

**An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Principals
with School Counseling Backgrounds**

by

Sarah Darby Moncrief

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
August 8, 2026

Keywords: collaboration, ethical and equitable responsibility, instructional leader,
professional working relationships, purpose and focus oriented, school improvement

Copyright 2026 by Sarah Darby Moncrief

Approved by

Ellen (Reames) Hahn, Chair, Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and
Technology

Amy Serafini, Associate Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and
Technology Jason Bryant, Clinical Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership,
and Technology

Fran Kochan, Professor Emeritus of Educational Foundations, Leadership and
Technology

Abstract

Research surrounding school principals indicates that the candidate pool is shrinking for this vitally important position. School counselors are great candidates to fill this position. Their experience as a counselor helps them solidify strong leadership skills and abilities that can contribute to a successful school principalship. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of school principals with school counseling experience. In particular, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement. Five participants who are currently or who have been school principals and also school counselors were interviewed and completed a follow up survey. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, five themes emerged. The findings of this study show that these individuals place a priority on strong professional relationships, keep students at the forefront of decision making, focus on whole child education, believe their time as a school counselor greatly prepared them for their principal positions, and always keep a growth mindset.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement

This dissertation was prepared in accordance with the academic integrity standards of Auburn University. The author used the artificial intelligence (AI) tool, ChatGPT, in a limited capacity to support aspects of the writing and revision process. AI assistance provided suggestions on improving thematic alignments, organization, and to refine language for clarity and coherence. The tool was also utilized to assist with developing tables and visualizations.

AI assistance was not used to generate original research ideas, conduct analysis, or produce findings. All scholarly content, including the research design, data interpretation, and conclusions, represents the independent work of the author. The author has reviewed and verified all AI-assisted content to ensure accuracy, coherence, and alignment with the study's methodology and scholarly standards.

The author accepts full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of this dissertation. The author also accepts full responsibility for the intellectual content, analysis, conclusions, and scholarly rigor of the research and this dissertation.

Digital Accessibility Disclosure Statement

In preparation of this dissertation, the following digital accessibility tools were used to ensure this document complies with federal accessibility requirements:

Microsoft Word Accessibility Checker and EndNote reference management software.

These tools reviewed document structure, formatting, alternative text, heading organization, and reference consistency to support accessibility standards. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work and has made a good faith effort to comply with digital accessibility requirements in publishing, wherein the nature of the content does not significantly change in order to do so. All content has been reviewed and revised to meet these requirements prior to final publication.

Acknowledgments

I express my sincere gratitude to my dissertation chair, professor, and mentor, Dr. Ellen Hahn. Your feedback and encouragement challenged me to grow professionally. I am deeply grateful for the time, patience, and commitment you invested in helping me reach this milestone. I thank my committee members, Dr. Amy Serafini, Dr. Jason Bryant, and Dr. Fran Kochan for helping and guiding me as well. I have truly gained so much knowledge from all of you and all my other Auburn professors during this journey.

To my husband, Danny, son, Dixon, and daughter, Darby Lynn, I am eternally grateful for your love. You three are my why and my biggest blessings. Your support gave me strength on the most challenging days and kept me grounded along the way. I am forever grateful for the sacrifices you made and for always believing in me.

To my parents, my sister, and my grandparents, father-in-law and mother-in-law, and other family members, I thank you. You all believed in me more than I believed in myself at times. Thank you for helping with my children when I needed to do schoolwork. Thank you for checking on my progress. Thank you for the love and support you have given me throughout this journey. I know my PawPaw would be proud. The love and passion he had for education is what continues to inspire me.

To my principal, head of school, and coworkers, your unwavering support and mentorship have helped guide me where I am today. I could not have completed this journey without your support and guidance.

To my friends and to my cohort members, your encouragement boosted me to continue working. Your constant check-ins and show of support helped me reach this point. I am so thankful to have each of you on my side. War Eagle!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Disclosure Statement	3
Digital Accessibility Disclosure Statement	4
Acknowledgments	5
List of Tables	11
List of Figures	12
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	13
Research Questions	18
Assumptions.....	20
Significance of the Study	21
Definition of Key Terms	21
Chapter 2: Literature Review	24
Purpose of the Study	24
Principal Career Pathway	24
Overview of the School Principal.....	28
Role of the Exemplary School Principal	28
Characteristics of the Exemplary School Principal	30
Existing Literature	34
Overview of the School Counselor.....	35
Role of the School Counselor	35

Positive Professional Principal and Counselor Relationship.....	39
Comparative Analysis of ASCA, PSEL, and ASSL Standards.....	42
Purpose and Focus Oriented.....	45
Ethical and Equitable Responsibility.....	46
Instructional Leadership.....	49
Collaboration and Engagement with School Community.....	53
Professional Working Relationships.....	56
Continuous Improvement.....	58
Leadership Skills of School Counselors.....	61
Summary.....	64
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	66
Data Collection.....	73
Chapter 4: Findings.....	76
Purpose of the Study.....	76
Research Questions.....	77
Data Collection.....	78
Method.....	79
Participants.....	80
Data Analysis.....	85
Research Question 1.....	86

Theme 1: Relationships are at the heart of leadership	86
Theme 2: Leadership is student centered	88
Theme 3: School counseling experience serves as great preparation for a school principal	90
Theme 4: Whole child education while viewing everything through a dual perspective lens is a critical component of a leader.	92
Theme 5: Growth mindset is important as a school leader	93
Research Question 2	94
(a) Being purpose and focus oriented.	95
(b) Enacting ethical and equitable responsibility	95
(c) Acting as instructional leaders.....	96
(d) Collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders.	97
(e) Creating and maintaining professional work relationships.....	98
(f) Continuous improvement.	99
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	101
Summary of the Study	101
Research Questions	103
Review of Methodology	103
Limitations	104
Major Findings Related to Literature and Interpretations of Interviews and Surveys	104

Theme 1: Relationships Are at the Heart of Leadership.....	105
Theme 2: Leadership Is Student Centered	105
Theme 3: School counseling experience serves as great preparation for a school principal.	106
Theme 4: Whole Child Education Viewed Through a Dual Perspective Lens	107
Theme 5: School Leader Growth Mindset.....	108
Findings Related to the Research Problem	109
Findings Related to the Practice of School Principals.....	110
Significance of the Study	111
Final Thoughts and Conclusions.....	112
References.....	114
Appendix A	121
Appendix B: Information Letter.....	129
Appendix C: Email Recruitment Letter.....	131
Appendix D: Interview Protocol.....	133
Appendix E: Qualtrics Dissertation Survey	134
Appendix F: CITI Training Certificates.....	140

List of Tables

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Standards	44
Table 2. Participants of the Study	83

List of Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.....	20
Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Framework	102

Chapter 1: Introduction

For almost fifteen years, I have been an educator in the state of Alabama. I began my educational career in a high school mathematics classroom. During this time, I had a school principal approach me about furthering my education in a field related to school leadership. At that time, I was beginning a family and not equipped to take on additional responsibilities of attaining a degree. A few years later, after becoming a middle school counselor, I was again approached about furthering my education and considering a future in school leadership. Upon reflection, I decided to enroll in Auburn University's online program for educational leadership. Now, roughly six years later, I am working towards my doctoral degree in educational leadership. Throughout my time as a school counselor, I have learned just how important the skills and characteristics of a school counselor can be.

A school principal is one of the most important factors impacting a school environment and student success (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). A school principal who is not considered a good fit for a school can inhibit school success and also cause tension and turmoil amongst faculty, staff, and school stakeholders (Sabina & Colwell, 2018). It is, therefore, crucial for school administrators to work diligently and proactively when finding the best fit professional for a school principal position.

School counselors have the potential to be exemplary school principals. In fact, they are considered school leaders per the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2025). Much like that of school principals, school counselors have rigorous standards to uphold which prioritize student success and well-being (ASCA, 2025a) School counselors have experience in upholding a school's mission, advocating for all

students, designing and implementing curriculums, collaborating with parents and other stakeholders, establishing and maintaining positive working relationships, and interpreting data for improvement (ASCA, 2025a). All of these are also responsibilities of school principals (ALSDE, 2025; NPBEA, 2015).

This hermeneutic phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Specifically, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and continuous improvement. By focusing on these factors, this study added to the literature and helped address gaps in the understanding of school principals who were previously school counselors. Insights gained through this study can aid in understanding the influence the school counseling profession can have on a person, how school principals with a school counseling background lead, and how the backgrounds of school principals who were previously school counselors impact the above mentioned factors.

Problem Statement

Research indicates that the candidate pool for school leadership, specifically that of the school principal, is shrinking (Cieminski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2020; Sabina & Colwell, 2018). More demands, longer hours, and low financial gain are a few of the reasons people are choosing not to pursue careers as a school principal (Cieminski, 2018; Ritchie, 2020). In an effort to ensure there is a strong leader in the role of school principal, school boards and administrators have turned to the process of

succession planning. Succession planning is a program school administrators use “to recruit and train new leaders to lead their schools” (Sabina & Colwell, 2018, p. 375).

Recently, the Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-3-.34 was changed. With this change, school counselors are now eligible for a school administrative position sooner than they were previously. Now, school counselors who wish to pursue a career in school administration must document a minimum of four full years in the school setting or eight semesters of full-time employment in a P-12 school setting. School counselors must also have a written recommendation from the superintendent in the district from which they are currently employed (ALSDE, 2025). This change can significantly grow the struggling candidate pool for school principals.

While there are clear differences, the roles and responsibilities of both school principals and school counselors have many similarities. Both professions are responsible for upholding a school's mission, vision, and values (ASCA, 2025a; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019). Advocating and supporting student success and well-being are a top priority of both a school principal and a school counselor. It is the responsibility of both professionals to ensure that each and every student has an opportunity to learn in a safe environment that is conducive to success (ASCA, 2025a; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; NPBEA, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015). A school counselor is responsible for ensuring there is a strong and effective school counseling program, while a school principal is responsible for ensuring all curriculums used within the school are strong and effective (ASCA, 2025a; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; NPBEA, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015). School counselors and school principals must effectively communicate with

parents and other school stakeholders, create and maintain positive and professional working relationships, analyze data, and make adjustments as needed to aid in continuous school improvement (ASCA, 2025a; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Easley, 2008; NPBEA, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015).

School counselors and school principals must work together often to support students and faculty. Because the job responsibilities have many similarities, it is crucial for a school counselor and a school principal to have a positive professional relationship (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Fontanez, 2023; Tygret et al., 2020). By trusting each other and understanding each other's role, this positive relationship can begin on a firm foundation. With a positive relationship, together, they can strengthen and elevate a school culture and community (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Fontanez, 2023; Tygret et al., 2020).

A comparative analysis of the American School Counselor Association standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership revealed many similarities and alignments. This comparison indicated that both school counselors and school principals should hold many of the same high standards and beliefs. The alignment of these three standards are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the close alignment and similar job responsibilities further solidified the idea that school counselors have leadership abilities and can become exemplary school principals.

School counselors are school leaders, as indicated by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2025a). While there is limited research connected to school counseling leadership, it is clear that leadership skills are vital for school

counselors to possess. These skills are important in aiding the success of a school counseling program and also to the ability of a school counselor to support students in their learning and well-being (Gibson et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015; Young & Dollarhide; 2017).

Despite the above research and literature, there is scant literature surrounding school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Research does indicate, though, that the skills of school counselors are comparable to skills of school principals. Through in-depth interviews, this phenomenological study provides insight and aims to add to the literature of school counselors who became school principals. Specifically, how did school counseling backgrounds influence school principals being purpose and focused oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement. By understanding the lived experiences, more awareness and knowledge surrounding school principals with a school counseling background was gained.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Specifically, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement.

Although there is little research related to school principals who were previously

school counselors, there is undeniable evidence that school counselors and school principals share many of the same responsibilities and standards (ASCA, 2025a; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; NPBEA, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015). The goal of this study was to add to the literature related to school principals with a school counseling background. The knowledge gained through this study will be beneficial in continuing to understand the lived experiences of these school principal professionals who hold a background in school counseling.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds?
- (2) How do these school principals with a school counseling background relate to:
 - (a) being purpose and focus oriented
 - (b) enacting ethical and equitable responsibility
 - (c) acting as instructional leaders,
 - (d) collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders
 - (e) creating and maintaining professional work relationships
 - (f) continuous improvement

Research Design

The research design was a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological study. Phenomenological research is “aimed at understanding experiences lived” (Peoples,

2021, p. 3). This approach was the best fit method for analyzing the lived experiences of school principals who have a background in school counseling. Double nomination sampling, specifically expert sampling, was used to study lived experiences of these professionals. The professionals in the study were exemplary school principals who had a school counseling background. This form of inquiry employed an in-depth interaction with the school principals using one-on-one interviews. Using this method allowed for each interview to contribute towards the entire phenomenon of school principals who hold a background in school counseling. Detailed research design and information is presented in Chapter 3.

