execution and timely dissemination. The first instructional day for students for the 2020-2021 academic school was set for August 17, 2021. The MISD always started each academic school year with a professional development week for teachers the week prior to the first day of school with students. The first Teacher Preparation Day was set for August 7, 2020 with professional development week designated as August 10-14, 2020. Therefore, the central office academics team had less than a month to define, detail and disseminate the instructional plan for the 2020-2021 school year.

During this time period, the top three things that needed to be defined, detailed and disseminated were:

1. Instructional Models

2. District, Campus and Student Expectation during Synchronous and Asynchronous Instruction

3. Academic schedules for the day, week, quarter and year.

2020-2021 MISD Instructional Models Defined

Due to the city guidance based on the amount of COVID-19 cases and hospitalization rates, the Middle Independent School District along with all other districts in the region were adhering to stricter building occupancy mandates than other parts of Texas. Therefore, MISD needed to prepare for starting the 2020-2021 school year without teachers and students being allowed in the buildings. The instructional models for MISD were Hybrid and Remote. The Hybrid model consisted of four face-to-face via computer instructional days and one remote instructional day. From Monday through Friday, all teachers were required to login to their Google Classroom from their computers following a regular bell schedule as if they were in a building and students were required to attend their class using the same Google Classroom with each scheduled teacher. The only students that had a Remote Learning option were PreKinder through second grade students due to adult dependency and students that had fallen ill. The goal for the Hybrid model was to mirror direct instruction and treat the digital classroom like an actual classroom with the anticipation that all students would sooner than later return to the physical classroom in their designated school building.

2020-2021 Expectations

The central office Middle Independent School District (MISD) academics team built professional development opportunities, exemplar lessons, Google Classroom resources, provided teaching materials and delineated district, campus, teacher and student expectations. This was done through various collaborative meetings with directors, instructional specialists, and coordinators

from the Academics teams coordinated as a task force, a Google Meet, and lots of communication. For the district expectations, the central office team delineated the two most important factors for instruction within the modified models were instructional quality, coherence, and continuity and building capacity. Figure 4.4 depicts a summary slide that was presented to the campus leadership in August 2020. Everything included in the slide was supported and created by the central office academics team. The team was a source of information, exemplars, and professional development for each campus principal.

THE District Expectations for 2020-2021

- **Instructional quality, coherence and continuity**
  - High-quality instructional materials
    - Google Platform, Office 365, Engage Me Initiative, Clever resources, content and program specific resources
  - **Diagnostics and student progress monitoring**
    - 3, 6, 9 assessments (AREA and C and I teams)
    - Istation, Achieve, Imagine Math, teacher input, etc.

- **Build Capacity**
  - Immediate and ongoing professional development focused on current environment including:
    - Instructional models
    - SEL and UDL
    - Special populations/needs
  - Well defined and aligned scope and sequence with initial, on-going and just in time training
  - Continue with PLCs for data analysis, shared best practices and support

Figure 4.4: August 2020 Expectations Slide from Leadership Meeting

Expectations for teachers were also delineated by the central office academics team and were inclusive of mandates to follow daily schedules, prepare and complete lessons using live technology options including effective use of the Google Classroom, providing timely and effective feedback for student growth and progress monitoring. Additionally, teachers were to communicate with parents through designated campus means including email, phone, and tech apps such as Remind and Class Dojo to ensure equity and accountability.

Expectations for students were communicated through various means beginning with district letters and general communication, as part of classroom procedures and daily check-ins, and through regular campus communication means. Expectations included daily attendance, active participation, submission and/or engagement in daily activities through computers that were provided to every student as well as hot spots for those with no or limited access to WiFi.

2020-2021 Academic Schedules

The academic schedules that were created by the central office academics team needed to align to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) guidelines in terms of minutes of instruction and attendance. The TEA defined synchronous instruction as being very similar to "on campus". Figure 4.5 provides the recap of synchronous instruction and includes the instructional minutes at prescribed grade levels.

Figure 4.5: Texas Education Agency Definition of Synchronous Instruction

The central office academics team used the minutes and guidelines provided by the Texas Education Agency to create the following district schedules:

- Asynchronous Schedule for PreKinder through Second Grade

- Synchronous Elementary Schedule for Third through Sixth Grade

- Synchronous Middle School Schedule Sixth through Eighth Grade

- Synchronous High School Schedule

All schedules included start and end times for each content block or period, a lunch period for teacher and student and conference office hours. The goal for the schedules was to create a school building and classroom experience even though students were not physically in their school buildings and classrooms. The Middle Independent School District (MISD) did not want students experiencing school through a computer screen but they did want students to feel like school students and engaged learners during traditional school days and times. The logic behind the design of the schedules being that students would need to transition to their school buildings and classrooms as soon as all COVID-19 restrictions were lifted on building occupancy and students needed to feel like they were in school regardless of their physical space. In the following three figures, the work of the Middle ISD academics team in providing specific teacher and student schedules is depicted. The start and end times of the instructional day remained as normal as possible and a bell schedule was provided to mirror what would actually be occurring in the normal school building. The MISD central office academics team intentionally wanted the day to feel like a normal school day, however, the central office academics team had to create a schedule that allowed students opportunities to experience instruction away from a computer screen and had to provide guidance to teachers on how to do as such.

Topic (Total Minutes)	Time Allotment	Component
Reading/ Writing/ Social Studies (100 minutes)	60 minutes	Read aloud/Shared Reading
		Reading Mini-Lesson (I do)
		Guided Practice strategy (We do)
		Independent Practice (You do)
		Embedded SS TEKS and Performances
	20 minutes	Word Study Phonics
	20 minutes	Writing
SEL, PE (20 minutes)	20 minutes	Mental and Physical Wellness
Math (60 minutes)	60 minutes	Number Sense
		Mini lesson (I do)
		Guided Practice strategy (We do)
		Independent Practice (You do)
Science (30 minutes)	30 minutes	5E Lesson
Enrichment (30min)	30 minutes	Fine Arts/ Intervention/ Acceleration

Figure 4.6: Sample Pre-Kinder Through Second Grade Student Schedule

The Pre-Kinder through Second Grade schedule was asynchronous as this younger aged student is much more dependent on an adult and due to the COVID-19 Pandemic health restrictions and guidelines, this age group was recommended to stay home. The school day began at 7:30am and ended at 2:45pm with a total of 240 instructional minutes scheduled. The core content areas of math, science, social studies were specifically delineated with reading and writing taking the largest chunk of instructional minutes. Every teacher was required to hold office hours from 2:45 to 3:30pm which would allow for parents or students to ask questions or seek support.

Elementary grades 3rd – 5th/6th Samples

Sample Teacher Schedule:

1st	Morning greeting and rituals and routines	5 minute welcome and wellness check 25 minutes daily tasks, theme, structure
2nd	ELAR/SLAR Block	90 minutes – direct instruction (online) – reading activity (offline) – teacher is available for small group and assistance (online and offline)
3rd	Math Block	90 minutes – direct instruction (online) – math activity (offline) – teacher is available for small group and assistance (online and offline)
4th	PE/Health/Wellness	45 minutes (offline and online depending on activity and task)
Duty Free Lunch		
5th	Science Block	25 minutes online - direct instruction and formative assessment, students offline 20 minutes, teacher is available for small group and assistance
6th	Social Studies Block (Spanish for DL classes)	25 minutes online - direct instruction and formative assessment, students offline 20 minutes, teacher is available for small group and assistance
7th	Enrichment/Support/ Intervention/ALD	30 minutes online – direct instruction – reading activity – students offline 15 minutes, teacher is available for small group and assistance (fine arts)

Figure 4.7: Sample Elementary Teacher Schedule

In the Elementary Teacher Schedule, the MISD central office academics team accounted for the necessary instructional minutes however provided guidance to the teacher on who to break up the core content teaching through blocks of time allowing teachers to assign independent work or tasks so students would not stare at a computer screen for the entire day. Various lesson examples and instructional resources were provided by the MISD academics team and Google Drives and Shared Folders were created in order to allow grade and content specific teachers to share with one another across the district. The differences between the teacher schedule as depicted in Figure 4.7 and the student schedule depicted in Figure 4.8 include the time that students were expected to be in direct communication with their teacher while allowing the teacher to assign varied tasks. The MISD central office academics team had to create a plan that included accountability on both the teachers and students with realistic expectations of online learning and remote access.

Elementary grades 3rd – 5th/6th Student Sample

Sample Student Schedule

1st	Greeting and Daily Expectations	**Online – 30 minutes**
2nd	ELAR/SLAR Block	**Online 20 minutes**, 25 minutes offline assignment/group work, **Online 20 minutes**, 25 minutes independent work
3rd	Math Block	**Online 20 minutes**, 25 minutes offline assignment/group work, **Online 20 minutes**, 25 minutes independent work
4th	PE/Health/Wellness	45 minutes – On/Offline brain back and activity
	Lunch	30 minutes on your own
5th	Science	**Online 25 minutes**, 20 minutes offline assignment/lab/group work
6th	Social Studies/Estudios Sociales	**Online 20 minutes**, 25 minutes offline assignment/group work
7th	Enrichment/Support/ Intervention	**35 minutes online**, 10 minutes – direct instruction – activity – fine arts - teacher is available for small group and assistance
Average time online		**190 to 240 minutes daily**

Figure 4.8: Elementary Student Schedule for Grades 3rd – 5th/6th

June 2020 through August 2020 included lots of communication and dissemination of academic expectations for a virtual start to the 2020-2021 school year. Conclusion for this timeframe:

- We are not just providing instructional support, we are supporting the instruction that needs to take place for every student.

- We will follow a 100% remote online model with a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instruction for at least the first 3 weeks.

- TEA Attendance Guidelines are specific to the instructional setting and must be adhered to on a daily basis.

- It is inevitable that students could alternate between on-campus, remote and hybrid options therefore alignment, quality instruction and progress monitoring must be consistent across all models.

This particular time period set the stage for the new remote instructional settings for teachers and students. The information and professional development to support the activities were delivered via a remote leadership retreat in July to all principals, assistant principals and any other members of the campus leadership team the campus invited. For campuses classified as in need of improvement, campus instructional coaches and all assistant principals were required to log in and participate in the July retreat. One final leadership meeting was held on August 6, 2020 and was also remote. A reflection sheet that was provided was filled out by 172 participants. Figure 4.9 depicts the favorable responses regarding the professional development and information that was provided in preparation for the start of the 2020 - 2021 school year.

How are you feeling about the 2020-2021 school year after these last two days of leadership?
172 responses
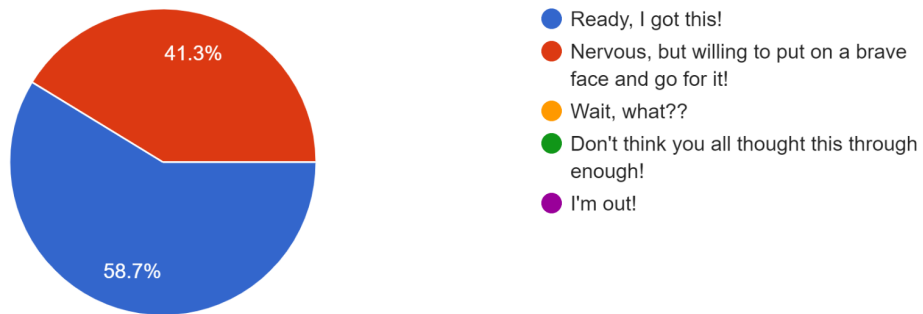
Figure 4.9: Response Chart for Summer 2020 Central Office Support

The next section describes the events that took place during the 2020-2021 school year. This is the official COVID-19 school year as it started with all COVID-19 academic restrictions and schedules that have been described in this section.

2020-2021 School Year (COVID-19 School Year)

The Middle Independent School District served just over 37,000 students during the 2020-2021 school year which is a lower enrollment number than before the COVID-19 Pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students were not in face-to-face live instructional classroom settings with their rostered teacher of record from March 16, 2020 through February 1, 2021. The 2020-2021 school year ended on June 11, 2021 with less than 40% of our enrolled students experiencing school in person in their designated campus of enrollment. Consequently, the instructional quantitative data that was collected during the 2020-2021 school year is skewed due to the various variables that come with not being face-to-face with a certified teacher during assessment windows and lower than usual participation rates.

The Middle ISD online instructional program was well planned based on the Texas Education Agency's requirements for providing asynchronous instruction by serving students that were in a campus building and those that were participating remotely. Students participated in the remote learning environment that was created by Central Office Academics teams and taught by certified classroom teachers to their rostered students as previously described. A Google Classroom within the trademark Google environment was the primary means of communication and classroom setup for every class. Depicted below in Figure 4.10 is a sample classroom content. Redactions have been added for confidentiality however all original content and dates are a true depiction of an actual Google Classroom.
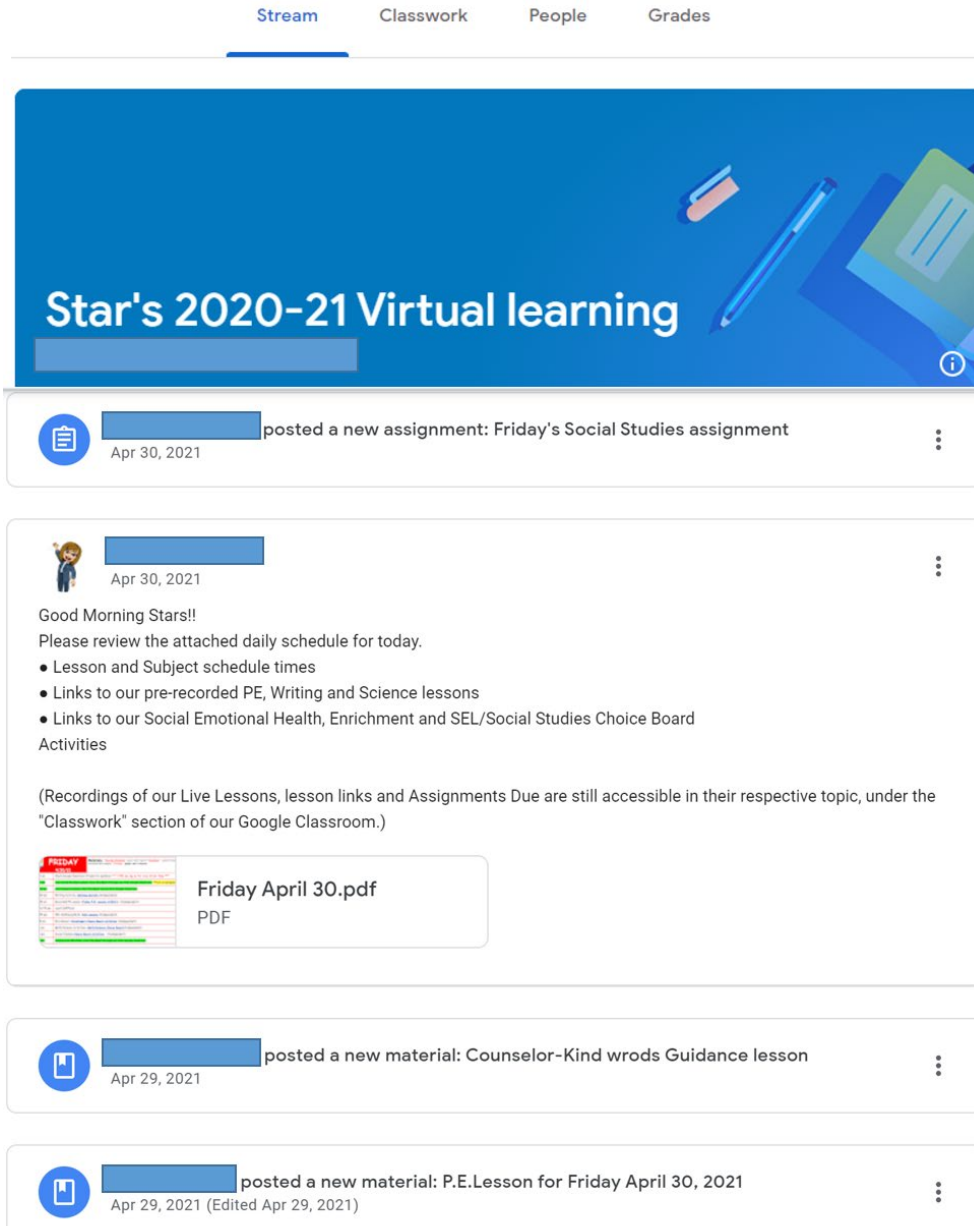
Figure 4.10: Google Classroom Content Sample

Of particular importance are the top headings; Stream, Classwork, People and Grades. The

Google Classroom was truly the classroom even though it was in a virtual setting. Additionally,

you can see Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons provided by the school counselor as well as

Physical Education lessons provided by the campus coach. The Central Office Academics Team

coordinated with other central office departments such as Fine Arts, Physical Education and Guidance and Counseling to create a full classroom experience for all students.

This is where the third objective of this study begins. What process did the district take to ensure instruction was occurring? The goal of the Effective Schools Framework is to provide a clear vision of what districts should do to ensure a quality education for all Texas students. At its core is Effective Instruction (lever 5) which describes what Middle ISD and all the campuses should do to provide effective classroom routines and instructional strategies for all students. This includes building teacher capacity, using data to drive instruction and supporting all students regardless of their learning gaps, behavior, attendance and/or struggles. The Middle ISD central office leadership historically used the ESF model to support struggling campuses however, under the conditions of reconfigured classrooms, uncontrolled data variables, and all that came with remote teaching and learning in general, the framework was used more as a guide than a framework with the focus on instruction through virtual means.

The 2020-2021 academic school year ended with the central office academics team using two waiver days as professional development days. The purpose was to provide a consistent and developed professional development that defined the instructional focus of strong tier 1 instruction, data disaggregation and professional learning committees. Many of the actions initiated by the central office academics team were guided by the Effective Schools Framework (ESF). The need to focus on classroom instruction provided an opportunity to use the ESF for the campuses identified as in need of improvement. Effective Instruction is at the core of the ESF and consists of the essential action 5.1: effective classroom routines and instructional strategies. The professional development topics included strong tier 1 instruction, professional learning communities and data. The goal was to improve instructional strategies for the upcoming school

year by understanding the reality of the students at the end of the current school year. The Middle ISD Central Office Academics Team titled the professional development, "Ending with the Beginning in Mind," and provided the professional development to campus administrators and teachers on May 28, 2020 and June 4, 2020 as part of the two professional development waiver dates requested from the Texas Education Agency. The purpose of using the waiver days was to allow the teachers to use a regularly scheduled work day as a professional development day, meaning students were given the day off so teachers could focus on the professional development provided by the central office staff and not have any student obligations. The professional development was given to every teacher at every campus. The campus leadership team was responsible for providing, monitoring and supporting the training alongside campus instructional coaches and central office staff as available. The campus leadership teams had all been trained on the professional development on May 6 so that they knew what was being delivered to every teacher but were not solely responsible for flipping or providing the professional development exclusively.

During this school year, the Middle ISD provided professional development support and instruction to students and teachers under the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and with the district planned instructional settings based on what was outlined during the waiver days. Not until February 2021, local restrictions allowed for opportunities for more students to attend classes in a face to face setting, however, in MISD, less than fifty percent of the students actually attended face to face classes. Regardless of the pandemic restrictions and changes, the district did not veer from the message of strong tier 1 instruction, professional learning communities and data analysis through the practices under the Effective Schools Framework 5.1: effective classroom routines and instructional strategies. This messaging and support continued through monthly meetings with all

campus leadership and additional meetings after the regular monthly meeting with campuses classified in need of improvement. The additional meeting for such campuses included the entire campus instructional leadership team as mandatory attendees. These meetings were led by the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement. Each meeting started with an instructional connection using the specific data from each of the invited campuses along with a leadership activity. Every handout and piece of data was personalized for each campus. An explanation of why they were considered a campus in need of improvement was explained through data. The ESF framework was used to model the professional development and support that the campus leadership team needed to provide to their teachers. Figure 4.11 below depicts the ESF Professional Development Success Criteria that was used as a rubric for campus professional development.

TEXAS SCHOOL
PD PLANNING SUCCESS CRITERIA

Purpose: Develop high-quality professional development sessions by using the success criteria outlined in this document to complete the "Texas School PD Planning Template" and create relevant materials.