Conceptual Framework

Themes from the review of literature and the ASCA Standards, Alabama Standards for School Leadership, and PSELs are used to organize the study's conceptual framework. Six guiding principles were identified after a thorough analysis and review of the ASCA Standards, Alabama Standards for School Leadership, and PSELs. These six themes are being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with a school community and its stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and continuous improvement.

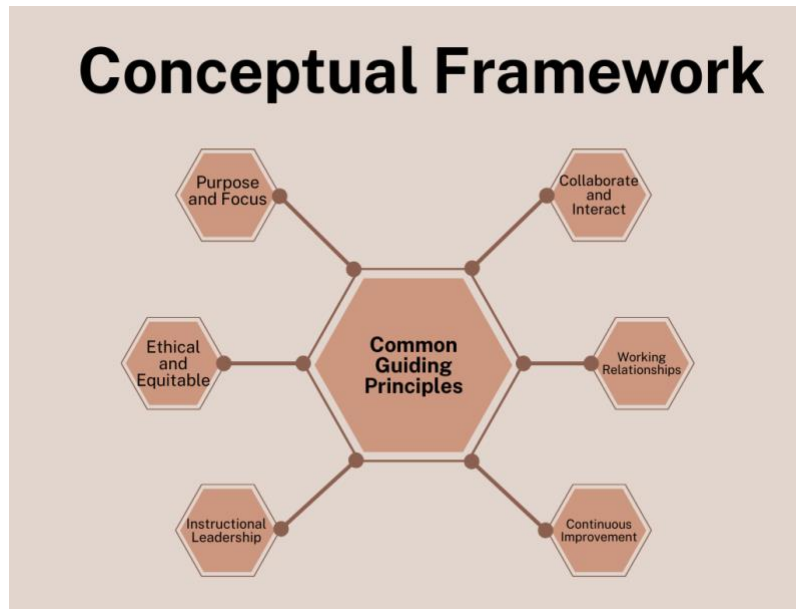


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Assumptions

One assumption of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research study is that participants are honest and open about their lived experiences. Another assumption is that school principals with a school counseling background have the ability to be exemplary in their job performance. The third assumption is that the selected participants are truly exemplary.

Limitations

The study focuses only on school principals with a school counseling background in the state of Alabama.

The overall sample size will be considered small. (4 - 6 participants reached saturation)

Participation is voluntary.

The researcher is a current school counselor.

The researcher aspires to become a school principal in the future.

Significance of the Study

Research indicates there is a lack of qualified candidates for a school principal position. To aid in the lack of qualified candidates, administrators are utilizing succession planning to recruit and determine potential candidates (Cieminski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2020; Sabina & Colwell, 2018). The recent change in Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-3-.34 was adjusted so that school counselors desiring a role as a school principal could achieve that in less time (ALSDE, 2025). The similarities of both school principals and school counselors' standards and job responsibilities indicate that school counselors can be viable candidates for becoming exemplary school principals.

There is clear evidence that school principals should stay purpose and focus oriented, enact ethical and equitable responsibilities, act as instructional leaders, collaborate and interact with school community and stakeholders, create and maintain professional working relationships, and continuously strategize and implement ways for school improvement. There is little evidence, however, on how a school counseling background can impact these factors. Therefore, it is beneficial and meaningful to understand these experiences. By doing so, more knowledge surrounding these influences is gained. Findings from this study may help in understanding these experiences so that more knowledge and information regarding school principals with a school counseling background can be conveyed.

Definition of Key Terms

Collaboration – The process of working closely together with multiple individuals or groups to help students achieve success (Ishimaru, 2019).

Ethical and equitable responsibility – Enacting in ways that are intended to promote student success for all students.

Instructional leader – A person who has a vast knowledge of the curriculum, works to ensure concepts being taught are being successfully presented to all students, and provides constructive feedback (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Professional working relationships – Relationships amongst coworkers and stakeholders that are focused on positive aspects and supporting student success.

Purpose and focus oriented – Ensuring that all operations, decisions, and actions are aligned with a school's mission and vision (Gurley et al., 2015).

School improvement – Analyzing and utilizing data for the purpose of improvement that will aid in student success.

Organization of the study

Chapter one introduces the research study exploring the lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background. I introduced the study and research problem, the purpose, research questions, research design, conceptual framework, assumptions, limitations, significance, and definitions of key terms. Following this, Chapter 2 contains a literature review related to school principals and school principals, a comparative analysis of the ASCA Standards, PSELs, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership, and leadership skills of school counselors along with existing research. Chapter 3 provides an extensive view of the methodology, while Chapter 4 consists of a summary of the results from the data collection and analysis.

The last chapter, Chapter 5, consists of the overall summary and discussion of the findings along with future research recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research indicates leadership skills of school counselors are similar to those of school principals. There is, however, little research dedicated to school principals with school counseling backgrounds. This chapter reviews literature pertaining to the development of school principals and the leadership skills of both school principals and school counselors. Through the reviewing of a vast assortment of academic books, dissertations, journal articles, studies, and scholarly papers, this chapter focuses on the pathway to becoming a school principal, roles of school principals and school counselors, principal-counselor relationships, American School Counselor Association Standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, Alabama Standards for School Leadership, and leadership skills of school counselors.

Purpose of the Study

There is scant literature regarding the lived experiences of school principals who have a background in school counseling. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals who have a school counseling background. In particular, how these school principals who have a school counseling background relate to being purpose and focus oriented, enact ethical and equitable responsibility, serve as instructional leaders, collaborate and interact with the school community and stakeholders, create and maintain professional working relationships, and prioritize school improvement.

Principal Career Pathway

School counselors are a large piece of the puzzle when it comes to future school principal development. Therefore, it is important to examine the literature related to school principals, school counselors, and school leadership. Exemplary school counselors have many leadership skills and characteristics (ASCA, 2025a; Gibson et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015; Young & Dollarhide, 2017). These skills and characteristics are very similar to those of a school principal.

In 2025, the Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-3-.34 was changed. This change allows school counselors to be eligible for school administrative positions quicker than in years past, thus enlarging the candidate pool for future school administrators. School counselors seeking an administrative position in the school setting must now document a minimum of four full years or eight semesters of employment that is full-time in a P-12 school setting. They must also obtain a written recommendation from their current superintendent (ALSDE, 2025). This change marks a great turning point in recognizing and honoring the leadership skills and roles of school counselors. As a result of this change, career paths for school counselors who have a desire to become school administrators is now more easily attainable.

Research data suggests that many school principals do not originally aspire to become a school administrator when beginning their educational career (Cieminski, 2018; Ummanel et al., 2016). One research study that analyzed the career paths of school principals stated that none of the five participants had intentions to become a school administrator when beginning their journey in education (Ummanel et al., 2016). The participants had a desire to move to school administration after being influenced by a colleague or family member, after having a desire for change, and after believing they

could perform better than a current or previous administrator they worked with (Ummanel et al., 2016). Another research study conducted by Amie B. Cieminski in 2018 revealed similar findings in regards to individuals not originally planning to have a career in school administration. This study also revealed that some participants were a product of succession planning, chose to move to administration after being influenced, or wanted to further their career path (Cieminski, 2018).

There is growing evidence to suggest that the candidate pool for future school principals is shrinking quickly (Cieminski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2020; Sabina & Colwell, 2018). Researchers suggest that the shrinking candidate pool is largely due to job factors such as increased responsibility and accountability, lack of support, low compensation, and demanding schedules (Cieminski, 2018). Ritchie (2020) notes the following:

Because the demands placed on the leadership have impacted the number of individuals qualified or prepared to lead a school or school system, boards and search committees are now competing for the same leaders from a limited pool of candidates. (p. 34)

Many schools and districts have had to quickly look for solutions to help in solving this crisis of a lower candidate pool.

While the lack of exemplary school principal candidates can be of great concern, researchers suggest that there has been a recent trend in education, succession planning (Fusarelli et al., 2018). Succession planning is described as a strategic action plan during which there is a search for future potential leaders. Those leaders are identified, and there is time, energy, and resources utilized to help in preparing those

targeted individuals for a future leadership role (Fink, 2010). Through succession planning in the educational setting, future school principals can be identified and trained. With the growing demands placed on school administrators, training future school principals is vital for not only their success, but also the success of the school (Fusarelli et al., 2018). “As our understanding of the significance of administrative leadership grows, we are more aware that recruiting, developing, supporting, and retaining quality leaders are vital to both local and national reform movements” (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012, p. 788). The process of succession planning arguably creates the most effortless transition from one school principal to the next (Ritchie, 2020).

Since the selection process of a school principal can drastically vary from one school system to another, succession planning can help in finding qualified candidates (Bush, 2022). According to a study conducted by Parfitt and Rose in 2020, there are three elements of effective succession planning. These are the identification process, developing and mentoring, and retention (Parfitt & Rose, 2020). When there is identification of future candidates who could potentially be successful and exemplary in a school administrative position, the process of succession planning begins (Parfitt & Rose, 2020).

There is a vast amount of research declaring mentoring is important for success in the school principal role (Fusarelli et al., 2018; Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Parfitt & Rose, 2020; Ritchie, 2020). “A change in leadership is often the most significant change in the life of a school” (Ritchie, 2020, p. 33). It is crucial, therefore, that school principals and other administrators have a strong mentor to aid in the transition process. By utilizing succession planning, the process of mentoring a future school principal can begin early

on so that a school or school district can “develop their next generation of leaders” (Fusarelli et al., 2018, p. 289). This allows for a smoother transition for all school stakeholders, students, and parents.

Through the concept of mentoring, school principals who were previously school counselors learn how to continue leading in an environment conducive to experiencing success. There are benefits of mentoring during the succession planning process. In a study conducted by Parfitt and Rose in 2020, participants revealed that one benefit included establishing relationships that had great trust. “Trust is the foundation for high-quality mentoring opportunities, and mentoring is a critical component to succession planning” (Parfitt & Rose, 2020, p. 279). When there is a strong level of trust, a vast amount of learning occurs. Both the mentor and the mentee are more likely to be open and honest about experiences within their job setting. By having a positive mentoring relationship and establishing trust, a future leader can be better prepared (Parfitt & Rose, 2020).

Overview of the School Principal

Role of the Exemplary School Principal

School principals are one of the most important and influential factors surrounding the success of a school. “The school principal is responsible for transmitting mission, vision, and values in and out the school, with a stronger, clearer emphasis for the success and well-being of students” (Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019, p. 53). General roles and responsibilities of a school principal include aspects related to instructional leadership, school safety, public relations, budgeting, creating a positive learning environment, supporting students and faculty, and collaborating with families

(Chan et al., 2019). An effective school principal is expected to adhere to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) also. These ten standards are “student-centric, outlining foundational principles of leadership to guide the practice of educational leaders so they can move the needle on student learning and achieve more equitable outcomes” (NPBEA, 2015).

A quantitative research study was conducted to gather school principals’ perceptions of their roles and responsibilities (Chan et al., 2019). The study revealed that principals feel a major responsibility of theirs is to provide a safe and supporting environment that is comfortable for all students to learn academically, emotionally, and socially. Major fulfillments for principals come from watching students grow and mature, being able to spend meaningful time with students and faculty, and helping teachers succeed. Principals also indicated major challenges consisted of maintaining a budget, providing constructive criticism when completing observations of teachers while trying to keep an encouraging environment, and meeting targets for Academic Yearly Progress.

Because school principals are the backbone of school improvement, roles and responsibilities are constantly changing (Reid, 2020). The role of a school principal is becoming more complex due to more policies being mandated and more work related demands on school principals. For instance, school safety has been an area of increased concern recently. Researchers have found that principals are spending more and more time working to enhance safety and security within a school. “Safety and security is currently and has always been a focal point for school principals, given the proliferation of school shootings across the United States, this focus is even more enhanced” (Reid, 2020, p. 257).

Another area in which school principal roles are evolving is the area of mental and emotional health (Reid, 2020). School principals indicate that they are spending more time supporting teacher and student mental health and well-being. It is predicted that this aspect of supporting mental health will continue to grow as demands to perform well are increased for both students and teachers.

Characteristics of the Exemplary School Principal

There is a great amount of literature related to the characteristics effective school principals exhibit. The backbone characteristic of an effective school principal is striving to maintain the vision and mission of a school while also creating a positive school culture. The very first PSEL Standard is Mission, Vision, and Core Values. It states, “Effective instructional leaders develop, advocate for, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 9). By developing, advocating, and enacting a school’s mission, vision, and core values, an effective school principal is actively working to promote a positive school culture. When you have a positive school culture, an environment that is safe, supportive, and welcoming to learning is produced (Barkman, 2015). A positive school culture helps others feel valued, which in turn helps in creating positive relationships.