Clear Objective	**Objective: have a clear understanding of the end goal of your workshop** **Keys to Effective Objectives:** • **High Leverage:** most important area to increase student learning/teacher proficiency • **Practice-focused:** participants are able to practice it in the session itself • **Measurable:** you can easily evaluate if they have accomplished the objective • **Doable:** you can accomplish the objective in the time you have allotted
Rationale	**Rationale: sense-make, increase participant engagement and gain buy-in** **Keys to Powerful Rationale:** • **Heart:** Caters to the heart by being inspirational and aspirational, evoking images and emotions • **Mind:** Caters to the mind by using economy of language, providing facts, referencing data and actively involving the participant
See it	**See it: design activities that lead participants to see the best practice** **Key Characteristics of "See It" Activities:** • **Aligned to Objective:** Key components of the PD are embedded within activity • **Easy to "see it":** Video clip of teaching/leading, movie clip, written exemplar or negative case study, live modeling, etc. • **Precise questions:** ask focus questions <u>before</u> the activity to target what they should see • **Keep them short:** videos/role plays < 5 min **Two Types of "See it": Model or Anti-Model** **Model—Show the Exemplar** • Focus on the positive: have them look for what is effective **Anti-Model—Diagnose the Problem** • Chose a situation that feels realistic and resonates with participants • Check for participants' understanding for what's going wrong • Create clear contrast between effective and ineffective actions to refine understanding

Figure 4.11: ESF Lever 5.1 PD Planning Success Criteria[16]

The Associate Superintendent of School Improvement would model the expectations of the leadership team, provide explicit examples to the professional development and use the clear objective, rationale and see it rubric as evidence of effectiveness. Each session ended with homework and expectations that the campuses were required to complete within the month and bring evidence of outcomes to the following monthly meeting. The Associate Superintendent of School Improvement planned each session with the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and

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[16] *Lever 5*. texasesf.org. (2019, April 15). https://texasesf.org/framework/prioritized-lever-5

Instruction and the Director of Academics. Specific roles and responsibilities were delineated and all central office academics team members were part of the support and resources available to each of the campuses labeled as in need of improvement. Ultimately, the campus principal was responsible for submitting the evidence, but central office and campus teams worked collaboratively. The plan was effective as it was tied to ESF and district expectations. The only campuses required to attend the additional monthly meetings and complete the homework were the campuses classified as in need of improvement. However, the evidence that was collected did not always meet the effectiveness that was delineated. For example, some campuses would turn in evidence of an agenda from a grade level planning time they allowed to occur. Additionally, the support provided by the central office academics team between monthly meetings was not always consistent and equitable across all campuses in need of improvement. For example, a reading specialist from the central office academics team may have spent a couple of days at a campus and only one class period at another. Time and the principal were two of the biggest factors that created the inequity. For example, some principals requested support immediately from the Central Office Academics team members and others did not. Some central office team members visited campuses more frequently than others, and scheduled themselves to be at the campuses based on their calendar availability.

Throughout this school year, more students started returning to the classrooms. The Middle Independent School District encouraged all state assessment eligible students to return to campus at least for testing. Additionally, many teachers were welcoming students back to their home classrooms through the Google Classroom assignments, daily messaging and by teaching from their actual classrooms. As the school year came to an end, nearly 90% of the students participated in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR). Once again, the central office

academics team provided training for two days of professional development before the end of the school year. This time, the professional development was based on how to understand the data from each student in order to identify the specific needs of every student. The district created a Student Performance Tracker that would be accessible to every campus administrator and every teacher that so long as the student was rostered to the teacher. Below is a sample of the data that was provided in the Student Performance Tracker.

Student Information				Student Profile											Attendance		Discipline		iStation		CCMR			Assessments								
				Demographic Information											Prev	Curr	Prev	Curr	Tier					Interim		Istation		Checkpoints			
Grade	Last Name	First Name	Local ID	At Risk	Retained	Foster Care	Homeless	Gifted	504	Sped	Speech	Dyslexia	EB	Parent Denial	Yrs in Schl	Absences	Absences	Incidents	Incidents	BOY 2023	EOY 2023	Ccnr Met	Subj	Opp 1	Opp 2	BOY	MOY	Q1Chec	Q2Chec	Q3Chec	Q4_Che

Figure 4.12: Middle ISD Student Performance Tracker

The school year ended on June 11, 2021 with just over 38,000 students. A full summer school program in person was offered to all students however students that were struggling with online learning through evidence of failing grades and high absences were provided special invitations and highly encouraged to attend summer school through a strategically created instructional plan that was based on basic and foundational skills and standards in order to fill any gaps data already indicated were existent as well as provide a kick start to the next grade level. To close off the academic school year, the central office academics leadership coined the phrase, Promoting Academic Student Success or (PASS). Through the use of stimulus monies provided through grants from the Texas Education Agency Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, PASS Tutor positions were created to support levers 4 and 5 of the Effective Schools Framework by focusing on foundational, universal and targeted strategies for acceleration. The PASS Tutors would be an additional 100 or more part-time positions that would specifically support the classroom teacher in providing targeted intervention during the regular school day. The PASS Tutors were hired by the campus and were slotted to each campus based on the number

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of students that were identified as at-risk. The introduction of the Student Performance Trackers, the focus on specific student needs and the investment in the PASS Tutors would be the focus for the next school year. Figure 4.13 below depicts guidance from the Texas Education Agency regarding the effectiveness of tutoring and the need for it post COVID-19 pandemic years.

If effectively implemented, high impact tutoring programs can result in significant student progress

High impact tutoring programs have a few key attributes[1]...

Well-trained, consistent tutor (can be a teacher, paraprofessional, teacher candidate) who builds a strong relationship with students

High quality instructional material aligned to standards and core classwork

One-to-one or small group for individualized support (1-to-3 maximum ratio recommended)[2]

Embedded in the school day or immediately before or after, to maximize student access

At least three sessions per week for sustained support, 30 minutes minimum

Data-driven with tutors building sessions around student strengths and needs

...and can have a significant impact on student outcomes

5 months
Additional progress

A 2020 meta-analysis of 96 studies of high quality tutoring programs found that students made **5 months of additional progress** on average, a large pooled 0.37 effect size[3]

*"The average effect of tutoring programs on student achievement is larger than the effects found in approximately 85% of studies evaluating education interventions and **equivalent to moving a student at the 35th percentile of the achievement distribution to the 50th**" – Dr. Matthew Kraft, Annenberg Institute, Brown University[1,4]*

Sources: 1) Kraft, Matthew A., and Grace Falken. (2021). A Blueprint for Scaling Tutoring Across Public Schools. (EdWorkingPaper: 21-335). Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/dkjh-s987; 2) Researchers are still vetting the effectiveness of 1:4 groups and currently recommend a careful approach to 1:4 support, with Dr. Robert Slavin (Johns Hopkins University) recommending: "I would keep careful track of how students are progressing...A lot of kids will be successful at one-to-four [groups] but there may be kids who are not, and I would reserve one-to-one for those who are not" (Source: Education Week) 3) Nickow, Andre Joshua, Philip Oreopoulos, and Vincent Quan. (2020). The Impressive Effects of Tutoring on PreK-12 Learning: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence. (EdWorkingPaper: 20-267). Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/eh0c-pc52; 4) Kraft, M. A. (2020). Interpreting effect sizes of education interventions. Educational Researcher, 49(4), 241-253.

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Figure 4.13: Effective Tutoring for Student Progress

2021-2022 School Year (Post-COVID-19 Year 1)

The 2021-2022 school year began August 2, 2021. Of the enrolled 37,244 students, 7,550 or 20% of the student population had at least one failing grade after the first nine weeks of instruction (Marking Period 1 Failure Report, November 2021). Algebra I data indicated that 49% of the students currently enrolled in Algebra I were projected to not meet the passing standard of the Algebra I end of course exam. Additionally, nearly 30% of the enrolled Kindergarten and First Grade students across the district were considered Tier 3 and/or Critical in foundational literacy skills. This quantitative data indicated that there were several students that were not adequately

performing academically at grade level. All students were back in face to face instruction but were indicating various learning gaps and negative effects of the 2020-2021 instructional models. Qualitative data was also collected through learning walks and Instructional Rounds which were classroom visits that the central office academics teams scheduled to monitor district initiatives. The central office academics leadership would schedule and structure instructional rounds at the campuses in need of improvement specifically to collect evidence from classroom observations as to what was actually occurring in the classrooms.

The Middle ISD has practiced instructional rounds in education (City, 2009) since 2015. Instructional Rounds in Middle ISD are defined as scheduled classroom visits by a group of educators. The classrooms can either be randomly or strategically selected for a visit. The classroom visit is based on a specified problem of practice. The group enters the classroom with the intention of collecting teacher and student comments and experiences based on the problem of practice. Each individual scribes what the teacher said and what the students said in the brief period of time that they are in the classroom. A sample of the Instructional Rounds Observation Sheet can be seen in Figure 4.14.

Instructional Rounds Observation Sheet

Teacher Name/Room #	Date
Campus	Observer
Problem of Practice:	
Class Objective:	

What the Teacher is Saying	What the Student is Saying/Doing

Figure 4.14: Instructional Rounds Observation Sheet for MISD

The group can visit a group of similar classrooms (same grade level, same content area, same problem of practice) or the group can visit random classrooms. The goals of the Instructional Rounds are to determine if the campus has classroom evidence that they are effectively working towards solving their problem of practice, to calibrate what effectiveness is for the campus and district, and to improve instruction.

Central Office academic teams, campus instructional leadership teams and cabinet members have conducted instructional rounds at various campuses as this has been part of the Middle ISD system of progress monitoring since 2014. The data collected based on a problem of practice as determined by the campus principal and then investigated in classroom visits is reviewed by the groups as whole once the classroom visits have concluded. Instructional rounds team members report the data that was collected and then calibrate their findings using the Hess Cognitive Rigor Matrices[17]. A typical instructional round would last about two hours. The central office team would begin with the campus leadership team for the first fifteen minutes of which the campus leadership team would describe their problem of practice and provide a brief overview of what they had done to support the problem of practice. Then the teams would go visit at least three classrooms. If there were 3 teams, the group would visit 9 classrooms. During the visits, individuals would document what they observed based on what the students were doing or saying and what the teachers were doing or saying. Once all designated classrooms had been visited, the team would reconvene and calibrate their observations. Calibrations are based on Hess Matrices as written by Karin Hess. The team leaves the campus with reflections on the calibrated evidence related to the problem of practice. These can be reported as next steps/recommendations, grows and glows, and/or supports that will come from central office staff. The next steps or

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[17] Complete listing of all matrices found at: https://www.karin-hess.com/cognitive-rigor-and-dok

recommendations are specifically related to what the campus identified as their program of practice and the calibrated evidence. The glows and grows are based on evidence the problem of practice is improving (grow) or evidence that indicates the problem of practice continues to be a problem that is not effectively being addressed because there is no evidence of it, or clear misses based on the evidence that was collected during the classroom visit (glows).

During the 2021-2022 school year, the central office academic associate superintendents along with the Chief of Academics and the Superintendent conducted quarterly instructional rounds in each of the learning communities. Again, it is important to note that I am one of the team members conducting the instructional rounds. In summary, the data that was collected and calibrated from the scheduled instructional rounds indicated that there was a lack of consistency and alignment when it came to instructional delivery, data disaggregation and teacher planning in like-teams of content (math, science or reading language arts team) or grade level (kinder, 3rd or 4th grade). The professional development and support that was being provided by the central office was abundant and strategic, but there was little evidence that it was positively impacting the students. Our instructional rounds data did not produce a lot of teacher talk as there was an abundant use of students using their computers and google slides the teacher had created and the students were not participating in classroom discussions as they were learning or answering on their Chromebooks in the google slide the teachers had created. Although all students and teachers were back in their classrooms, there was still an abundance of use of the technical systems (google classrooms, slides, instructional computer programs) and very little evidence of student and teacher discourse, eye contact, or face to face instructional communication.

Various policy initiatives have called on district central offices to shift the work practices of their own central staff from the limited or managerial functions of the past to the support of

teaching and learning for all students (Honig, 2008). It is important to note the central office configuration in 2019 when the district received a B rating and how the central office changed though July 2022. The chart below provides a depiction of changes.

Table 4.1: Restructuring of Central Office in MISD

Positions	2019 with B rating	July 2020 through July 2022
Chief of Academics	No chief	Chief oversees all Academics
Associate Superintendent for grade level	Elementary, Middle and High and all oversee directors	Elementary with no director supervision, Middle who oversees 2 directors and High with no director supervision
Associate Superintendent for School Improvement	No Associate	Oversees all campuses in need of improvement
Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction	No Associate	Oversees all curriculum and instruction from Early Education to Early College High School directors and teams
Academic Directors	Elementary, Middle, High = 3	PK-8, High, College Career Readiness and Advanced Academics = 3

As previously stated, the Middle ISD was among only 25% of Texas public school districts that was recognized as an A rated district on August 18, 2022. This indicates that all our efforts during the 2021-2022 school year made a significant enough difference to give our district an A rating when 75% of the other districts in Texas could not. The significance of this study will allow other districts to recognize, make and sustain instructional improvements that will lead to student growth by improving the role of central office. Systematizing what we did at the central office and how we supported a continuous cycle of improvement will allow Middle ISD and other districts like us to define and sustain such efforts so that others can replicate.

When the central office supported tier 1 instruction, professional learning communities and data disaggregation, it did so with the presumption that the three focus areas held the same meaning for teachers, administrators and central office staff. With the new central office leadership configuration, the chief and associate superintendents, with the exception of the associate superintendent of school improvement, had all been part of the district in 2019 when the strategic plan, Encore 2025 was written. Although they did not hold the same positions in 2019 as in 2022. The 2020-2021 school year was to be the first year of the strategic plan. Since the B rating had transferred over to the 2020-2021 school year, the 2021-2022 school year was the first year of authentic data post-COVID. Therefore, what was going to be looked at regarding data was aligned in the strategic plan but how the data was going to be analyzed was not. The figure below describes the specific phases of the Encore 2025 for Middle ISD. It was written prior to the pandemic and was not adjusted post pandemic.

The associate superintendent of school improvement and the director for College and Career Readiness were the only two new members of the central office academic leadership team that were not previously part of the district when the Encore 2025 strategic plan was written as they each came from different districts. There are three goals in the Encore 2025 strategic plan, however, for purposes of this study, data from Goal 1 regarding student performance in academics and mastery of content are what will be evaluated for data disaggregation, tier 1 instruction and academic planning.

In January 2022, the Chief Academic Officer asked a very simple question to the central office academics team, "What's working and what's not?" The significance of the question allowed each of the Associate Superintendents and the directors to reflect on their current practices through an evidence-based lens. The answer could not be provided without defining success,

determining the conditions that created the success and providing evidence of the successful outcomes. Typically, when the central office reflects on what is working and what is not, success is measured by the work that is being done and the support that is being provided. The fact that the academic directors recognized that more training was needed and therefore more professional development opportunities were provided could be viewed as successful. But if student outcomes on common assessments were not indicating success, then one could say there is a disconnect. Improving how we answer the question of what's working and what's not at the central office level can impact the role of the central office on student outcomes.

The campuses that were under the leadership of the associate superintendent of school improvement were also participating in extended support opportunities. The focus of strong tier 1 instruction, data disaggregation and professional learning communities for all campuses allowed the associate superintendent of school improvement to work at a deeper level with the targeted campuses leadership teams to address any issues or concerns and to model effective leadership and coaching strategies directly. The framework that was used for the targeted campuses was The Effective Schools Framework from the Texas Education Agency.

In the previous school year, the district academic team defined four areas as their instructional focus which included strong tier 1 instruction, data digs, professional learning communities and intervention for all. The intervention for all was the newest concept and was based on House Bill 4545 which mandated that accelerated instruction be provided to any student who was not successful on the state STAAR/EOC assessment.

Accelerated instruction: For any student who did not pass STAAR grades 3-8 or EOC assessments, accelerated instruction must be delivered in the 2021-2022 school year (starting in fall 2021) or subsequent summer of 2022. Accelerated instruction entails either 1) assigning a classroom teacher who is a certified master, exemplary, or recognized teacher, or 2) delivering supplemental

instruction (e.g., tutoring) before or after school, or embedded in the school day and meeting HB 4545 requirements.[18]

With declining enrollment and increases in learning challenges coupled with a community that is nearly 80% economically disadvantaged, systematizing the work of the district central office and the support that is needed for campus leadership to ensure instructional gains for every student needs to be defined, explained and shared. This study presents practical suggestions on how the central office can work with schools and improve instruction for all students. This study offers suggestions to other districts to recognize and make instructional improvements that will lead to student growth by improving the role of central office.

The post-COVID-19 2021-2022 school year ended on June 3, 2022. State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and End of Course Assessments (EOC) followed a regular testing calendar with no COVID-19 interruptions. The 2022-2023 school year will start with not COVID-19 pandemic disruptions. All data reports have been calculated and the goal will be to keep the A-Rating from the Texas Education Agency.

2022-2023 School Year

As the Middle ISD enters the 2022-2023 school year, the challenge is to continue to assist the schools in need of improvement and in a way that demonstrates positive results. The positive results, for purposes of state accountability would be achieving another A rating, however, student growth and improvement is the ultimate goal. Once again, the significance of this study is timely. As a district we need to recognize and systematize what we did in the 2019-2020 post-COVID school year when Middle ISD was a B rating, through the 2021-2022 school year, when Middle attained the A rating during a pandemic and while addressing the complexities of curriculum and

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[18] Taken from: (https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/news-and-multimedia/correspondence/taa-letters/house-bill-4545-implementation-overview)

instruction that were produced during this period of time. Anthony S. Byrk, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching states, "The work of improvement focuses in on a specific problem to be solved, and the defining characteristics of this problem are anchored in a deep understanding of the experiences of people actually engaged in the work," (Bryk, 2018). Keeping the A rating may not be a significant problem, however not being able to focus on one specific problem will always be a problem for all public school systems.

The Central Office Academics leadership team recognizes that the A rating did not eliminate any challenges. We are still declining in enrollment, we are increasing in our special populations which means there are more students with specific learning challenges that must be addressed. Additionally, although this is considered a post-COVID school year and we did not have to start the school year with the COVID challenges that were part of last school year, there are still students, teachers, and administrators that have specific needs that need to be addressed to include clearly defining tier 1 instruction, recognizing and providing intervention to all students, using data (qualitative and quantitative) to determine the specific instructional needs of every student and providing guidance and time for teachers to effectively plan the day to day delivery of lessons. Replicating all of the efforts from the previous school year will not be enough as there are two new challenges of a new accountability system and new item types for the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®). The new accountability system is currently going through what the Texas Education Agency calls a refresh[19] which will be rolled out through September 2023.

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19 The refresh is detailed at: https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2023-a-f-refresh-preliminary-overview-summary.pdf

The Middle ISD central office academics team uses the accountability reports, student qualitative and quantitative data from various sources, and teacher data all from previous years to inform and guide instructional practices for the following years. The strategic plan targets are derived from areas of strength and weakness in order to set realistic goals and improve instruction for all students. Particularly in the Student Achievement domain of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Accountability Rating System , the central office exists to provide the data to district level academic teams; create professional development sessions for administrators, campus instructional leadership teams and teachers; and make data- driven decisions on resources and supports that campuses will benefit from. The resources and supports are highly influenced by the second domain of the accountability ratings, School Progress. Central office leaders evaluate various quantitative and qualitative data points to determine the level of progress across the district. The data comes from district-wide resources that are directly correlated to the thirteen essential areas within the Encore 2025 Strategic Plan. Additionally, all student groups are considered as part of the data-based decisions to support the third and final domain of academic performance accountability, Closing the Gaps. A brief overview of the TEA Accountability System can be found at the Texas Education Agency website under Accountability[20].

As the central office team learns more about the accountability system refresh, the goal will still remain the same which is to focus on the areas of strong tier 1 instruction, data digs, professional learning communities and intervention for all. Two additional areas of focus are the new item types for the STAAR and the new accountability system. Thus, the question will remain until the conclusion of this study: does the central office have an effective system of support that resulted in a sustained district A rating? Beyond the chronological analysis, interviews were

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[20] Website: https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2022-accountability-system-overview.pdf

conducted to provide first-hand experience from the central office leaders that produced the support provided along with two campus principals that lead campuses in need of improvement. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. The information from the interviews will be part of Chapter 5. Due to the size of Middle Independent School District and the declining enrollment the district is experiencing, the central office academics team leadership is less than thirty educators each responsible for one of the four content areas; Math, Science, Social Studies and Reading Language Arts and led by a single director for elementary and middle grades and another for high school. There are also five Associate Superintendents that represent each grade level; Elementary, Middle School and High School, one for Curriculum and Instruction, and one for School Improvement. The Central Office staff that were selected for the interviews were directly involved in identifying the schools in need of support, determining the plan of action for each of the schools, and were direct contributors to the support that was provided.

Chapter 5: Findings

In this chapter, I present findings from interviews as well as an analysis of the lessons learned from the chronology of events through a sensemaking process (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) of organizing and creating a comprehensive outcome to my research purpose, which is to analyze the central office support process for schools categorized as in need of improvement to determine the lessons learned and systematize the experiences. The chronological events showcased the attempts to implement the Effective Schools Framework to the campuses in need of improvement and the interviews from the campus administrators provide their perceptions. Additionally, the interview of the Central Office leader responsible for the campuses in need of improvement provides the intended outcomes of the professional development and support to her campus leaders. Finally, the analysis of the supports and the actual outcomes from the chronology, interviews and the lived experiences as the researcher and author of this study support the intention of systematization.

Interviews

I requested an interview from 7 individuals that held the position of central office leadership or campus leadership for elementary schools that were identified as in need of improvement. Four responded that they would be interested in participating in the interview. Two did not respond and one administrator was part of campus consolidations during the timeframe of the research.

Erin Jordan, Associate Superintendent of School Improvement

Erin has been in education for over 20 years. At the campus level, she has held positions as teacher, assistant principal and principal. At the central office level, she has been an instructional specialist, director for curriculum and instruction and has been the Associate Superintendent of

School Improvement for Middle Independent School District since July 2020. She states that she is most motivated by "her personal connection with improvement." She states that her passion and connection to the use of the Effective Schools Framework comes from her experience of being a school principal for a low performing school that she was charged with improving their teacher and student attendance and retention and their academic data. This experience is what she attributes her expertise in the support that the campuses in need of improvement required.

Ms. Jordan described her leadership approach to supporting campuses in need of improvement through creating opportunities for reflection and helping each individual campus team identify their strengths and weaknesses. She tied the reflections to the criteria within the Effective Schools Framework (ESF) so that they could compare their practices with the success criteria delineated within the framework. During her time as a campus principal, she describes that there was no framework to reference therefore she had to learn from her mistakes. Part of her leadership style is to share the personal experience in order to gain credibility with those she is serving by helping them understand the necessity of a system that works for them. However, she said it was a necessity to bring in the principal, assistant principal(s), and the two instructional coaches as a core team to determine what was working or not and then how to fix it as a team.