Effective school principals focus on instruction and people (Barkman, 2015). As stated in Standard 7 of PSEL, “Effective instructional leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 15). Effective school principals work to set clear goals for faculty members. In collaboration with teachers and other faculty

members, they also work to set achievable goals for students. An effective school principal helps with the action steps needed to achieve the goals. They also communicate the goals with stakeholders, support implementation steps, such as professional development, needed to achieve the goals, and help in monitoring the progress of the goals. Effective school principals stay up to date with research and trends so that they can continuously support improvement and student learning while striving to reach the goals (Barkman, 2015).

By following Standard 10: School Improvement of the PSEL standards, an effective school principal is continuously looking for ways to promote improvement related to a student's academic success and well-being (NPBEA, 2015, p. 15). They identify the need for improvement and develop action steps to help in realigning tasks for achieving progress and improvement. "Top principals track the progress of all students in relation to student goals and outcomes" (Barkman, 2015, p. 15). Strategies to track the progress include developing assessment strategies, analyzing student data, and meeting with faculty and staff. Effective school principals work to improve when progress is not being met.

An effective school principal has many tasks to accomplish constantly. Therefore, managing time is of the utmost importance (Barkman, 2015). An effective school principal should have a clear understanding of priority tasks and be able to delegate tasks when able. Alongside managing time appropriately, being an active listener is crucial to being an effective school principal (Barkman, 2015). Taking the time to hear the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of others builds strong professional relationships and

also solidifies commitment from the faculty and staff. Advocating for school employees also helps to build strong professional relationships and solidify commitment.

Strong communication skills are a key characteristic of an effective school principal (Barkman, 2015). A study conducted by Jacob Easley II in 2008 states that “teachers value and long for meaningful dialogues with principal” (Easley, 2008, p. 33). Communication and conversations keep teachers and other faculty and staff informed and included. Communication with parents and other school stakeholders is also important. When communication is consistent, exemplary school principals are promoting collaboration, community, and positive working relationships (Easley, 2008). By communicating regularly, a cohesive school climate will be solidified.

“Working in a school and with diverse people and opinions demands professionalism from the leader” (Barkman, 2015, p. 16). Acting in a professional way includes treating others with respect, leading by example, and modeling positive behavior. By basing tough decisions on what is considered right by a school’s mission and vision, a school principal is exhibiting a key characteristic of effectiveness (Barkman, 2015).

Many schools require teachers to self-reflect at the end of each school year. Alongside this, many schools have teacher observation procedures in place. Because one key characteristic of an effective school principal is leading by example, school principals also need to take time to self-reflect (Barkman, 2015). Everyone makes mistakes. Not all decisions are the best ones. During times such as this and also during times of positive decision making, self-reflection helps an effective principal stay

accountable and maintain high expectations. Effective school principals also “hold themselves accountable by opening themselves up to criticism” (Barkman, 2015, p. 17).

One research study identified twenty-nine themes participants indicated were effective personality traits of school principals (Schulte et al., 2010). The following traits were identified by Schulte et al. (2010):

...leader, communication, caring, understanding, knowledgeable, fair, works well with others, listening, service, organized, disciplinarian, good attitude, patience, respectful, helping, open-mindedness, motivating, professional, flexible, being visible, honest, good role model, responsible, builds relationships, involving, consistent, friendly, focus on schools, experience in the classrooms (Schulte et al., 2010, p. 180-181).

The researchers in this study took the above twenty-nine characteristics and formed five meta-themes. These are (1) responsible and supportive leader, (2) being impartial, (3) straightforward, task-oriented, and communicative, (4) professional and facilitator, and (5) collaborative, organized, and inclusive role model (Schulte et al., 2010). “Consistency is present between the results of this study and the extant literature. These respondents agreed that effective leadership was an important attribute for a principal to possess. They highly endorsed themes that could be related to effective leadership” (Schulte, p. 19-20, 2010). Exhibiting the above mentioned personality traits and upholding the themes are strongly indicative of an individual possessing what it takes to be an exemplary and effective school principal.

Existing Literature

While there is scant literature surrounding school principals with school counseling backgrounds, one study conducted on the impact of counseling backgrounds for administrators in higher level education researched benefits, hindrances, preparation, gains, and losses of participants (Regan, 1998). Results revealed that opportunities for influencing and leading were benefits (Regan, 1998). In another research study, school superintendents with a counseling background were interviewed and surveyed (Wojeski, 2011). Responses regarding benefits of a counseling background included interpersonal skills and the ability to have interaction with parents and other stakeholders (Wojeski, 2011).

Knowing and understanding the characteristics of empathy was reported as a huge positive impact of having a counseling background (Regan, 1998). "One former AHEAD officer used empathy as an essential element of communications when conducting discipline, especially when the outcome was serious" (Regan, 1998, p. 4). Other positive characteristics were indicated to help in conflict resolution, active listening, and relationship skills (Regan, 1998). A major strength of those interviewed through the study conducted by Wojeski was determined to be, once again, empathy and compassion (Wojeski, 2011).

Hindrances included long hours and a feeling of loneliness (Regan, 1998). One negative revealed during the research was that counselors tend to be an advocate for all people. While this is great for a counseling position, "as an administrator you can still be an advocate for people but you must have a vision, the directiveness and firmness to stand by your decisions" (Regan, 1998, p. 5). Drawbacks found during the Wojeski

research study included no time as an instructional leader for some people and having to become stricter than when previously a counselor (Wojeski, 2011). Participants also stated that they did find they had to take some time becoming familiar with the financial aspects of educational leadership once becoming an administrator (Wojeski, 2011).

While there are drawbacks, there are clear advantages of administrators with a counseling background. “People skills, listening ability, and group process knowledge are requisite staples of a good administrator, and these skills are basic elements of counseling” (Regan, 1998, p. 6). All participants in the study conducted by Wojeski (2011) indicated that their counseling skills were valuable and easily transferable to their school leadership position as these counseling skills were utilized oftentimes throughout the day as a school leader. Per one recommendation of this study, boards of education and selection committees need to give adequate considerations to individuals with a school counseling background who desire a role in a school leadership position (Wojeski, 2011).

Overview of the School Counselor

Role of the School Counselor

The American School Counselor Association states that school counselors are responsible for boosting student success through achievement strategies, ensuring equitable learning conditions for all students, helping students grow socially and emotionally, and planning for life after secondary school (American School Counselor Association, 2025a). Exactly how these responsibilities are carried out on a day to day basis varies differently for each school and school counselor (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). Because of this and an ever-changing role of the school counselor due to

societal changes, a school counselor's identity often lacks clarity and clear definition (Atici, 2014; Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Tygret et al., 2020, Windham & Tuttle, 2023; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012).

Research suggests that the responsibilities of a school counselor are often mandated by the school principal (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). Consequently, perceptions of the school counselor role varies differently amongst school principals and other administrators. Therefore, researchers find that there are often conflicting opinions and understandings of the role of the school counselor (Waalkes et al., 2018; Windham & Tuttle, 2023; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). While school principals do believe that the duties of a school counselor should be aligned with those recommended in the ASCA National Model, many school principals are largely unfamiliar with the model (ASCA, 2025b; Windham & Tuttle, 2023; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial that school counselors advocate for themselves regarding their roles and job duties (Waalkes et al., 2018)

In a quantitative research study conducted by Zalquett and Chambers (2012), 190 surveys from middle school principals were returned to gather information about the perceptions of the role of a middle school counselor. Overall findings revealed that 91% of the surveys returned indicated a highly satisfied job performance by the school counselor (Zalaquett & Chambers, 2012). However, there were mixed results regarding what a school principal believes a school counselor's priorities should be. Most agreed that responsibilities such as individual and small group counseling, academic advising, classroom guidance, and consulting with parents, teachers, and administrators were a priority (Zalaquett & Chambers, 2012). Responsibilities such as student registration and

standardized testing, however, all received conflicting results regarding those as job responsibilities of the school counselor (Zalaquett & Chambers, 2012).

A similar quantitative study conducted by Windham and Tuttle (2023) aimed to investigate how a school counselor views their own role versus how a school administrator views the school counselor role. Thirty participants completed the study, twenty-five of which were school counselors and five of which were school administrators (Windham & Tuttle, 2023). Both school counselors and administrators all agreed that school counselors should place priority on providing both individual and small group counseling services to the students (Windham & Tuttle, 2023). School counselors want to engage less in activities such as responding to health issues, coordinating standardized testing, and performing duties such as hallway, bus, and cafeteria duty (Windham & Tuttle, 2023). The study determined that administrators wish school counselors would engage in testing coordination more frequently while also rarely responding to health issues or helping with shared duties (Windham & Tuttle, 2023). It was also found that student records, new student data, grade calculations, and coordination of tier learning was deemed appropriate by administrators but found inappropriate by school counselors (Windham & Tuttle, 2023). An overarching conclusion of this study was the need for school administrators to better understand the ASCA National Model (Winham & Tuttle, 2023) and that proper training on this model could greatly help.

Tangible duties of school counselors include creating and implementing a school counseling program, which includes meeting with students individually as needed and in small group settings as needed (ASCA, 2025a). The American School Counseling

Association says that 80% or more of a school counselor's time on the job should revolve around direct and indirect services for students (ASCA, 2025a). Direct services include individual counseling sessions, small group session, and classroom lessons. Indirect services include collaborating and consulting with teachers and parents, serving on supporting committees and teams, and advocating for students (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). Helping students close learning gaps and resolving issues are two of the most important duties of a school counselor (Young & Dollarhide; 2017). This falls in the direct services category of a school counselor.

Advocacy is a huge job responsibility of the school counselor. School counselors are to always advocate for all students' success, both emotionally and academically (ASCA, 2025a; Young & Bryan, 2015). They should also support and defend decisions that will help a school achieve its mission and vision (Young & Bryan, 2015). Emphasis should also be placed on the role of advocating for the school counseling program and duties of a school counselor (Waalkes et al., 2018). There are numerous benefits to advocating for the school counseling program and professional duties. It can positively impact how a school principal views and supports the school counseling program. Strong advocacy by the school counselor can also impact how the principal chooses to allocate a counselor's time, resources, and duties. It also improves the professional relationship between the school counselor and school principal (Waalkes et al., 2018).

Even though the roles and duties of a school principal are much more explicit than the roles of a school counselor, a school counselor still has a crucial job within the school. "Principals desire school counselors who are communicative, systemic in their work, student-focused, and able to take on leadership roles in the school" (Dollarhide et

al., 2007, p. 363) School counselors and school principals should both prioritize student success within a school (Dollarhide et al., 2007). While the roles of each position look different, each role has a common expectation to ensure that a student is set up for positive achievement. Therefore, it is crucial that a school counselor and a school principal have a positive working relationship.

Positive Professional Principal and Counselor Relationship

“To be successful, leadership strategies are based on understanding the relationships between principals and counselors” (Dollarhide et al., 2007, p. 360). While each professional role looks different, both have expectations that their roles highly value students and their success. Research typically finds that in order for a principal to support the role of a school counselor and also rely on this person to add value to a school culture and community, a positive principal-counselor relationship is vital (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Fontanez, 2023; Tygret et al., 2020). “The close partnership between school counselors and principals suggests that their work together can influence student learning and school culture” (Fontanez, 2023, p. v).

Because school principals and school counselors are essential positions in a school, they should collaborate with each other often and in positive ways (Tygret et al., 2020). This will ensure a strongly functioning school. It is said that the first step in establishing a positive relationship is through trust and understanding of each other’s role. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that suggests many do not understand the role of a school counselor (Atici, 2014; Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Tygret et al., 2020, Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012).

One research study examined the qualities in the school principal-school counselor professional relationship (Fontanez, 2023). Results revealed the following three themes: the roles of a school counselor and a school principal, the environment and physical office location for both professionals, and the formed partnership between the two. "Numerous participants described the importance of both school counselors and principals knowing the roles defined for each position and how both contributed to the success of the partnership between school counselors and school principals" (Fontanez, 2023, p. 75). Without role understanding, there is ground for mistrust, miscommunication, and an overall poor environment. All of this can lead to a negative school culture. When both school counselors and school principals have a clear understanding of each other's roles, they are more likely to value and respect each other (Fontanez, 2023).

Interestingly, this study analyzed the location of the counselor's office in relation to the principal's office (Fontanez, 2023). It was revealed that some thought having the counselor's office close to the principal's office would connect them to discipline, which is not a counselor's role. Others believed that the closeness of the offices would aid in effective communication and enhance the positive relationship needed for success. Because of these potentially positive and negative factors, it is important that school principals and school counselors communicate regarding the location of their offices and also discuss what parameters each will have regarding the location (Fontanez, 2023).