When asked how Ms. Jordan was able to leverage being a member of the Central Office leadership even though she was the campus principal supervisor, she stated, "...it was important for me that when I planned what I needed to talk to the principals about and leveraging the ESF and reflecting on strong school leadership that when we got to the instruction piece that I was also aligned with our director and our associate. So they played a crucial part in the planning and bringing them in and embedding that instructional piece." She indicated that the struggle as a campus leader is keeping instruction at the forefront regardless of all of the other principal duties.

In her work with her principals, she stated that through the reflection pieces she planned for, it was evident when a principal noted that they needed to build capacity within their instructional coach. She explained that the partnership with the central office academics team was crucial in this process as building capacity within the principal was her job, but she had to rely on the central office team to build capacity for the instructional coach. The alignment of the messaging is what was crucial. She noted however that the alignment and expectations were not always evident and that time was an even bigger challenge. Once data was shared with a campus that indicated why they were considered a campus in need of improvement, a substantial amount of time was needed to work with the campus to help them create a solid system of improvement that was aligned to ESF levers of effective practices. Ms. Jordan explained that setting expectations and progress monitoring had to be the responsibility of the principal however the entire team had to work at meeting the success criteria.

Ms. Jordan reported that her biggest surprise was the lack of professional development in what she referred to as the "big pieces of PLC, data and leadership." During her first year in Middle ISD in 2020, she noticed that everyone had their own definition of how to use data, what should actually occur in a professional learning community (PLC) time, and what the principals were held accountable for in campuses that were delineated as in need of improvement. During the 2020 school year, she stated she was supervising 12 different campuses all of which had 12 different practices and systems for leadership, plc and data. However, her arrival to the district in 2020 was also during the same period as the central office configuration with the addition of a Chief of Academics and an Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. Therefore, she began to see the change and focus on alignment. For Ms. Jordan, the best way to support the change was to make sure the principal understood why they were a campus in need of improvement and guide

the principal to get the teachers to understand what needed to change in order for improvement to occur.

Ms. Jordan indicated that the central office teams as well as the campus leadership teams initially struggled with feedback and coaching. Particularly during the 2020 to 2022 time periods, both sides struggled with recognizing the adult behaviors that needed to change and the critical conversations that needed to take place so that systems of support, like teacher support plans, could be implemented effectively. She noted, "I think for some of my campuses that really left the emotion out and really focused on the system and is this working or not, they made the improvements needed. And I think the year that was the best where we earned the A rating was when we were bringing those teams in once a month, focusing on the ESF lever every month, and then making them bring the artifacts that were based on their action plan, so they couldn't just say they did it." She continued with the argument that time still remains the biggest challenge. Not only would she have liked to bring in the campus teams once a month, she would also have liked more time to see their ESF work in action at their campus and get all of the central office academics team to see it in action and be a part of the entire process together for purposes of alignment.

Ms. Jordan concluded with a depiction of a dream team that had all had previous similar experiences and could speak through the lens of the campus principal and the lens of the instructional coach and the lens of the teacher to help them improve because they had all lived it once before. However, she recognized that is not the current makeup of central office. Therefore, reliance on the Effective Schools Framework and the levers was one tool that could unite the campus with the central office as an effective tool for alignment to both sides. She stated, "But I think if we continue to just be consistent with our messaging and then all the departments and the

academics team and the other associates also, you know, speak the same language, we're only going to get better."

Moxie Bee, Principal of School in Need of Improvement Elementary

Moxie Bee has been a campus principal since July 2012. She has been the principal of a school in need of improvement since July 2019. She stated that her biggest motivation is making sure that her students succeed and that they are proud of who they are and where they are coming from. She prides herself on building pride within her campus and for the teachers that serve in her campus to truly believe that the students they serve can make a difference. She admits that being an administrator during the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult and many times ineffective but that it did provide an opportunity for her to practice things like professional development and sharing of ideas in a new and unique way that allowed her to build relationships with her faculty during a time that they were not even in the same building. "It was not something that I would ever want to do again, because I didn't see it being effective, but we did what we had to. It had to be all of us. It wasn't just one person."

Coming out of COVID-19, Ms. Bee leveraged what her teachers knew were ineffective practices to encourage a "back to basics" approach. Part of her leadership approach was to instill in her teachers how valuable the personal and direct teaching was to the students they served. So she led her campus to focus on guided reading and guided math. Focusing on teaching through small group instruction instead of one lesson to the whole class is what she claims really made the difference for her campus as they tried to work to get out of being a campus that was in need of improvement. She also credits that during the 2020-2021 school year, she was able to select her own assistant principal and two instructional coaches. Since they were her hires, she was able to mold them to what she wanted for her campus. She describes that what she wanted for her campus

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was a focus on math and reading. She wanted hands-on, face to face instruction and she and her assistant principal and coaches were going to be in classrooms a lot making it happen. She stated, "we had to be very specific." Therefore, she again leveraged a technology math program that students and teachers were both familiar with during COVID-19 and showed the teachers how to look at the data and determine which standards students were struggling with and make an individualized plan to support the students with those specific standards through the small group, face to face instructional time with the teacher.

When Ms. Bee was asked what role the central office played in helping her campus team; she stated that her instructional coaches would go to every professional development that was offered by the central office. Then, she would sit with them and ask, "...what is the bigger picture and what is it that we really want to get to the meat of….what is central office asking us to do and let's see how it applies to our school and our needs." She indicated that by having the discussions and planning times with her leadership team, she was able to personalize what was going to be turned around at her campus with the unique needs of her teachers. Once the team determined what was going to be shared, the professional development would then become a non-negotiable and something the team would support and expect to see. She stated that she was not one to call on the central office for help. She believed that the professional development that the central office provided was enough "and that's why we have instructional coaches, because that's their job, and our job is to help them make sure [we deliver the professional development] as a team, a leadership team, that's our job here at school. I seriously, I honestly see our academics department as a resource, an opportunity to present PD. And it's our job to take that information…..So I just see central office as my resource."

Ms. Bee was the only elementary campus in the district that went from a school in need of improvement to a school that had an A-rating in 2022. She stated that one of her challenges was the mindset of teachers believing that the school they were at was a school in need of improvement because that was the student population. Ms. Bee used her leadership skills in building pride by supporting her teachers through the professional development that was personalized for her campus and expecting the teachers to personalize the learning for every student. Focusing on the data and celebrating growth is what she believes helped her teachers realize that if they put in the work through the personalized instruction, the payoff would be the growth in the students and the eventual A-rating as a campus. She stated that because she was a campus in need of improvement, she was required to attend training once a month that focused on the Effective Schools Framework. "So we were required to go to these trainings once a month. We were required to think. And I'm gonna be honest with you. I thought I knew something, because I came from a successful school. So I'm like, I got this, and no, I don't got this ha." Ms. Bee recalls the reflection pieces that her supervisor impressed on her regarding her walkthroughs, her data and professional development through the Effective Schools Framework is what really helped her team of four lead the campus to an A-rating. She stated that her reflections with her team had her look at things differently and the ESF helped her by creating a timeline of things that needed to be considered. She credits her supervisor for challenging her to look at her practices with her teachers and how she was monitoring her own expectations. "So it's like, I thought I had done all of it but when I really look at the black and white, it was like, no, I didn't." As a result, she created her own interventions with the guidance and support of her supervisor by referencing the ESF and then reflecting on her practices. Once she noticed that she hadn't hit the scale of effectiveness on the ESF, she felt supported by her supervisor. "But it was always like, oh, what about this? And it wasn't, oh, you

forgot. It was more like, how about you consider this?" She considers her support from her supervisor as effective support from the Central Office.

Abel Contreras, Elementary Principal of a School in Need of Improvement

Abel Contreras is the principal of a campus in need of improvement. He has been in education for over 20 years and has been a campus leader since 2013. He has been a principal for a campus in need of improvement throughout his principalship. He stated, "...first we have to be able to accept where we are and so as a school, as a principal, as a teacher, an educator in general, it's hard to kind of accept the data that's in front of us sometimes. But that black and white is where we have to focus." His leadership style is based on being realistic, setting appropriate standards and goals for kids and educators and setting the expectations for effective instructional practices. He noted that things got a little harder when they could not control their environment during the COVID-19 pandemic therefore coming out of it, he felt he needed to guide his campus to what he called the standards of excellence. He described the standards of excellence as best practices that he and his team were good at prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Using longitudinal data and having a good PLC environment is what he holds as key and stated that the central office academics team was key in reestablishing what that meant for his campus.

Abel Contreras admitted that as a campus leader he was having conversations about students and data with his teachers during COVID-19, however he knew it was not the same because the camera allowed for disengagement that he could not control and would not consider it an effective PLC. However, coming out of COVID-19 is when he felt the central office stepped in to set the foundation of the big rocks, reestablishing what strong effective instruction should look like and laying out the PLC process that was supported by the district. He stated that when conversations erupted from his teachers asking why they needed to get professional development

on things they already knew, having the backing and expectations from the central office is what helped him reiterate with his teachers on how to recognize excellence and show them that they needed professional development because the data indicated as such.

Mr. Contreras transitioned from one campus in need of improvement to another during the summer of 2021. He stated that while the students and populations were different, the fact that both campuses were considered campuses in need of improvement were easy to determine based on data. The first campus he was at during COVID was in need of improvement because students needed targeted intervention to help them grow. The students at his current campus also needed to grow in performance. He stated that one of the challenges with teachers is helping them understand that if students are doing well, they still have to show growth from each year. He referenced that as long as students are struggling mastering any of the state standards, then they all need and deserve strategic intervention. Consequently, during COVID he invested time in supporting his teachers how to understand their standards and get students to mastery. He used longitudinal data with his teachers showing them that in some cases it was not the student that kept struggling with the same standard because the historical data indicated that the teacher struggled in getting the students to master the standards year after year. In 2021, he followed the same tactic with his current elementary campus in need of improvement by demonstrating to his teachers the importance of growth from year to year with each student. He did this along with his team by calling in each student one by one and letting them know how they had done historically on standards and what their target was. He and his team would then go visit classrooms with the expectation that they would hear the same kind of data conversations with teachers and their students. When he did not hear what he was looking for, he would call in his teachers grade level by grade level and ask them questions about their individual student data. He would explain to the

teachers, "how can you grow what you don't know?" This would be the start of the targeted intervention and support for each teacher. When asked how the central office supported this initiative, he credited a previous mentor from his teaching days that was a central office administrator until her retirement in 2019. Additionally, he credited the abundance of data that the central office academics team provides stating that the central office support allowed him to focus on the classroom practices and develop his teachers and not worry about getting them to pull the data and run item analysis on their own.