Both role clarification and location of offices are important themes within the Fontanez study (Fontanez, 2023). Without these two themes, the third theme of a

paired partnership could not happen. A principal needs to understand the role of the school counselor. The location of the offices should be close, while not necessarily beside each other. Both of these greatly impact the formation of a positive partnership. Literature clearly states that the relationship between school counselor and school principal is very important and can impact student success and school culture (Fontanez, 2023; Froeschle & Nix, 2009; Tygret et al., 2020). A positive relationship allows for open communication and creates a united approach to working with students, parents, faculty, staff, and other school stakeholders. Without this positive relationship, mistrust can happen along with a negative work environment and a lack of student success (Fontanez, 2023).

School principals and school counselors should work together and develop a shared understanding of each other's roles so that they can form a positive and collaborative professional relationship (Tygret et al., 2020). This begins the creation of a team that can continue to work together to improve and sustain a school. By modeling positive relationships, school principals and school counselors are also setting the standard for all personnel employed by a school, for students, and for parents (Tygret et al., 2020).

In a study conducted by Froeschle and Nix (2009), results revealed that teamwork was "viewed as a crucial element in school and student success" (p. 10). Participants in this study, which was focused on examining the perceptions of effective school counselors, stated that this effectiveness was caused because of the school principal and counselor relationship. One teacher stated that their principal listens to their school counselor's ideas, while another teacher talked about how valuable it was

to them as a teacher that their counselor and principal talked every day. This study highly suggests that school counselors serve as important school leaders. Through a school counselor's leadership, teachers feel supported, and a better climate is created for students and faculty (Froeschle & Nix, 2009).

Comparative Analysis of ASCA, PSEL, and ASSL Standards

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Professional Standards & Competencies were adopted in 2007 and revised as recently as 2025 (ASCA, 2025a). These standards and competencies “outline the mindsets and behaviors school counselors need to meet the rigorous demands of the school counseling profession and the needs of Pre-K-12 students” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 1). School counselors use these standards and competencies as a guide in establishing and maintaining a school counseling program that helps students thrive in a school setting, plan for future careers, and develop socially and emotionally.

Formerly known as the ISLLC Standards, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) was adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in 2015 (NPBEA, 2015). Prior to the NPBEA assuming leadership over the standards, The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) held the framework for policy related to educational leadership in forty-five states and the District of Columbia. In recent years, the professionals in the field of educational leadership “have a better understanding of how and in what ways effective leadership contributes to student achievement” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 1). Because the educational leadership profession has grown and continues to change significantly, a revamping of the standards was necessary in order to continue guiding educational leaders in a

productive direction that will positively benefit students. The PSEL standards are widely considered a strong guiding force for meeting opportunities and challenges within a school setting.

The Alabama Standards for School Leadership were created through the Alabama Principal Leadership Framework, which strives to support, guide, and enable school leaders to enhance the success of all students (Alabama State Department of Education [ALSDE], 2024). These standards are organized around five domains that reflect principal effectiveness. They are designed to define the “nature, quality of work, and expectations that current research and best practices indicate are critical to student learning and other positive school outcomes” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 4).

The American School Counselor Association Standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership are all very closely aligned, indicating that school counselors and other school leadership positions hold high standards and beliefs. The chart below is a comparison of the three standards and their alignment with each other. Further details and an in depth comparison can be found below the chart. The ASCA Standards & Competencies are composed of seven mindsets (M), indicating what school counselors should believe, and twenty-four behaviors (B), representing the upholding of standards related to the “design, implementation, and assessment of a school” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). These behaviors are divided into three categories: Professional Foundation (PF), Direct and Indirect Student Services (SS), and Planning and Assessment (PA). The Professional Foundation category are essential skills that are at the forefront of a school counselor’s career. Direct and Indirect Student Services are those that are provided directly to students or

indirectly to students with the help of teachers, administrators, families, community organizations, and other school staff or stakeholders. Planning and assessment are items essential to the success of the school counseling program. This includes assessment, analyzation, implementation, and reflection (ASCA, 2025a).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Standards

Guiding Principles	ASCA Standards	PSEL Standards	Alabama Standards for School Leadership
Purpose and Focus Oriented	B-PA 1	Standard 1	Visionary Leadership
Ethical and Equitable Responsibility	B-PF 2, B-PF 3, B-PF 6	Standard 2, Standard 3	Managerial and Operational Leadership
Instructional Leadership	B-SS 1, B-SS 2, B-SS 3, B-PF 1, B-PF 4, B-PF 5, B-PF 7, B-PF 8, B-PF 9	Standard 4, Standard 5	Instructional Leadership
Collaboration and Interaction with School Community and Stakeholders	B-SS 4, B-SS 5 B-SS 6	Standard 8	Managerial and Operational Leadership
Professional Working Relationships	B-PA 7, B-PA 8	Standard 6, Standard 7	Relational Leadership
Continuous Improvement	B-PA 2, B-PA 3, B-PA 4 B-PA 5, B-PA 6, B-PA 9	Standard 9, Standard 10	Innovative Leadership

*This table provides a visual comparison of the guiding principles and which ASCA and PSEL standards , and the Alabama Standards for School Leadership are being met.

Purpose and Focus Oriented

ASCA standard B-PA 1 states “Create school counseling program beliefs, vision and mission statements aligned with the school district” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). The sub statements within this standard indicate that a school counselor will examine personal, school, district, and state statements about student success while also examining the school’s vision and mission. They will also uphold creating a mission statement for the counseling services that are aligned directly with the school, district, and state mission and beliefs.

PSEL Standard 1 states “Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 9). Effective school leaders will work to develop a mission statement for a school that will encourage student success and well-being. They will also promote the mission statement, develop a vision statement, and develop action steps for achieving the vision of a school (NPBEA, 2015).

Standard 1 for the Alabama Standards for School Leadership is Visionary Leadership. It states that “Effective visionary leaders facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a shared vision that guides the learning of every student” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 4). This standard tells us that an effective school leader should keep the needs of all students in mind while creating with others a shared vision and improvement plan. School leaders should be committed to the school’s vision and its improvement plan. Therefore, they should consistently analyze data to monitor progress and make adjustments as needed (ALSDE, 2024).

The above standards are all closely aligned because they both promote the clear and vital focus of strong mission and vision statements, both of which are geared towards student achievement and well-being. In a 2009 study conducted by Craft et al., results revealed mission statements can influence vision and culture along with student performance. “Mission statements represent organizational values and provide direction” (Craft et al., 2009, p. 8). These mission and vision statements should be the foundation of all decision making within a school.

Implementing a mission statement is putting into practice the words written on a piece of paper (Craft et al., 2009). A strong and clearly visible mission statement along with a purposeful vision statement that are both at the center of implementation will result in a positive environment (Craft et al., 2009). It is crucial, therefore, that both school principals and school counselors adhere to staying mission and vision oriented.

Ethical and Equitable Responsibility

“In collaboration with principals and other leadership team members, professional school counselors have ethical responsibilities in promoting culturally competent school environments” (Nelson & Bustamante, 2009, p. 1). There are three ASCA standards that are related to school counselors having great ethical and equitable responsibility. Standard B-PF 2 says school counselors are to “Demonstrate understanding of educational systems, legal issues, policies, research and trends in education” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). This entails school counselors explaining organizational structure and influences on education practices, explaining theories and trends in education, and explaining the process of developing policies. School counselors need to be able to explain the history of school counseling and the nature of counseling in schools as well

as how school counseling and other areas of counseling are related. School counselors should collaborate with other student service providers, such as the school nurse and school psychologist, to best support student success. All of these are crucial to helping maintain an equitable environment for all students (ASCA, 2025a). When school counselors are not able to explain policies, procedures, trends, theories, etc, then they cannot advocate for all students in the same manner. Standard B-PF 3 indicates that school counselors will “Apply legal and ethical principles of the school counseling profession” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). ASCA has an entire set of standards dedicated specifically to practicing ethical principles, the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors. School counselors must adhere to legal responsibilities and maintain confidentiality when working with students. They need to model ethical behavior and aid in solving ethical dilemmas in accordance with the ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors. Professional development helps school counselors stay informed on legal and ethical matters. ASCA standard B-PF 6 says school counselors should “Demonstrate understanding of the impact of cultural, social and environmental influences on student success and opportunities” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). Subsets within this specific standard inform us that school counselors are responsible for advocating for all students, regardless of their cultural or socioeconomic background. They should also collaborate with administrators, faculty, and other staff members to ensure that all curriculums and instruction are inclusive (ASCA, 2025a). By collaborating with school stakeholders and advocating for all students, school counselors are supporting an inclusive school culture.

PSEL Standard 2 states “Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 10) Educational leaders are to have a student-centered approach when making ethical decisions. Effective educational leaders are to model ethical behavior and provide moral direction for a school. PSEL Standard 3 states “Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 11). In the same realm as the ASCA standards, the PSEL standards strive to ensure that all students are able to learn and succeed in an inclusive environment. Leaders must ensure that policies are in place and abided by to ensure equitable and respectful treatment, provide resources necessary for success, and exhibit an understanding of each student’s culture and background. A school leader is responsible for creating a culture that is inclusive and welcoming for all students. (NPBEA, 2015).

The Alabama Standards for School Leadership Standard 3 is Managerial and Operational Leadership (ALSDE, 2024). It states, “Effective managerial leaders strategically oversee school operations, staff, and resources to foster a safe and productive school community” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 5). Substandard 3d relates to ethical and equitable responsibilities. It states that an effective school leader should “model and communicate high expectations, clear guidelines, and systematic procedures in alignment with the state’s code of ethics for educators” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 5).

School principals and school counselors are two of the most physically visible jobs in a school. Because of this, they have great influence. When school principals and

school counselors adhere to their standards and work together to create and support an atmosphere that accepts all students, a positive school culture and learning environment is created (Nelson & Bustamante, 2009). “Although a culture is a natural by-product of people working in close proximity, it can be a positive or negative influence on school’s effectiveness. An effective leader builds a culture that positively influences teachers, who, in turn, positively influences students.” (Marzano et al., 2005, pg. 47). Both school principals and school counselors have a responsibility to create a school culture that is equitable for all students. By adhering to ethical guidelines, modeling strong positive ethical behavior, and supporting equitable learning opportunities for all students, school counselors and school principals are creating the inclusive school culture supportive of student achievement and well-being.

Instructional Leadership

The ASCA Standards, PSELs, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership emphasize the importance of developing curriculums that help students grow and succeed (ALSDE, 2024; ASCA, 2025a; NPBEA, 2015). There are nine ASCA standards related to instructional leadership. Standard B-SS 1 states school counselors should “Design and implement instruction aligned to ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success in large-group, classroom, small-group and individual settings” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). Standard B-SS 2 states they will “Provide appraisal and advisement in large-group, classroom, small-group and individual settings” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). ASCA standard B-SS 3 expresses that school counselors are to “Provide short-term counseling in small-group and individual settings” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2).

Standard B-PF 1 says school counselors will “Apply developmental, learning, counseling and education theories” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). Human development theories, learning theories, evidence-based counseling theories and techniques, and career development theories are all crucial to use when planning and implementing plans for student success. School counselors need to be cognizant of these theories and techniques so that they can appropriately apply them in individual, small-group, large-group, and classroom settings. By utilizing these theories and techniques, school counselors can help students succeed academically, develop mentally and socially, and plan for postsecondary life (ASCA, 2025a). Next, standard B-PF 4 indicates school counselors will “Apply school counseling professional standards and competencies” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 3). Similar to the first standard mentioned, school counselors need to stay up to date on counseling research and best practices. A great way to do this is by promoting professional growth and attending professional development (ASCA, 2025a). Standard B-PF 5 expects that school counselors will “Use ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success to inform the implementation of a school counseling program” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). This standard suggests that school counselors should greatly utilize the ASCA Student Standards when planning goals, lessons, meetings, and other counseling related needs (ASCA, 2025a). The standard B-PF 7 indicates school counselors should “Demonstrate leadership through the development and implementation of a school counseling program” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). A vital aspect of a school counseling job is the creation and implementation of an effective school counseling program that aligns with the ASCA National Model. With this, school counselors will also use their leadership skills to guide changes needed for

school counseling programs. They will serve as leaders in the school and in the community, modeling the way in leadership using qualities and skills of effective leaders (ASCA, 2025a). Standard B-PF 8 indicates they will “Demonstrate advocacy for a school counseling program” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). Keeping students’ best interests in mind, school counselors will advocate for school policies that support student success and well-being. They will help explain and justify appropriate activities and actions while also explaining and justifying the discontinuation of activities and actions that are not beneficial (ASCA, 2025a). Lastly, standard B-PF 9 says school counselors will “Create systemic change through the implementation of a school counseling program” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). School counselors will work to develop and implement action plans that address changes needed to better support students. They will help in creating an environment that promotes student success (ASCA, 2025a).

PSEL Standard 4 states “Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 12). Through this standard, effective educational leaders implement curriculums, instructions, and assessments that promote the school’s mission and vision, align with academic standards, are inclusive for all students, and set high expectations for learning. They also ensure that curriculums, instructions, and assessments are grade level appropriate and will aid in child development while attending to student needs. Effective educational leaders will support effective technology integration when applicable (NPBEA, 2015). PSEL Standard 5 states “Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the

academic success and well-being of each student” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 13). In order for students to learn and succeed, they need an environment that is safe and supportive. It is vital that effective educational leaders create and maintain an environment that is a place where all students can learn, be respected, be loved, and be encouraged (NPBEA, 2015).

The Alabama Standards for School Leadership standard 2 is Instructional Leadership. It states, “Effective instructional leaders ensure intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curricula, instruction, and assessment while facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning to drive growth and achievement for all students” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 4). Subsets within this standard revolve around supporting staff in the implementation of a curriculum, through instruction, and assessments. Effective school leaders should ensure that these curriculums, instructions, and assessments challenge students and are aligned with state standards. Maintaining a high expectation for staff and students, observing classrooms, and ensuring a culture inclusive to learning are all important for an effective school leader (ALSDE, 2024).

School counselors and school leaders are expected to develop, implement, and support curriculums that develop and support student success and well-being (ALSDE, 2024; ASCA, 2025; NPBEA, 2015). The close alignment of the above mentioned standards signify the importance of prioritizing curriculums, instructions, and assessments that will support students in many areas. A school’s success is dependent upon the extent to which students are able to engage in learning that truly leads to student achievement (Graf & Yavuz, 2023). “To that effect, both academic and school counseling curricula should be structured in a way that strikes a balance between

academic and non-academic foci designed to meet the needs of all students” (Graf & Yavuz, 2023, p.3-4). As indicated in the ASCA Standards, PSELs, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership, both school counselors and school principals play an essential role in curriculum development and implementation.

Collaboration and Engagement with School Community

The essence of community is encouraging everyone to be on the same page and moving everyone in the same direction. Community brings people together and provides a place where they can express similar ideas, values, and opinions, and where they can be heard by members of their team. Community allows people to accomplish great things. It enables people to work hand in hand in pursuit of a shared vision that supports the common good. Through community, people can promote the greater good of everyone in the group. (Northouse, 2021, pg. 256)

The ASCA Standards and PSEL Standards emphasize the importance of community environments both inside and outside of school and the importance of family collaboration (ASCA, 2025a; NPBEA, 2015).

ASCA Standard B-SS 4 states school counselors are to “Make referrals to appropriate school and community resources” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). Within this is the commitment that school counselors will keep a list of referral resources that align with school policies and communicate when counseling services are needed outside of the scope which school counseling can provide. Standard B-SS 5 says school counselors will “Consult to support student achievement and success” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). This standard tells us that school counselors will maintain student information gathered from families and school faculty/staff to aid in developing strategies for student success.

They will also share strategies that can help support students with teachers, other faculty and staff, families, and community organizations, when applicable. A vital component of achieving this standard is providing training and workshops for faculty/staff, families, and community stakeholders on subjects that will support student achievement and well-being (ASCA, 2025a). The standard B-SS 6 declares school counselors should “Collaborate with families, teachers, administrators, other school staff and education stakeholders for student achievement and success” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). School counselors should partner with others to advocate for student achievement, inclusive educational opportunities, and support in times of a crisis (ASCA, 2025a).

Similarly, PSEL Standard 8 states “Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 16). Effective educational leaders are responsible for welcoming families and community stakeholders into the school while also creating and encouraging positive relationships with these individuals and groups so that the school can be an impactful resource in the community. Advocating for the school and student needs outside of the school is a vital component of this standard. Of utmost importance, an effective educational leader needs to understand the community’s culture and available resources so that they can best support student achievement and improvement (NPBEA, 2015).

The Alabama Standards for School Leadership Standard 3 is Managerial and Operational Leadership (ALSDE, 2024). It states that “Effective managerial leaders strategically oversee school operations, staff, and resources to foster a safe and productive school community” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 5). Sub standards indicate that an

effective school leader is responsible for providing an environment that is functional, safe, and clean. They are also responsible for the recruitment, hiring, and retention of faculty and staff that will help in ensuring all students have an opportunity to learn and succeed. Effective leaders should support their faculty and staff with professional development opportunities, communicate expectations and guidelines, and model the way for positive behavior. They are also to oversee resources needed in order to support the goals of a school and success of students (ALSDE, 2024).

Standard 4 of the Alabama Standards for School Leadership is Relational Leadership. “Effective relational leaders cultivate a welcoming, supportive, and collaborative learning environment for all students, staff, families, and the community” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 5). An effective school leader can develop trust and enhance the support of students and their success through the creation of a school environment that promotes collaboration amongst all students, staff, families, and community members (ALSDE, 2024).

“Collaborative efforts among families, schools, and communities hold much promise for improving the success of young people” (Ishimaru, 2019, p. 351). It is evident that the ASCA Standards, PSELs, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership support student achievement and improvement through collaboration and engagement with a school community. Through this collaboration and engagement, parents can be more involved and be empowered to advocate for their children (Ishimaru, 2019). Community organizations can become connected to a school, which helps both parties grow, understand each other’s goals, and support each other in attaining the goals (Merino et al., 2025). Research shows that when students feel

connected to those within their school, their families, and their community, they do not engage as much in unhealthy behaviors (Wilkins et al., 2023). For these reasons, school principals and school counselors should be instrumental in establishing, conducting, and maintaining strong positive collaboration and engagement with a school community. As a result, student achievement and well-being will be evident.

Professional Working Relationships

ASCA Standard B-PA 7 states school counselors will “Establish agreement with the principal and other administrators about the school counseling program” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). This entails explaining and advocating for the school counseling program and its goals to administrators, to faculty, and to other school staff members. Within this standard is also the mindset that school counselors will advocate for the appropriate role of the school counselor (ASCA, 2025a). Standard B-PA 8 states school counselors need to “Establish and convene an advisory council for the school counseling program” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). This entails determining the proper stakeholders to represent on the council, developing meeting agendas that will be effective and efficient, recording meeting notes, conducting follow-ups when necessary, and analyzing feedback related to student success and well-being (ASCA, 2025a).

PSEL Standard 6 states that “Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 14). They are responsible for the recruitment, hiring, support, supervision, and retention of teachers and other faculty staff members. Effective educational leaders should plan for staff turnover and provide mentoring for new personnel. They are to also encourage continuous improvement and

professional development, give attainable feedback and evaluations, and empower teachers and staff. Promoting the personal and professional well-being of faculty and staff along with a good work-life balance is also an important aspect of an effective educational leader (NPBEA, 2015). PSEL Standard 7 states “Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 15) By developing workplace conditions that promote professional growth and student learning, effective educational leaders are achieving this standard. They also should establish and maintain an engaged and committed culture that focuses on the mission and vision of a school. Promoting accountability, collaboration, trust, and open communication are also embedded within this standard (NPBEA, 2015).

Standard 4 of the Alabama Standards for School Leadership is Relational Leadership. “Effective relational leaders cultivate a welcoming, supportive, and collaborative learning environment for all students, staff, families, and the community” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 5). An effective school leader is responsible for advocating for all students, fostering a relationship with students, faculty, and staff, and creating a culture surrounded by respect and professionalism (ALSDE, 2024). These leaders should also strive to build and maintain positive relationships with families and community partnerships that will help support a school’s mission and vision. By creating an environment that is conducive to collaboration and positive relationships, an effective school leader can empower and entrust others to support the needs of all students and promote success (ALSDE, 2024).

By focusing on relationship building, school leaders can develop a caring school community (Atici, 2014). Through a caring community, school leaders, faculty and staff, students, and parents can feel connected, which results in positive collaboration between stakeholders and student success (Wilkins et al., 2023). These caring communities centered around positive collaboration help produce and enable positive and supportive working relationships (Wilkins et al., 2023).

Continuous Improvement

It is imperative that educators take time to analyze and reflect on data gathered in order to improve schools and boost student success. The ASCA, ASSL, and PSEL Standards reflect this importance. ASCA Standard B-PA 2 indicates that school counselors should “Identify gaps in achievement, attendance, discipline, opportunity, and resources” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). By collecting and analyzing data, areas of success or improvement are determined. School counselors are responsible for aiding in the collection and analysis along creating goals that will help close the gaps. School counselors are also upheld to reviewing and interpreting student attendance and discipline data and should implement action steps for improving these, if necessary (ASCA, 2025a). School counselors should also “Develop annual student outcome goals based on student data” (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2), according to ASCA Standard B-PA 3. School counselors should write the annual student outcome goals in a measurable format and closely monitor the goals and progress toward achieving them. Communicating these goals to teachers, administrators, and other staff members is the last component of this standard (ASCA, 2025a). Standard B-PA 4 states, “Develop and implementation plans aligned with annual student outcome goals and student data”

(ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). A school counselor's plans should be aligned to help students achieve their goals and also be aligned with the appropriate ASCA Student Standards. This can be done by choosing evidence-based curriculums, programs, and best practices. If there is a potential impact on a student's academics, attendance, or discipline because of the action plan, it is the responsibility of the school counselor to communicate this to the appropriate school staff (ASCA, 2025a). School counselors are to abide by Standard B-PA 5, "Assess and report program results to the school community" (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). It is important for school counselors to collaborate and inform appropriate members of the school community regarding annual student outcome goals. They are to work with the administration to determine the best method for assessing counseling programs and sharing results. Use data to inform stakeholders of the importance of a school counseling program and what it adds to student success and well-being is embedded within this standard (ASCA, 2025a). Standard B-PA 6 declares school counselors will "Use time appropriately according to the national recommendations and student/school data" (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). Time is a crucial component to the school day (Barkman, 2015). School counselors must effectively and efficiently use their time so that a school counseling program can be a success. By assessing the use of time for both direct and indirect student standards, a school counselor can appropriately determine how much time is needed for each component of school counseling (ASCA, 2025a). Another ASCA Standard related to using data is B-PA 9, which says "Use appropriate school counselor performance appraisal process" (ASCA, 2025a, p. 2). Particularly, school counselors can use data from performance

appraisal processes and the ASCA National Model to implement student focused activities that will benefit student success and well-being (ASCA, 2025a).

PSEL Standard 9 states “Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 17). This includes analyzing data to better manage day to day operations, budgets and resources. Effective educational leaders are responsible for developing and maintaining data pertaining to classroom and school improvement (NPBEA, 2015). PSEL Standard 10 states “Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 18). School leaders should always be striving for school improvement. By accessing data, determining action plans, and implementing these plans, a school can experience continuous improvement. It is the responsibility of an effective educational leader to assess the data, determine the action plans, and implement these. They are also responsible for communicating the data reports, areas of strength and weaknesses, and action plans. Preparing a school community for improvement, promoting improvement, fostering mutual commitment and accountability, and helping with the resources needed for improvement, an effective educational leader will be vital in student success and well-being (NPBEA, 2015).

Innovative Leadership is the fifth standard of the Alabama Standards for School Leadership. “Effective, innovative leaders continue professional growth, actively engage in reflective practices, and apply new knowledge and understanding to drive change” (ALSDE, 2024, p. 6). Effective leaders use gathered and analyzed data to improve strategies that will support student success. They work closely with others to reflect and

pursue growth. By consistently finding ways to implement strategies obtained from feedback, a culture that is conducive to continuously improving will be established (ALSDE, 2024).

School principals and school counselors utilize data gathered from many areas to help in decision making (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). One example of data usage is analyzing report card grades and disciplinary data. These are major components in identifying students who need additional support. By utilizing and monitoring this data, an intervention can be created and adjusted to help students succeed (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022).

Through a comparison of relevant literature regarding exemplary school principals with a school counseling background and an analysis of professional standards for counselors and principals, the researcher was able to thematically align commonalities. These themes are the conceptual framework guiding this study. The six themes include: purpose and focus oriented, ethical and equitable responsibility, instruction leadership, collaboration and interaction with stakeholders, professional working relationships, and continuous improvement.

Leadership Skills of School Counselors

There is limited research related to school counseling leadership (Gibson et al., 2018; Young & Dollarhide; 2017). However, the American School Counselor Association states that school counselors are school leaders (ASCA, 2025a). “Recognizing, developing, and utilizing leadership skills in professional school counselors is less of an option and more of a professional responsibility” (Gibson et al., 2018). Leadership skills are essential for school counselors to possess so that students

and a school community can be fully supported. These leadership skills are also vital to the success of a school counseling program (Gibson et al., 2018). “The reality is that many school counselors currently initiate programs and deliver services that directly involve them in leadership in their school” (Young & Bryan, 2015, p. 2). For these reasons, the ASCA National Model is closely aligned with leadership skills that will aid success. These skills include motivation, effective communication, proper delegation, and advocacy (Gibson et al., 2018). Also of utmost importance are positive attitudes of school counselors.