Abel Contreras concluded his interview attributing some of his success to supporting his campus in need of improvement. "I think when you consider the demands of the state and what the state is asking for a teacher, we've got to match it with what central office is doing. So, central office is doing a great job there of matching that and helping us to achieve those goals." He also recognized the efforts of one member of the academics team and he stated the following, "She comes in, she knows what we're doing, she knows what the goal is. She appreciates the efforts that my coaches and my admin team put in. She provides wonderful suggestions. She couldn't do that without being present and being available and knowing what's really happening on campus, knowing the dynamics of my teachers in a PLC, knowing their strengths and their weaknesses." Mr. Contreras explained that he would like more support with new teachers.

Sheila, Director of Pre-Kinder through Eighth Grade Academics

Sheila has been in education since 1996 and has worked in the central office academics team since 2006 for Middle Independent School District. She has supported the teachers and campuses of Middle ISD as a math and science specialist, coordinator and as a director of the PreK-8 Academics Team. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, Sheila was the elementary coordinator with a focus on science. In December of 2020 she became interim director

of middle school academics and then in July of 2021 she became the director of PreK-8 Academics. Due to staffing issues and a retirement, Sheila was the stability of the Academics team when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and to present. She credits herself as being a problem solver and always coming up with new ideas. For her, the time period of this research study from 2020 to 2022 has been a motivator and has allowed her to come up with new ideas like teaching in a virtual setting and providing the support and modeling for the campuses as part of the district response and practices that were created.

When asked what were some of the challenges Sheila feels in her role as part of the central office academics team, she stated it was experiences of the team and opportunity to support at campuses. She stated that the team members that understood the dynamics of campus life and were willing to be district voices and models were more supportive to district initiatives and campus support than others. She stated that collaborative efforts are what is key stating that the central office team members had to understand what teachers were going through and use the campus instructional coaches to build support. In many cases it was as much creative as it was collaborative. She continued with an example of the Chief of Academics wanting something that would help principals make a quick connection to the pacing that should be occurring in specific content areas. As the director of academics, she met with her team and they created documents that were like cheat sheets as to what should be occurring during a specified time period. Each of her content area team members added their content expertise, but as a team, she modeled the consistent template that was to be used. Then, she shared the finished products with the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement who then in turn gave specific directions to her principals on how to effectively use the documents. Sheila stated, " It took so much conversation, you know what I mean, to mold something to make it better. So, I guess really sitting at the table and planning

with them not delegating……It's about producing something systemic……until it becomes an expectation for all." Sheila continued that additional challenges may exist when the expectations and accountability do not match. She explained that many times it felt like she had many bosses because she was evaluated by one Associate Superintendent, but supported the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement and would still need to address the Chief of Academics during general meetings and conversations that included other directors and administrators. "...even how we approach data. We all are streamlined. But again, based on the experience, it looks different." Therefore, accountability in terms of responsibility and progress monitoring would be so different that it would be hard to hit the goals of the masses based on what was more valued at one campus versus another.

Sheila concluded with what she really likes about the district under the current leadership is that there is not a lot of newness. She credits it to the district being consistent with the big rocks like strong PLCs and data and having systems in place like the Effective Schools Framework. These big rocks have allowed her to continue to build her team and be a better support to the campus.

Themes

With the chronology of events and the interviews, I was able to identify themes that overall provide a good representation of what occurred in the Middle Independent School District between March 2020 until July 2022 in terms of how the Central Office systematized their efforts. The themes are as follows:

- Define what is really occurring
- Provide details through data

- Systematization

Each theme will now be analyzed and discussed in detail.

Define What Is Really Occurring

From March 2020 through July 2022, the chronology of events coupled with the interviews produced the common theme of defining what was actually occurring. The Central Office team was critical in providing the facts and the next steps in nearly every academic situation. Beginning during the 2019-2020 school year, the central office set the strategic goals to indicate how close they were to an A-rating. When the district shut down in March, the central office continued communicating the work that needed to be done to reach high academic achievement despite the physical restrictions. The agenda items for the June 11, 2020 Virtual Leadership meeting started the importance of being realistic:

- It's about to get more exciting
- TEA funding
- Year-round Calendar
- 3 things that are going to be key:
  - Attitude
  - Re-Design of Organizational Model - Old to New Vision 2025 The Encore
  - Be bold in all that we do!

Having a plan to immediately address how the 2020 school year was going to begin provided a realistic and immediate awareness that things were going to be different and that funding, support and resources were going to be provided. Additionally, the attitude of the adults and educators had to be positive and reassuring and they had to be bold in adapting to the unknown. The central office leadership team created a sense of urgency not towards the COVID-19 pandemic

but toward the instructional goals that needed to be met. By providing the instructional models in the new virtual learning environment and re-creating events such as the Professional Learning Community (PLC) and data discussions, the central office team was able to concentrate their support making sure that the campuses in need of improvement did not deter from those common practices.

In addition, the transparency of the campus principals indicating that instruction was not effective in the virtual setting was a critical awareness and understanding that the real work was going to be coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that the central office created virtual instructional models that mirrored a regular school day, allowed for the campuses to transition to regular school under the current instructional model regardless if the students were face to face or virtual for any part of the 2020-2021 school year. The approach to a new instructional model allowed for the realistic acceptance that students could not be on a computer for the entire time of their school day, but they had to know that they were responsible for a regular school schedule in their homes.

The theme of being realistic continued when Erin Jordan stated, "So I think that I bring that experience and that I'm very open to the mistakes that I've made, the things that I was successful at, but then again, the things that didn't work for me at that time." As the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement, she initiated the Effective Schools Framework so that should could demonstrate and support what effectiveness entailed using the framework indicators so that principals and their instructional teams could set realistic goals and provide real evidence of how they were going to get their teachers to provide effective instruction post-COVID-19.

Provide details through data

The first piece of data that Middle Independent School District focused on was how close they were to an A rating just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, when their physical environment and instructional settings were changed during the 2020-2021 school year, they remained focused on students and teachers not losing sight of instructional practices that would continue to provide positive results such as Professional Learning Communities, and using data to support individual student needs.

The Associate Superintendent of School Improvement used data to explain to her principals why their campuses were in need of improvement and collected additional data on a monthly basis in the form of evidence of the practices that the principals implemented from the Effective Schools Framework. The evidence collected was then shared with the central office academics team to provide professional development and support either requested by the campus principal or provided out of necessity. The academics team would then provide qualitative and quantitative data through instructional rounds and data reports from district programs as explained in the previous chronological events. The use of data both qualitative and quantitative support the instructional focus. In the interviews, each principal spoke to the ineffective instructional practices due to the virtual environment. Moxie Bee stated, "technology is scary if you're not familiar with it ...it got us out of our comfort zone so was it a challenge, absolutely, and is it still a challenge to this day yes, because we could not be effective in our instruction." Then, Abel Contreras stated, "It hasn't been as easy these last few years as we've gotten back into the game of instruction, we've forgotten some important things when it comes to how we can be effective with kids." Consequently, Erin Jordan, as the Associate of School Improvement had to make sure her principals relied on the data from the Effective Schools Framework to get teachers to recognize

the areas that needed improvement and insure that the support from central office was aligned to effective practices that would support teachers. She stated, "Because even before that, everybody tiered their teachers differently….so tiering the teachers based off a modified version of the ESF levers…we went to the teachers' level…so that they are more effective in the classroom." Although the actual results from the ESF levers that the principal and the teachers identified were never shared outside of the campus in need of improvement and the educators directly involved, the analysis of the data and the sharing of the information would be disseminated by Erin Jordan as the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement in order to guide, request and support the Central Office Academics Team so that they could in turn create the professional development opportunities and support that were data driven and relevant to the goals and planned outcomes.

Systems of Support

Sheila, who has been with the district since 1996 stated, "I think one of the challenges we had is how do we do something systemic because the district is known as doing things very systemic." The theme of systems of support was evident when in June 2020, the superintendent announced the reconfiguration of the central office team during a leadership meeting. The addition of three chiefs aligned to the three goals in the strategic action plan provided more accountability for the central office, specifically with the central office academics team. The addition of the Chief of Academics, the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement and the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction provided more oversight and support for campuses in need of improvement specifically in the area of academics. The Chief of Academics position meant that there was now someone responsible to oversee the elementary, middle, high school and academic support programs. There was not a single person responsible for the full oversight of all things academics including "district-wide planning initiatives and accountability management

programs designed to achieve district objectives and Board of Trustees goals" as written in the Chief Academic Officer job description.

As the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, it is written in my job description that it is my responsibility to "work with appropriate staff to develop, maintain, and revise curriculum and direct instructional and curriculum services to ensure they meet students' needs." From March 2020 through this very moment that I am completing this dissertation, doing as such requires a team effort and lots of support. The addition of the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement at this same time was the additional central office academics team support that was needed as her job description includes that she "participates as a member of each low performing campus' intervention team and supervised principals of low performing campuses." The reconfiguration of the central office leadership allowed for the first system of support for the systematization of the central office and the work needed to support the campuses in need of improvement.

The next system of support was the system of communication and dissemination. The leadership meetings hosted by the Superintendent of Schools and the Chief of Academics that provided the guidelines and information coming from the Texas Education Agency and the local government allowed for every academic director and campus leader to be at the forefront of the latest information and the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. Additionally, all professional development and support that used to occur in person at the central office building still occurred in a virtual setting. Under the reconfigured leadership, the importance of academics and the focus on effective instruction continued in the virtual environment. The director of Academics, Sheila, stated, "it was a lot but in the end everybody kind of went by this guideline that we provided, but instruction still went on. I think the beautiful part of it, is when we had leadership meetings, we

did rotations, just like we do in a physical setting…" Although the setting for the leadership meetings was different, the meetings still communicated and modeled how technology could be leveraged for effective instruction. Beyond the leadership meetings, the Central Office Academics Team would still continue with instructional coaches meetings and PLCs, again to communicate and model the expectations of how to use online resources, how to pull data from the online programs and how to monitor students through data reports, breakout rooms and artifacts of learning that students were required to submit. Sheila continued, "I think another thing is we modeled of what to do……And then, we also still had coaches, so coaches were still support systems in online virtual PLCs, that didn't change, so coaches got a lot of support."

Overall

The overall events and the perceptions of those events exemplified in the chronology portion of Chapter Four coupled with the interviews provided in this chapter prove that the overall support that was provided by the Central Office Academics Team was positive and effective for the campus leaders of the schools in need of improvement. The systematization of the Middle Independent School District consisted of lived experiences through a trivial time period. Analysis of the lived experiences details that in order for one group of leaders to support another group of leaders in need of improvement, both groups must be able to identify and define what is actually occurring and/or what needs to be improved. All of the leaders that were part of this research used data differently and used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to collect their data through their lived experiences. The findings from the research that was conducted show that true transformation of a district that serves campuses in need of improvement requires systems of support that are built from the reflection of their practices and experiences of those practices.