In 2015, Young and Bryan investigated the school counselor’s perspective of leadership. The authors developed and administered the School Counselor Leadership Survey (SCLS).

The SCLS is an instrument that has been normed on school counselors and is the first known scale designed to measure leadership behaviors and practices of school counselors and school counselor supervisors. The SCLS is intended to provide researchers and school counselors with information about specific school counselor leadership practices, rather than relying on generalized assumptions about leadership from other instruments. (Bryan & Young, 2015, p. 8)

The authors administered this to participants and then analyzed the survey. Using concept mapping to identify themes, leadership behaviors and practices of school counselors could be measured. Young and Bryan discovered five domains of school counselor leadership practices. These are “interpersonal influence, systemic collaboration, resourceful problem solving, professional efficacy, and social justice advocacy” (Young & Bryan, 2015, p. 1). These five domains are also aligned with

themes of the ASCA National Model related to advocacy, data usage, collaboration, and change (ASCA, 2025).

“The relational skills inherent in interpersonal influence contribute to school counselors’ success in accomplishing common goals and their ability to approach and resolve situations” (Young & Bryan, 2015, p. 6). Through aligning a school counselor’s practices with a school’s vision, interpersonal influence can occur. These school counselors can influence other faculty and staff, motivate others, and establish positive relationships (Young & Bryan, 2015). This directly aligns with the ASCA National Model theme of collaboration (Young & Bryan, 2015). Through collaboration, school counselors can work with teachers, families, administrators, and other stakeholders on a specific goal related to student success (ASCA, 2025). By working together, these individuals all have a shared responsibility and accountability for helping students succeed (ASCA, 2025).

With systemic collaboration, school counselors work with other school stakeholders in a positive collaboration to achieve goals. School counselors can empower stakeholders and create buy-in through strong systemic collaboration as well (Young & Bryan, 2015). Again, the theme of systemic collaboration directly aligns with ASCA National Model theme of Collaboration. It also aligns with the ASCA National Model themes of Advocacy and Use of Data (Young & Bryan, 2015).

Staying up to date with trends and new methods aid in advocating for change and helping with student success, all of which are factors that are related to resourceful problem solving. Another aspect of resourceful problem solving is networking and working with others, when necessary, to help meet student needs and help students

succeed (Young & Bryan, 2015). Resourceful problem solving aligns with the ASCA National Model theme of Collaboration (Young & Bryan, 2015).

The professional efficacy domain consists of school counselors knowing, understanding, and expressing confidence in their leadership skills. The study conducted by Young and Bryan indicates that “professional efficacy is an important leadership dimension for school counselors” (Young & Bryan, 2015, p. 11). Professional efficacy, along with interpersonal influence, is vital for changes and school improvement to occur (Young & Bryan, 2015). Professional efficacy aligns with the ASCA National Model themes of System change, Advocacy, and again, Collaboration (Young & Bryan, 2015).

Lastly, social justice advocacy includes advocating for all students, standing up for what is right, and responding to social justice unfairness (Young & Bryan, 2015). “School counselor leaders must seek socially just outcomes to challenge many of the inequitable patterns facing students, schools, and many districts” (Young & Bryan, 2015, p. 11). In order to achieve these outcomes, school counselors have to promote academic success, identify barriers related to social and emotional constructs, develop positive partnerships with student families, and increase college and career readiness amongst students. School counselors must have the courage and confidence to assist in leading change (Young & Bryan, 2015). Social justice advocacy aligns with the ASCA National Model themes of systemic change and advocacy (Young & Bryan, 2015).

Summary

Not as many individuals are choosing to pursue careers in leadership positions within the school setting (Cieminski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2020).

Reasons for this lack of desire range from too many responsibilities, lack of support, low salaries, and heavy workloads (Cieminski, 2018). Because of this, there is a limited pool of qualified applicants. As a solution, school officials are utilizing succession planning in helping identify potential exemplary candidates for the school principal position (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Fusarelli et al., 2018; Ritchie, 2020).

School counselors are considerable candidates for the school principal position. School counselors typically possess leadership skills that are vital to the success of a school (Gibson et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2018). These leadership skills include advocacy, professional efficacy, positive influence, collaboration, and effective communication (ASCA, 2025a; Gibson et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2018).

School counselors and school principals work closely together to monitor student success, create an inclusive school climate, support the school in many ways, and collaborate with parents and other stakeholders (ASCA, 2025b; Boulden & Schummel, 2022; Chan et al., 2019; NPBEA, 2015; Reid, 2020; Young & Bryan, 2015; Zalaquett & Chambers, 2012). School principals should adhere to the PSELs and Alabama Standards for School Leadership. School counselors should adhere to the American School Counselor Association Standards. All three sets of these standards are closely aligned, indicating that both school counselors and school principals have the same goals of student success and well-being.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A crucial component of student success and a strong school environment is the school principal (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Without a viable professional in the school principal position, school and student success rates can be difficult to accomplish. Tension and turmoil amongst school stakeholders will be evident, as well (Sabina & Colwell, 2018). To help students achieve success and for the school to be successful overall with a strong culture and climate, it is important to have a school principal who is considered a best fit professional for this position.

Arguably, some school counselors have the ability to be the best fit professional for a school principal position. School counselors are to closely follow the Alabama School Counseling Association (ASCA) standards. These standards “outline the mindsets and behaviors school counselors need to meet the rigorous demands of the school counseling profession and the needs of pre-K–12 students” (ASCA, 2025a, p.1). School counselors have experience in upholding a school’s mission, advocating for all students, designing and implementing curriculums, collaborating with parents and other stakeholders, establishing and maintaining positive working relationships, and interpreting data for school improvement (ASCA, 2025a). All of these are also responsibilities of school principals (ALSDE, 2025; NPBEA, 2015).

While there are clear differences, the roles and responsibilities of both school principals and school counselors have many similarities. Both of these professionals are responsible for upholding a school’s mission, vision, and values (ASCA, 2025a; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019). Advocating and supporting student success and well-being are a top priority of both a school principal and a school counselor. It is the responsibility of

both professionals to ensure that each and every student has an opportunity to learn in a safe environment that is conducive to success (ASCA, 2025; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; NPBEA, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015). A school counselor is responsible for ensuring there is a strong and effective school counseling program, while a school principal is responsible for ensuring all curriculums used within the school are strong and effective (ASCA, 2025; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; NPBEA, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015). School counselors and school principals must effectively communicate with parents and other school stakeholders, create and maintain positive and professional working relationships, and analyze data and make adjustments as needed to aid in school improvement (ASCA, 2025a; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Easley, 2008; NPBEA, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015).

School counselors and school principals must work together often to support students and faculty. Because the job responsibilities have many similarities, it is crucial for a school counselor and a school principal to have a positive professional relationship (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Fontanez, 2023; Tygret et al., 2020). By trusting each other and understanding each other's role, this positive relationship can begin on a firm foundation. With a positive relationship, together, they can strengthen and elevate a school culture and community (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Fontanez, 2023; Tygret et al., 2020).

A comparative analysis of the American School Counselor Association standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership revealed many similarities and alignments. Specifically, the following

six themes emerged that provided the conceptual framework for this study: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and continuous improvement. The comparison of the three sets of standards indicates that both school counselors and school principals should hold many of the same high standards and beliefs. Furthermore, the close alignment and similar job responsibilities further solidified the idea that school counselors have leadership abilities and can become exemplary school principals.

Research reveals candidates for school principals are becoming increasingly hard to find (Cieminski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2020; Sabina & Colwell, 2018). Because the role of a school principal is crucial to student success, it is vital that the proper professional is in this position (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Thankfully, succession planning allows for the opportunity to identify, mentor, and train potential exemplary school principals (Sabina & Colwell, 2018). Succession planning is a program school administrators use “to recruit and train new leaders to lead their schools” (Sabina & Colwell, 2018, p. 375).

School counselors are school leaders (ASCA, 2025a). There is limited research connected to school counseling leadership. However, it is clear that leadership skills are vital for school counselors to possess. These skills are important in aiding the success of a school counseling program and also to aiding in the ability of a school counselor to support students in their learning and well-being (Gibson et al., 2018; Young & Bryan, 2015; Young & Dollarhide, 2017). These leadership skills can also be tremendously

critical to possess in an exemplary school principal role.

In 2025, a change in the Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-3-.34 occurred. School counselors are now eligible for school administrative positions sooner than they have been in years past. This change marks a turning point in recognizing and honoring the leadership skills and roles of school counselors. School counselors who possess these leadership skills can become exemplary school principals, strongly filling a gap and need for a leader who will help both the school and the students experience success.

This chapter describes the purpose of the research study, the researcher's role, the research design, the sample population, and the methodological approach. Participant and the recruitment process along with ethical considerations are also discussed in this chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Specifically, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and continuous improvement. Using the hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach, this research study sought to add to the existing literature surrounding school principals with a school counseling background and how these backgrounds influenced the themes of being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders,

collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and continuous improvement.

Role of the Researcher

I have been an educator for fifteen years. Over the course of my time in education, I had three principals encourage me to explore my options and think about continuing my education through a degree in administration. After much thought and consideration, I decided to pursue a degree in Educational Administration. During my time as a school counselor, I have been very inspired to move to a school principal or other school administrative position when the opportunity arises. As I continue to grow in my profession of a school counselor, I am constantly reminded of how my time as a school counselor will be of great benefit for myself in a future school administrator role and for the students and parents that I will serve when I am a school administrator.

Because I have a goal to become a school administrator, hopefully in the near future, I remain very invested in the lived experiences of school principals who have a background in school counseling. Throughout the entirety of the study, I sought to remain unbiased, objective, and impartial (Peoples, 2020) so that the research participants and their lived experiences could be the core of this study. The hermeneutic circle was applied while analyzing data by deconstructing and synthesizing then looking at the whole again (Peoples, 2020). This process was repeated so that new understandings could emerge.

Research Design

I applied Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenological approach to address the research questions. This method allowed me to gather, analyze, and explain meaningful

and personal descriptions of the lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background. Ethnography is a research method, similar to phenomenology, that works to determine shared patterns of a cultural group (Peoples, 2020). Since this research study does not focus on culture, it is not an appropriate method to use. The method of a case study also allows for the analysis of data to explore a certain phenomenon (Peoples, 2020). However, since case studies do not meet the requirements for focusing only on lived experiences, it is also not an appropriate method.

“Phenomenological research is strictly aimed at understanding experiences as lived” (Peoples, 2020, p. 3). Generalizations of certain situations are made through the analysis of multiple experiences in phenomenological research. By asking the same questions to multiple people regarding the same situation, the analysis followed by generalizations occurs (Peoples, 2021). With hermeneutic phenomenology, “each participant’s experiences are translated through the researcher by comparison and contrast of accounts with the accounts of other participants discussing their experiences of the same phenomenon” (Peoples, 2020, pp. 64-65).

Because this research study analyzes the lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background and because the same questions will be asked in both interview and survey form, I felt the hermeneutic phenomenological method would be the most appropriate method for this research study.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school

counseling

backgrounds?

(2) How do these school principals with a school counseling background relate to:

- (a) being purpose and focus oriented
- (b) enacting ethical and equitable responsibility
- (c) acting as instructional leaders,
- (d) collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders
- (e) creating and maintaining professional work relationships
- (f) continuous improvement

Participants, Background, and Setting

The sample for this research study consisted of exemplary school principals who have a background in school counseling. Individuals meeting the criteria were found by contacting the Alabama State Department of Education and utilizing word of mouth. An email invitation was sent with information pertaining to the study and to request participation.

Purposive sampling, specifically expert sampling, was used to identify potential participants. This sampling method allows participants to be identified and chosen based on knowledge and skills that are relevant to the research study (Bloomberg, 2022). By utilizing expert sampling, potential candidates can be identified based on selective qualities and achievements that can help in contributing meaningful and valuable data to this research study.

Data Collection

The researcher collected data through one-on-one interviews with the participants and a follow-up survey. The semi-structured open-ended interviews consisted of a predetermined set of questions asked to each participant that would elicit strong descriptions of the lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background and how these participants' backgrounds influenced the six themes of the research study's conceptual framework. Through a semi-structured interview, flexible and organic conversations were possible to ensure that thorough data could be collected. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Interviews were recorded with consent from participants. The follow up survey sent to each participant after the interview consisted of demographic questions and open-ended survey questions that could provide clarity from the preceding interview questions.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed, the data was transcribed. Then, the process of the hermeneutic circle was utilized. The hermeneutic circle is the process of the "the parts inform the whole and the whole inform the parts" (Peoples, 2020, p. 59). Transcripts were read and unrelated information was deleted. Preliminary meaning units were generated. A meaning unit is "the allocation piece of data that reveals a feature or trait of the phenomenon being investigated" (Peoples, 2020, p. 60). This resulted in final meaning units, or themes, emerging. Specifics of each theme were organized. This process was repeated for all participants. Major themes of all participants were combined, resulting in general narratives that could then be used to form the general descriptions of the results from the interviews. The survey results were analyzed and

categorized in a similar manner to categorize commonalities and differences, resulting in the emergence of themes. These were combined to form general descriptions as well.