Chapter 6: Systematization

The objective of this study was to analyze the lived experiences and support provided by the central office academics team to campuses in need of improvement as we maneuvered our way through the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects on instruction thereafter. More specifically, I wanted to share the systematization of the Middle Independent School District Central Office Academics by analyzing the following:

1. How the Effective Schools Framework was interpreted and implemented.

2. The perception of the central office support provided to the campuses in need of improvement.

3. The professional development that the central office academics delivered and enforced for the campuses in need of improvement.

The findings described in the previous chapter that included the analysis of the chronology of events and the interviews of campus and distinct leadership have important implications for practice and theory based on the achievements and the lessons learned. Moreover, the lived experiences shared by me support the literature of systems and tools that Texas public schools are a part of. Altogether, the findings of this study make important contributions to the central office academics teams that are part of the Texas accountability system and are looking for positive outcomes for schools that are in need of improvement. These lessons learned will be explained as part of the systematization methodology of this research.

As the researcher and Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction in Middle ISD, I chose the methodology of systematization due to the transformations that occurred through the lived experiences from March 2020 through June 2022 that have been described. The Central

Office Academics Team had to provide support to the campuses in need of improvement by identifying the specific urgent needs of each campus, defining what the support would entail, disseminate the support through specified means and reflect on the support in order to provide evidence of effectiveness and to then determine next steps. The methodological approach of systematization provided the context and reconstruction of the lived experiences through the support and interventions the central office academics team provided. It allowed for the recovery of a knowledge base of a system of continuous improvement for the Middle ISD. Through the lens of improvement science and sensemaking the results of this study include:

1. Any academic leader in a central office position now has an intentional knowledge base of the relevance of using systematization practices to define what the real problem is and follow the 3 D's to 1) Define what it is that needs to be improved; 2) Detail the reality and possible interventions for short and long term improvement; and 3) Disseminate the interventions through support, professional development, modeling, reflection and effective practices.

2. The use of the Effective Schools Framework is research based and has relevance if attached to what has been identified in number 1 and is connected to past experiences. Additionally, the choice of levers has to be grounded in district initiatives that are consistent for multiple years and are explicit factors and areas of focus in the support or professional development that is provided to your campus leaders.

3. A transformation of central office has to be understood by all. Each position the leaders of the central office hold has to have a strong accountability and messaging that is consistent across. Areas of expertise must be taken into account and cannot

be forced upon another area that requires a different type of expertise. Credibility and trust are factors in the recipients of the support that cannot be ignored.

4. Contributions to the greater good are that Middle ISD did attain the highest accountability rating from the Texas Education Agency exemplifying that what they did worked. Some improvements were as a result of change that could not be avoided such as COVID-19 however some change was not a guaranteed improvement such as not using the Effective Schools Framework in year 2 the same as year 1. Additionally, with factors such as declining enrollment, changes at the central office and campus level were not always strategic but were necessary.

Effective Schools Framework Interpretation

The use of the Effective Schools Framework as a tool to measure effectiveness had an unforeseen outcome due to the fact that it was not used as intended and using the ESF as a whole was never fully implemented. The interpretation of the Effective Schools Framework mattered because it was initiated by central office leadership and only specific levers and essential actions were used to support campuses in need of improvement. Through the lens of the systematization methodology, the people involved in the process and their interpretation of the process are vital components of how the actions throughout the process were planned even if some outcomes could not be foreseen (Jara Holliday, 2012). On the other hand, the Effective Schools Framework was designed to provide a clear vision for what districts and schools should do to ensure effective instruction (https://texasesf.org/). Philosophers on systematization such as Braun (1973) conclude that a logical idea within a single system can manifest itself throughout the inquiry process as it absorbs, accommodates and coordinates through the various parts of the system. This philosophical interpretation resonates with how the district did not use the ESF in its entirety but

it was used as a tool for the overall system of improvement initiated by the Associate Superintendent of School Improvement.

The Associate Superintendent of School Improvement was charged with improving her schools that were under her leadership. However, she had to rely on an academic team of specialists that were under the direction of a director who had no experience in using the Effective Schools Framework or in being a campus administrator. Additionally, the director of academics was supported and evaluated by me, the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. The choice in the ESF levers and the Essential Actions were chosen through the Associates own personal experiences of being a campus administrator of a school in need of improvement in a previous district. Therefore, the framework itself did not need to be fully interpreted by the campus administrators or the instructional team. Moreover, the investment of time in training the campus and distinct teams on the full Effective Schools Framework was time that both associates were unable to find and commit to amongst all their other duties and time dedications to getting to other anticipated outcomes.

Both principals that were interviewed shared their positive impressions of using the ESF as part of their journey to improvement. Moxie Bee stated, "the ESF…it did help me…it did hold my hand when I needed it…it did help my instructional coaches, my leadership team." Additionally, Abel Contreras stated, "All of the trainings y'all put together with the effective schools instruction and then making that connection to the things that we do as adults has been wonderful." The initial training that the campus administrators were given was not specifically tied to ESF, but rather tied to how they identified their teachers in need of support. In 2020, when asked how they tiered their teachers in order to provide support, the principals provided answers such as walkthroughs and past data. Consequently, a simple rubric adapted from the ESF was

introduced so that principals would have consistent language and indicators, The Central Office Academics Team created a template that had only three indicators per ESF lever. A sample of lever 5 is depicted in Figure 6.1.

Lever 5-Effective Instruction

Lever 5- Effective Instruction	Yes (1)	Sometimes (2)	No (3)
1. Does the teacher provide instruction that is aligned to grade level standards and district pacing?			
2. Does the teacher share instructional practices, supported by data, with other members of the PLC?			
3. Does the teacher plan daily engaging lessons that have best practices embedded throughout?			

Figure 6.1 MISD ESF Lever 5 Criteria for Effective Instruction

The actual ESF Lever 5 with the Essential Actions from the ESF website looks like Figure 6.2 below.

Essential Actions Success Criteria

Lever #5: Effective Instruction

Essential Action 5.1: Professional development for effective classroom instruction

Key Practice	Success Criteria
Campus instructional leaders provide training and support so that teachers consistently implement content specific best practices.	❏ Teachers and campus leaders use frameworks for content specific pedagogical practices that reflect research based instructional strategies and are aligned to campus instructional materials (for example, in math pushing students to choose appropriate tools or techniques to solve problems). ❏ Leaders provide teachers with effective initial training and ongoing support to ensure instruction contains content specific pedagogical practices. ❏ Campus calendar indicates dedicated time for training and ongoing job embedded professional development on content specific teaching practices.

Figure 6.2 ESF Essential Actions Success Criteria[21]

The purpose of using the systematization methodology for this study is to highlight the actions the central office leadership team took and to provide an analysis to other central office members. Simply stated, the lesson that was learned from the use of the Effective Schools Framework was that support provided by the central office academics team was perceived as positive not because of the use of the ESF as a tool, but because of the way the concepts from the ESF were used and transferred to the campus leaders in a way that made them reflect on what was actually occurring in their campuses. As described in Chapter 2, the Effective Schools Framework was chosen to specifically support the campuses in need of improvement. During the 2020-2021 school year, the reconfigured central office leadership team identified the need for a model of effectiveness. The identified needs were based on qualitative and quantitative data on student performance and mastery of standards. The data indicated instructional experiences for students and teachers were not at a high level of effectiveness due to the COVID-19 pandemic imposed instructional environment of virtual learning. Therefore, central office leadership needed to define effectiveness using the language from the ESF, and campus leadership needed to define and provide the details on why and how to improve to their teachers.

The additional lesson learned was the importance of detailing. Although the director and instructional specialists of the central office academics team had never experienced the ESF as campus leaders, they used their expertise in content knowledge and professional development to create and deliver support for campuses in need of improvement that aligned to the essential actions that were part of the ESF. They would model the support across the contents to the campus

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leadership team and leverage the campus team to either deliver the actions themselves or invite the central office academics teams to co-deliver and model in partnership with the campus team. The detailing in the district big rocks of strong tier 1 instruction, professional learning communities, data digs and interventions for all were detailed and modeled through documentation, expectations, non-negotiables and goals. The figure below illustrates a PowerPoint slide from a July 2022 training that was delivered to instructional coaches. The training included a step by step process of the PLC process as defined by Middle ISD. The process itself contained visuals of actual artifacts and evidence of effectiveness that needed to be a part of every PLC to include the non-negotiables.

PLC Non-Negotiables

- Weekly meetings with an agenda
- Assigned roles
- Arrive prepared and on time every time!
- EVERYONE is accountable!
- Follow the PLC process when lesson planning and reviewing assessments
- Abide by your PLC's established norms

Figure 6.3 Non-Negotiables for the Campus PLCs

The advantage of sharing the lived experiences as part of the systematization methodology was evident in the last lesson learned regarding the perception of the Effective Schools Framework. The district was declining in enrollment and teachers and administrators were retiring and/or leaving to neighboring districts that were heavily recruiting from the only A-rated district in the city. Consequently, every year after the 2020-2021 COVID-19 year began with vacancies and/or late hires. This caused the inability for central office academics teams to keep up with the

dissemination of the supports. Additionally, as campus instructional teams identified more ineffective practices that needed modeling or more personalized support, this too spread the central office academics team so thin that they could not get to everyone every time. Therefore, some campuses received more modeling and support than others and there was little time left to provide equitable support to all campuses in need of improvement.

Perception of the Support Provided by the Central Office

As previously stated, the principals that were interviewed perceived the support from the central office team positively. However, a reflection of the analysis of the supports provided by the central office academics team is where the true lessons are learned. The reconfiguration of the Central Office Leadership provided the new Associate Superintendent for School Improvement and the new Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. Additionally, there was a director for elementary academics, a director for middle school academics, a director for high school academics and a director for College and Career Readiness. My new position as Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction left a vacancy in my previous academic department therefore I held both positions for almost the entire 2020-2021 school year. Retirements and reorganizations later combined the elementary and middle school directors into a single PreK-8 directorship and a later move caused the College and Career director to merge with the High School Academics Director as a single directorship. The changes and inconsistencies in central office leadership led to changes in how support was defined, detailed and disseminated.

The Wallace Foundation supported a national study regarding how leaders transformed the work of the central office to better support student outcomes (Honig et al., 2010). Five dimensions were among the key findings with themes of learning-focused partnerships, central office-principal partnership, transformation and continuous improvement (Honig et al., 2010). The many staffing

changes and challenges that come with change deter from opportunities of continuous improvement and partnerships. Additionally, consistency among the grade levels and content areas was challenging among the central office leadership. Most of the central office instructional specialists were singles in their content meaning there was one instructional specialist for elementary math and one for elementary science. However, there were two Associates that would oversee elementary campuses. One through school improvement parameters and one without. Consequently, the support the central office provided to campuses in need of improvement was accepted as a continuation and consistency of support for those that were initially involved and remained involved, but may have just been perceived as a general professional development opportunity by those that did not have the historical experience. This was made more evident when Sheila stated, "But it took me to take a step back and reflect and said, they're not there yet. You know what I mean? They're not quite there yet. So, when we do things, we are trying to align but we're at different experience levels." She was speaking in regards to another director who has just taken on a consolidated role and was new to the academic pieces that had already been disseminated. The lesson learned from the changing dynamics can be exemplified in the following:

1. The term support can be defined through intention and perception based on the deliverer of the support as well as the recipient.
2. Anything defined as support required explicit detail, modeling and a level of expertise based on learned experiences.
3. The process of bringing professionals together for a common purpose must be goal oriented, data driven and be recognized as a system through every level of dissemination.