Validity, Reliability, and Credibility

To ensure validity and reliability, I used journaling and member checking. A journal was kept throughout the data collection process, data analysis, and synthesizing stages of the research. Reflections, biases, opinions, and assumptions were recorded. When I began to transcribe interviews, I recorded patterns I saw emerging. I also wrote any concerns and a list of action items that needed to occur. I did this process for the follow-up survey as well. Member checking was also used to help ensure validity and reliability (Peoples, 2020). I sent the interview transcript for each participant to the participant, asking them to review the transcript and verify the accuracy of the transcript. Member checking also helped to ensure credibility. By utilizing member checking, the participants were able to review the transcripts from their individual interviews and confirm the accuracy of the transcripts.

Assumptions

One assumption of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research study was that participants were honest and open about their lived experiences. Another assumption is that school principals with a school counseling background have the ability to be exemplary in their job performance. The third assumption is that the selected participants are truly exemplary.

Ethical Considerations

I provided participants with various parts of the IRB associated with the study. I

ensured participant confidentiality and anonymity by assigning pseudonyms to each individual and omitting any information that could identify a participant. I valued their time by scheduling the interviews with participant schedules in mind. I reminded participants that they could terminate their participation at any time. I also reminded participants there is little risk in this research.

Summary

With the growing need for exemplary school principals, school counselors can fill the gap in the school principal candidate pool. School counselors must adhere to a very similar set of rigorous standards that school principals must abide by. As such, school counselors have many qualities and characteristics that can serve the school principal position in a positive way.

This research study sought to explore the lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background. In particular, how these backgrounds influenced factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and continuous improvement.

Chapter 3 outlined the research design, data collection process, and data analysis. Validity, reliability, and credibility were discussed along with assumptions and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Findings

In chapter 1 of this dissertation, my reasons for researching the lived experiences of exemplary principals with school counseling backgrounds were presented. Chapter 2 presents the literature related to the pathway of school principals, roles and characteristics of the principal and counselor, professional working relationships of a counselor and principal, a comparative analysis of the ASCA standards, PSELs, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership, and leadership skills of school counselors. A hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was designed and developed in Chapter 3 to investigate the lived experiences of principals with school counseling backgrounds.

This portion, chapter 4, provides the findings of this study of the lived experiences of principals with school counseling backgrounds that were discovered through the use of the hermeneutic phenomenological research method. “Through participants’ vivid depictions of their experiences, phenomenological researchers construct a meaningful reality through data analysis” (Peoples, 2020, p. 5). The process of data collection, the method, participant information, and data analysis are thoroughly discussed in this chapter.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. In particular, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining

professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement.

Although there is little research related to school principals who were previously school counselors, there is undeniable evidence that school counselors and school principals share many of the same responsibilities and standards (ASCA, 2025a; Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; NPBEA, 2015; Young & Bryan, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018). The goal of this study was to add to the literature related to school principals with a school counseling background. The knowledge gained through this study will be beneficial in continuing to understand the lived experiences of these school principal professionals who hold a background in school counseling.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds?
- (2) How do these school principals with a school counseling background relate to:
 - (a) being purpose and focus oriented
 - (b) enacting ethical and equitable responsibility
 - (c) acting as instructional leaders
 - (d) collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders
 - (e) creating and maintaining professional work relationships
 - (f) continuous improvement

These are the six guiding principles from the conceptual framework used for this

research study. A thematic analysis was conducted with the American School Counseling Association standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and the Alabama Standards for School Leadership. The six guiding principles above were commonalities discovered amongst all three sets of standards.

Data Collection

Heidegger's hermeneutical phenomenological design was used to study the lived experiences of principals with a school counseling background. "Phenomenological research is strictly aimed at understanding experiences as lived" (Peoples, 2020, p. 3). This study design allowed the researcher to focus on and gain understanding of the lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background. The researcher used a series of steps to arrive at the essence of understanding these lived experiences. The steps included interviewing participants followed by data transcription. Transcripts were analyzed, meaning units were identified, and themes were organized to form general narratives. Survey results were analyzed and coded in a similar manner. Interview and survey results were merged to form common themes throughout all participants, which described experiences and context of the experiences.

Purposive sampling, specifically expert sampling, was used to identify potential participants. This sampling method allows for participants to be identified and chosen based on knowledge and skills that are relevant to the research study (Bloomberg, 2022). By utilizing expert sampling, potential candidates can be identified based on selective qualities and achievements that can help in contributing meaningful and valuable data to this research study of understanding the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Expert sampling

allowed the research to identify and choose participants who qualified as exemplary participants.

Method

I researched and read a significant amount of academic literature related to school principals and school counselors. A literature review was then written based upon the literature read. A conceptual framework was designed based off of a thorough analysis of the American School Counselor Association standards, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership. Interview questions and a survey were written based on this analysis of standards.

An IRB was written, submitted and approved. All candidates were recruited via email. Once candidates gave consent to the researcher, an interview was scheduled. Interviews were conducted and recorded via the Zoom platform. A survey was sent out after each interview to the participant to collect demographic information and ask follow-up questions. After transcribing interviews, recordings were destroyed to keep participant confidentiality. Meaning units and coding from the transcribed interviews were then determined. Themes were derived from these codes. This process is referred to as the hermeneutic circle. "When you analyze data, there is an understanding of the whole (the entire transcript) and analyzing the whole as you read it, and then there is an understanding of parts (codes and themes). As you are analyzing data, you break down information into parts and then synthesize, and you look at the whole again (the entire transcript). That is the new understanding. And then as you move through it again in analysis, the parts make sense of the whole and the whole makes sense of the parts,

and this hermeneutic circle continues until a new understanding emerges” (Peoples, 2020, pp. 32-33).

Participants

Participant 1 (P1)

Participant 1 is a Caucasian female who has over thirty years of experience in education. She taught Science and English courses at the high school level before shifting into a school counselor position. She spent twelve years as a school counselor and one year as an assistant principal followed by sixteen years as a school principal. After leaving the school principal position, P1 served as an interim superintendent where she helped build an entire school system from the ground up. She then served in the curriculum department at a central office for a school system before moving into her current position as an assistant professor at the collegiate level. P1 holds a bachelor’s degree in biology with a Minor in English, a master’s degree in Secondary Education, a master’s Certification in School Administration and School Counseling, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership. P1 received a Principal of the Year Award and a Middle School Principal of the Year Award during her time as a school principal. Due to all of her accomplishments, P1 is considered an exemplary educator.

Participant 2 (P2)

Participant 2 is a Caucasian female with over twenty-five years of experience as an educator. With a master’s degree in social science, she taught at the high school level. After receiving her second master’s in counseling, she then moved into a high school counselor position for five years. Upon obtaining her leadership certification, she became a middle school principal for seven years. P2 currently serves as an academic

dean, and she has been in that role for over ten years. This participant received the faculty of the year award at her respective school while serving as the principal. She also began an initiative to help lower achieving students receive one on one help that is individualized for their needs. Even though she is not serving as a school principal, she continues to return to this school and support the initiative she began. Due to all of her accomplishments, P2 is considered an exemplary educator.

Participant 3 (P3)

Participant 3 is an African American female holding twenty years of experience in education. P3 obtained a bachelor's degree in Secondary Education followed by obtaining a master's degree in School Counseling. She taught English Language Arts for three years, served as a school counselor for seven years, then served as an assistant principal for four years. She has been at her current position as a school principal for six years. P3 holds an Instruction Leadership certification and a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership. The majority of this participants' time in education has been spent at the middle school level. She was named a Counselor of the Year twice while serving as a counselor. P3 received an Educator of the Year award and Gold Medal Award for summer learning innovation while serving as a school principal. Her school was named both a State and National School of Character under her leadership due to her transformative initiatives that supported academic achievement, social-emotional development, and school performance improvement. Due to all of her accomplishments and accolades, P3 is considered an exemplary educator.

Participant 4 (P4)

Participant 4 is a Caucasian female with thirty-three years of experience in education. She holds a bachelor's degree in Emotionally Conflicted Education, a master's degree in Learning Disabilities, a master's degree in education and Instructional Leadership, and a certification in School Counseling. P4 has served at an intermediate school level for fourteen years as a special education teacher then school counselor. She then moved to an elementary school for five years where she was a school counselor. Beginning her role as an assistant principal, she then moved to the high school level for eight years. For six years, she has served as a school principal for a virtual public school serving students in grades K-12. Throughout her time in education, P4 grew a new school from 38 students to over 300 students and applied and received funding to officially become a school that is now Cognia accredited. Under her leadership and guidance, the school continues to grow and add opportunities for students to experience success. Academic achievement increased by 4.26% and chronic absenteeism by 1.88% during her time as a school principal. Due to all of her accomplishments, P4 is considered exemplary.

Participant 5 (P5)

Participant 5 taught kindergarten for three years and then became a middle and high school counselor for eighteen years. Her five years as a school principal has been spent at the middle and high school levels as well, with her first year being an interim principal position. Her twenty-six years of experience in education have contributed to improvement in ACAP scores. This is due to P5's overarching guidance as a principal in leading initiatives to help students improve. This participant also received an award for her dedication to her school during her second year of principalship, as her school was

the only school in the district to make AYP yearly. She also received the Most Distinguished Middle School Principal award and a recognition for the most ACAP growth. Participant 5 holds a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, a master's degree in counseling, an Ed.S. in School Leadership, and a PhD in School Administration. Due to all of her accomplishments, P5 is considered exemplary.

Table 2. Participants of the Study

Participant	Years in Education	Degrees & Certifications	Educational Roles	Awards & Recognitions	Why Considered Exemplary
P1	30+	*B.S., Biology; Science Minor *M.Ed., Secondary Education *Master's Certification, School Counseling *Master's Certification, School Administration *Ed.D., Educational Leadership	*Science and English teacher *Counselor *Assistant Principal *Principal *Interim Superintendent *Central Office Personnel *Assistant College Professor	*School Principal of the Year *Middle School Principal of the Year	Participant 1 has broad leadership experience, has built school systems from the ground up, and has award winning principalships .
P2	25+	*B.S. Social Science *M.Ed. Social Science *M.Ed. School Counseling *Ed.S. Educational Leadership	*Social Sciences teacher *Counselor *Counselor *Middle School Principal *Academic Dean	*Faculty Member of the Year	Participant 2 started an initiative and created an academic support system for low achieving students, has broad leadership experience, and had an award winning principalship.
P3	20	*B.S. Secondary Education *M.Ed. School Counseling *Instructional	*ELA Teacher *Counselor *Assistant Principal *Principal	*Counselor of the Year *Middle School Counselor of the Year	Participant 3 won numerous awards during her

Participant	Years in Education	Degrees & Certifications	Educational Roles	Awards & Recognitions	Why Considered Exemplary
		Leadership Certificate *Ed.D. Educational Leadership		*Educator of the Year *Gold Medal Award Recipient	educational career along with starting transformative initiatives and summer learning innovations during her time as a school principal that helped her school earn state and national recognition.
P4	33	*B.S. Emotionally Conflicted Education *M.Ed. Learning Disabilities *School Counseling Certification *M.Ed. Education and Instructional Leadership	*Special Education Teacher *School Counselor *Assistant Principal *Principal	*Started a school and achieved Cognia accreditation for the institution	Participant 4 has a passion for students of all ages and has served in various roles to gain expansive leadership experience. P4 grew a school from 38 students to over 300 in two years. P4 continues to strengthen and grow the school with improved report card ratings each year.
P5	26	*B.S. Elementary Education *M.Ed. School Counseling *Ed.S School Leadership *Ph.D. School	*Elementary Education Teacher *School Counselor *Interim Principal	*Most Distinguished Middle School Principal Award *Most ACAP Growth	*Participant 5 led initiatives that resulted in consistent AYP achievements and ACAP

Participant	Years in Education	Degrees & Certifications	Educational Roles	Awards & Recognitions	Why Considered Exemplary
		Administration	*Principal	Recognition *Only school in district to make AYP yearly for two years	growth. She also held an award winning principalship.

This table provides demographic information about all six participants, such as years in education, degrees and certifications, educational roles, awards and recognitions, and why the participant is considered exemplary.