In summary, the support that the central office provides has to be connected to a grounding factor or consistent theme. In Middle ISD, since the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, the

district has detailed their big rocks of strong tier 1 instruction, PLCs, data digs, and intervention for all. Once the grounding factor was determined, support needed to be defined, detailed and disseminated. The definition and detailing of the support either through professional development or other means, needed to be connected to lived experiences, or modeled for effectiveness. As part of the detailing, when and how the support was going to be delivered was just as critical as the message within the delivery.

Future Research

At the time of this study, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education was well referenced in literature on the economic and educational gaps (Tarkar, 2020; Schleicher, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Di Pietro, Biagi, Costa, Karpiński, & Mazza, 2020). Studies on systematization (Falkembach &Carillo, 2015; Tapella & Rodríguez-Bilella, 2014; Varela & Blanco, 2019) were conducted mostly in Latin America in the field of social work but not on public education. The potential for future contributions on the pre and post work of educational leaders since the initiation of the COVID-19 pandemic as schools in need of improvement were identified is endless. Researchers should review the qualitative side of the Texas accountability system and its effects on public education. Additionally, researchers should expand on the findings of this study in the area of support from the central office and its effects on student outcomes. Additionally, researchers should consider using the systematization approach on other aspects of schools in need of improvement to include student and community perceptions on the district's response to the needed support.

Policy and Practice

The policy and practice that emerged from this study are recommendations for superintendents, district leaders, principals and curriculum and instruction specialists. This study

found that the central office for the Middle Independent School District initiated an effective plan of support to schools in need of improvement during a global pandemic. Central office leaders noted that identifying schools in need of improvement and providing effective support must be identified, detailed and disseminated in a way that is perceived as effective by those providing the support as much as those receiving the support. Additionally, principals noted that professional development from the central office district team was effective. I offer the following recommendations to central office administrators attempting to support campuses that are in need of improvement with evidence of effectiveness:

1. Define
2. Detail
3. Disseminate

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on the actions of support from a central office academics team in one Texas school district. The use of the systematization method strayed from the traditional research and evaluation separate practices and combined the methodologies with lived experiences and action research within a unique period of time in order to uncover the effective practices that led to an A-Rating during the 2022 Texas Accountability System. Interviews were conducted from a sample of the central office academics team and a sample of the principals that served campuses in need of improvement.

Middle Independent School District and the demographics it serves coupled with the central office organizational structure may not be transferable to other districts that do not share in similar attributes. The time limitation from March 2020 through July 2022 was also a unique period

of time that may not be replicated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview findings and the perceptions of the experiences during the time period may have also been unique to the time period.

Finally, this study was limited by me. My position within the district and my personal and professional connection to the district may have unintentionally aided in the way the chronological events were detailed and what was said to me during the interviews. Although my best efforts were in place and proper protocols and recordings were in place to remain unbiased or impartial.

Closing Remarks

The Middle Independent School District has a common purpose to "deliver excellence through innovative educational experiences in a safe and nurturing environment." It is a common purpose they have been sharing and teaching to every employee of the district since 2015 as part of the initiative to provide customer service through what they refer to as Service Excellence. The fact remains that the Middle Independent School District attained an A-rating from the Texas Education Agency in August 2022. At the time this research was conducted, the outcome of the 2022-2023 school year was unknown. I am thankful to the educators of Middle ISD and their work during the COVID-19 pandemic and thereafter. I am honored to be an employee of the MISD and the central office team. The principals and central office leaders that participated in the interviews were open and honest about their work and perceptions of what was provided to them and I am eternally grateful for their knowledge and expertise. While I focused on the work of the central office academics team, the effectiveness and success of the support that is provided to our campuses in need of improvement and all the other campuses is not the sole work of the academics team.

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Glossary

Academics Team – The team that was representative of instructional specialists, coordinators, directors and Associate Superintendents. In this study, the academics team was under the direct supervision of the Chief of Academics. The Chief of Academics was under the direct supervision of the Superintendent of Schools.

Assessment Calendar – This is a comprehensive calendar of every assessment (local, curriculum-based or state) that delineated what assessments were going to be aggregated and analyzed at the district level. When appropriate, the assessment data would be ranked for the entire district so campuses would have a quantitative depiction of how they ranked across the district. The rankings would also be used to determine schools in need of improvement.

Campus Leadership – Each campus in Middle ISD had only one campus principal. Most elementary campuses also had only one assistant principal. The campus leadership team would include the campus principal, assistant principal and instructional coach. More members could be added but not removed.

Central Office Academic Team – The central office academics team consisted of the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and instruction, the PreK-8 Director, and the instructional specialists responsible for elementary math, science, and reading language arts.

Central Office Academic Leadership – This team consisted of the Chief of Academics and the Associate Superintendents over Curriculum and Instruction, School Improvement, and Elementary, Middle and High School Campuses. Often Academic Directors were part of the several meetings and reflections.

Content Teacher – A teacher that teaches a specific content area (math, science, language arts)

Curriculum Documents – Documents created and managed by the Academics Team that include pacing of units, standards that are to be covered in each unit, resources available to support the units of study and key instructional details such as differentiation and clarifications of misconceptions.

Education Service Center – In 1967 the Texas Legislature directed that the State Board of Education provide, by rules and regulations, for the establishment and operation of regional Education Service Centers (ESCs). Twenty Regional Service Centers were established to provide services to school districts throughout the state. The Centers are service organizations, not regulatory arms of the Texas Education Agency, and participation by schools in services of the centers is voluntary.

Elementary Teacher – a teacher that teaches grades Kinder, first, second, third, fourth or fifth.

Instructional Coach - Provide support to programs and/or services that supplement the regular education program, curriculum and district initiatives so that students graduate college,

career and/or military ready and have the opportunity to participate in other college readiness measures. Coordinate and provide support in professional learning communities to support the alignment of content, the backwards design process and curriculum resources. Serve as an on-site instructional coach for the teaching staff to train and provide supplemental support to the regular education programs. Attend district instructional program trainings and implement the instructional programs at the campus level. Serve as a lead teacher training, planning, implementing and assessing supplemental educational programs relevant to the needs of all students particularly in the areas of Math/Science and/or Reading and Language Arts/Social Studies.

Instructional Specialist - Improve the quality of education of Ysleta ISD students by providing support to elementary and secondary campus administrators in the development, implementation and assessment of instructional programs, projects and initiatives. Coordinate or assist with coordination of the districts pre-kindergarten through grade 12 instructional programs. Provide leadership for the development and/or revision of district curricula to be aligned with Texas Essentials Knowledge & Skills (TEKS).

Professional Learning Communities – The rationale for PLCs in 2020 was to support the Effective Schools Framework, share common language, increase instructional leadership efficacy and meet the goal and targets from the Encore 2025 strategic plan. The PLC agenda consisted of answering four questions:

1. What do we want our students to know?
2. How doe we know if they learn it?
3. How do we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

The agenda also discussed Tier 1 instruction, assessment data and intervention. In 2021, PLC Planning Process included:

- Reviewing curriculum documents
- Analyzing data
- Unpacking standards and assessment data
- Planning the instructional pacing
- Designing strong tier 1 lessons
- Reflecting on the delivery and student data
- Developing corrective instructional plans based on data
- Reflecting and revising

Appendix

Hi, I am conducting interviews as part of my study, SYSTEMATIZATION OF CENTRAL OFFICE SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT. This research will be grounded in improvement science in education to improve practices that occur to get schools to get better at getting better (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and Lemahieu, 2015). This research project will be conducted using the systematization methodology. Systematization aims at assisting those that have participated in transformative processes in local contexts to reconstruct their lived experiences and recover the knowledge therein (Falkembach & Carrillo, 2015). My purpose for the study is to analyze the central office support process for schools in need of improvement. This is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my degree of Doctor of Educational Leadership and Administration.

I will interview three groups of people to include campus principal, director of academics and Associate Superintendent of School Improvement. Each interview is designed to take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete and will consist of questions around your perception of the central office support (including professional development) from March 2020 (initiation of COVID-19) through the present with any specifics you can add on the district's current A rating. Your participation is completely voluntary. Can I have your consent to interview you?

YES _____   NO_____   Date of Consent: _____

Signature: _____ Printed Name: _____

Position: _____Principal   _____Director   _____Associate Superintendent

Campus/Department: _____ Timeframe in Position? _____ to_____

I will be recording this interview for accuracy as I prefer to give you my full attention by taking minimal notes and referring to the recording for more specifics. Do I have your permission to record? YES _____ NO_____ Signature: _____

NOTE: Begin Recording

1. What motivates you to be the principal/director/associate of your team?

2. At the core of effective schools is effective instruction. What is your strategy for improving effective instruction?

3. What role, if any, does Central Office play in your strategy for improving effective instruction?

4. What are some of the major challenges your campus/department/team faces in attempting to change teaching and learning practices? What are the major opportunities?

5. What are your expectations of the central office academics team to support effective instruction? Have they been able to meet those expectations?

   a. Probes: professional development

6. Is there anything you would like to add regarding central office and effective instruction?

Thank you for your interview. This concludes all of the questions. If there is anything else that comes up during the study, may I reach out to you?

YES_____NO_____ Signature: _____

Anonymity of your participation is of utmost importance. What pseudonym would you prefer to be referenced as?

Vita

Louisa Aguirre-Baeza was born and raised in the El Paso, Texas. She graduated high school in 1992 as an athlete, a leader and a learner. She continued her education by earning a Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies degree in Bilingual Education from the University of Texas at El Paso in 1996. Before she graduated she was already recruited by two local independent school districts and took her first teaching position as a fifth grade bilingual teacher in the city's most economically disadvantaged communities. She continued to pursue her education at the same university and received her Master of Education Degree in 1999. She was again recruited to serve leaders and learners at the university level who came from marginalized communities and were pursuing their degrees in education to serve the marginalized communities and promote higher education. Her pursuit of her doctoral degree started in 1999.

Louisa Aguirre-Baeza has created and presented various research-based professional development opportunities for all levels of teachers, leaders and learners. Presentation topics include Dual Language, Service Excellence, Highly Effective Interventions, Data-based Decisions, Professional Learning Communities, STAAR 2.0 and Curriculum.

Louisa Aguirre-Baeza is currently the Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. She has served her community as a leader and learner since 1996 in the capacity of teacher, coordinator, specialist, administrator, director and associate superintendent. She will proudly continue to serve the future leaders and learners in any capacity related to education. She can be reached at crabsmom@gmail.com.