Data Analysis

After data collection was completed, analysis began. “The qualitative analytic approach involves uncovering patterns or themes in the data, identifying any relationships among these patterns or themes, and then developing thick rich descriptions” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 236). Once interviews and surveys were transcribed, the coding process began. Certain phrases were highlighted to identify any big ideas (Bloomberg, 2023). A journal was kept with notes and thoughts, indicating any repetition among the data. “Analytic memos are reflective notes that researchers write to themselves about what they are learning from their data” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 328). Through the use of these memos - or journals - I was able to write observations down so that I did not have to fully rely on memory during further analysis and conclusion making (Bloomberg, 2023). Next, quotes from the transcripts were highlighted and set aside. Throughout the process, themes began to emerge. Triangulation was accomplished by using approved interview protocol, aligning the interview questions appropriately, and utilizing the peer review process to check emerging themes (Bloomberg, 2023). The key themes of the research questions are summarized below.

Research Question 1

(1) What are the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds?

Many commonalities were found in the data analysis of the five participants in this study. These commonalities were grouped and given a theme name. The theme was considered common if two or more participants mentioned it. A total of five themes surrounding this research question emerged from the data analysis. These themes were derived through the multiple coding sessions that occurred after the interview transcription process and survey data was gathered. Sticky notes, journaling, and member checking was used along with a peer review. Quotations from participants were highlighted along with key words and phrases to help in identifying themes.

Theme 1: Relationships are at the heart of leadership

The lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background indicate that leadership is relational. All 5 participants discussed the importance of relationships. Relationships are at the heart of leadership for these individuals. Relationships were the most consistent theme throughout the interviews. “My background in counseling made relationships easiest” (P1). “Sit at lunch with teachers to talk to them” (P1). “Get to know all of those students. It helps when you have to have tough conversations with them” (P2). “Build good relationships with parents” (P3). “The teachers and I, we’re partners in this work” (P3). “Kids want to build a relationship with you. Then, they tend to come back to you once they know they can trust you when they have an issue or need help with a problem” (P4).

By establishing positive relationships with students, parents, faculty, and staff, a school climate and school culture greatly benefits. “I think it's very important for people to feel supported. It makes your school a better place” (P2). “You can't have rigor and relevance, if you do not build a relationship” (P4).

Positive relationships help build trust with the school community. Having the trust of a school community is highly important. “You have to win the trust of them. They have to develop a degree of trust that you are paying attention, trust that you understand their side of the story, trust that you're going to be organized about how you do things” (P2). Trust can be gained through communication as well as through showing up for your school community. “I think you should know how to relate to the kids. Have a conversation with them. Know the parents and how to de-escalate them if they're upset. Building trust with both students and parents” (P4). “I've always believed in calling parents because I think the more you call them and the more you communicate with them, the better the relationship is and the more they trust you. You have a good rapport with your parents” (P5). Along with having the trust of a school community, you also have to choose to trust your faculty. “I always talk about the awesome village of teachers that we have. I trust them to deliver instruction to the students” (P3). “I count on my people” (P4).

By attending extracurricular events to support students, you build rapport that helps with trust and establishing those positive relationships. “Strengthen those relationships by attending extracurricular activities and participating in fundraisers. Be present” (P1). “When you become an administrator, people want to see you. The kids want you at those things. And if you're going to be successful, you've got to attend

those functions” (P4). “You're going to be everywhere. Football games, basketball games, city meetings, everywhere” (P5).

Participants discussed the importance of expressing genuine care for the faculty, staff, students, and parents. “I don't want to just hear you. I want you to understand that I'm listening to you” (P3). Through care and engagement, participants felt the relationships were strengthened and solidified. “Care and engage. Make them feel special, because they are. That is important for success” (P4). “Give them an opportunity to explain, because a lot of times, something's going on somewhere else” (P4). “If I know that you have a family and children, I'm asking about them. If I care about you, then I care about them. Be genuine” (P5).

Participants also discussed how active listening is a component of expressing care. Through active listening, people are empowered and feel as if they matter, because they do. “They need to feel like they have a voice and be included” (P1). “Be humble. Don't ever walk in a classroom like you know it all. Listen to what is being told to you” (P3). “Be an active listener. I don't want to just hear you. I want you to understand that I'm listening to you. If I ask you a question, I really do want to hear the answer” (P5).

Theme 2: Leadership is student centered

Every participant in this research study discussed the vitality of keeping students at the forefront of decision making. “Every decision - discipline to club offering to course offering - must be student focused which is part of the mission and vision” (P1). “We are not here to serve adults. The goal is to serve students. I frame decisions around students and services for them. How do we produce learners we say we will produce?”

(P1). Through framing decisions around what is best for students, participants indicated you are also keeping the mission and vision of the school at the core of your leadership. “I am continuing to keep the mission of the school at the forefront and stay focused on that. I constantly remind myself and others, if this doesn't align with our mission or what is best for our students, we aren't doing it” (P2). “Ask yourself what is the mission of the school? What are the policies of the school? Then, you have to figure out how you're going to apply that in a way that is fair and equitable and supportive” (P2). “Build the foundation with students” (P3). Through establishing a solid foundation with students, a school leader can better focus on the school's success.

Another aspect of keeping decisions student centered is always practicing equity and fairness. The conversations surrounding equity and fairness with participants during interviews were crucial to their leadership styles. “We have to protect all children. The falsely accused, did wrong, all areas. That is our responsibility” (P1). “Ethical is doing what is right regardless of race/gender/etc. Never mistreat a child because their identity is something outside of our own morals and values” (P1). “Whether you're dealing with adults or students, I've always put a priority on fairness and equity. Like if we're doing something for one student, then it needs to apply to everybody that's in that same boat. Understanding the importance of consistency” (P2). “Treat people with dignity, respect, and fairness. I don't think you benefit from just being viewed as somebody who's super harsh or unfair or who doesn't communicate a lot about situations that need to be rectified” (P3). “You just have to stick to policy. And then once you do that, you can lay your head down at night” (P3). “We're going to follow policy. I will tell you that the minute you veer from policy, you get yourself in trouble. Friend, no

friend, your kid. If you veer from policy, that's when you set yourself up for disaster. So follow policy" (P4).

Theme 3: School counseling experience serves as great preparation for a school principal

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently discussed how well their time as a school counselor helped prepare them for their school principal positions. "I think there's a lot of benefits of being a counselor before you go into administration" (P2). "I think that counseling was a really good stepping stone to administration" (P2). Key skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and active listening that were obtained through the counseling position were helpful along with gaining real world experiences. "When you're a counselor, you aren't the disciplinarian, but you still know all the school rules, regulations, and procedures. Having a background at this school with the students, the faculty, and the school procedures and stuff made for an easier transition for me" (P2). "Moving into a school principal, all those things helped me to easily be able to have difficult conversations with parents, to easily make difficult decisions, to easily put my kids at the forefront, build relationships with parents, it was the smoothest transition for me. I tell everyone I credit it to being a school counselor" (P3). "Hands down, I think all principals should have some form of school counseling background" (P3). "Being the counselor helped me, groomed me to be more understanding of situations" (P4). "Being a counselor helped build the foundation with students. As their principal, I could still discipline them, but they knew I was fair and treated everybody the same" (P4). Participants also said one of the harder transitions was the shift in a more complex role with more responsibilities. "You carry a lot of burdens as a counselor. The

experience helped me because you carry burdens as a principal on an even greater level” (P1). Participants discussed the shift in having to discipline students. “The hardest was not being so sympathetic, empathetic, because when you move into being an administrator, there's discipline there” (P5). “As a counselor, you have so much empathy for everybody and everything. So to somehow figure out how you can still have empathy and how you can still be respectful and how you can lay the groundwork during tough times was a learning curve for me” (P2). Learning things you did not already know was another transition that some participants said was not difficult but took some time to figure out. “For any job you walk into, you don't know what you don't know. Balancing learning because I was always in secondary, but my first admin job was elementary, like learning data and such that I had no clue about beforehand was tough at times” (P1). “I think the hardest part is to win the trust of the faculty. I think because I was a teacher in the past, I was really good with students. It's different when you are supervising adults. They have to develop a degree of trust that you are paying attention, trust that you understand their side of the story, and trust that you're going to be organized about how you do things” (P2). Participant 3 said “The shift in demographics going from one school to the next was difficult for me. I came from a huge melting pot where everyone accepted everyone. At my first school as a principal, they were all privileged compared to where I previously was. That was a big adjustment. I had to learn how to cope with a shift in perspectives and expectations” (P3).

Theme 4: Whole child education while viewing everything through a dual perspective lens is a critical component of a leader.

Throughout interviews, the participants talked a great deal about ensuring students were being educated through the lens of the whole child. This includes mentally, socially, and academically. “From test scores and AP scores to school safety to physical safety and emotional safety, it’s all very important” (P1). “As a principal, you’re basically responsible at some level for everything in your buildings, including the buildings. You have to look at facilities constantly. You have to look at safety and security constantly. You have to look at academics. You have to look at emotional support services” (P2). Participants discussed how important the mental health aspect of students can be. “You have to deal with students’ mental health. That’s a priority. Students cannot learn to the best of their ability when their mental health is struggling” (P3). “Mental health and exercise. Two of the most important things in a school day” (P4). “I care about the students. I care about their mental well-being, their physical well-being, their academic success. I care about every aspect of their life. They are just as important to me as my own kids” (P5).

Participants also discussed how important it was to have a dual view of everything so that the best decisions can be made. “You have to look at both sides of the story. You have to look at the student side, you have to look at the teacher side, and you have to kind of see where does all of that meet in terms of the mission of the school? What are we here to accomplish? How do we best accomplish that?” (P2). “Sometimes it is challenging to get the staff to see another side.” This statement was

said by P4 when talking about having to explain decisions that were made with the best interest of all in mind.

Theme 5: Growth mindset is important as a school leader

Interestingly, not one participant desired to go into school administration at the start of their educational career. They all chose to further their education after being influenced to move into an administrative position by one of their own administrators at the time of their counseling career. “Being a school principal was not on my to do list. I had multiple people encourage me to pursue that route” (P1). “Admin came to me and asked me if I was interested in administration. He really encouraged me and said, you know, the school really needs people like you. I think you'd be great at it” (P2). “Admin always said, you need to be an administrator. I fought it forever. I gave in and it was one of the best decisions I've made.” (P3). “I decided to go back and get my Instructional Leadership degree after people kept asking me if I ever wanted to be a school administrator. Thirty years ago, I never thought I would want to do this one day. Now, I wouldn't trade it for anything” (P4). “My passion to serve students kept growing. After my school principal told me he thought I would be a great candidate for his position one day, I enrolled in a school leadership program” (P5).

Participants often mentioned how much they continue to attend professional development opportunities and the importance of these opportunities. Through these opportunities such as conferences, webinars, classes, etc., participants discussed how they gain valuable knowledge on staying up to date with learning trends, supporting students and teachers, and learning innovative ways to help students find their success. “A critical piece to being a good leader is willingness to learn instructionally” (P1). “I

went to training with teachers. I went and learned with the faculty as an administrator. Teachers see you there as supporting the school and then applying what you learned. That is beneficial” (P1). “I have learned more at conferences and through meeting people from other schools” (P4). “I like professional development. It has helped me a lot. Learning what I needed to learn, then bringing faculty and staff to get trained to see, because they already know what the mission and vision is, because I talk about it constantly.” (P5)

Participants also talked considerably about the importance of being present in classrooms. “I was constantly in classrooms formally and informally. I loved to go in classrooms (especially when asked) to be a cheerleader and a support system. It is important to support your teachers” (P1). “I think it's very important for people to feel supported. It was very important for the teachers to feel supported, even if I did not want to 100% agree with everything they did all the time” (P2).

Research Question 2

(2) How do these school principals with a school counseling background relate to:

- (a) being purpose and focus oriented
- (b) enacting ethical and equitable responsibility
- (c) acting as instructional leaders,
- (d) collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders
- (e) creating and maintaining professional work relationships
- (f) continuous improvement

(a) Being purpose and focus oriented.

During interviews, participants were asked how they stay purpose and focus oriented. Responses stated that you have to keep the mission and vision of the school at the forefront of the decision making. A student first mentality is also important when it comes to being purpose and focus oriented. “Every decision from discipline to club offering to course offering must be student focused which is part of our mission and vision. We are not here to serve adults. Our goal is to serve students” (P1). “Once you become a school principal, you have to keep the mission of the school at the forefront and stay focused on that and not falling off task of doing something that does not align with our mission” (P2). “For me, I keep the mission at the forefront. I talk about it constantly. That way it is always on my mind and on the teachers’ and students’ minds” (P3). “It starts with me, but I have to be consistent with it. Even during a hard time, I have to keep what is best for the students in mind and what the goal of our mission is” (P3). “I make it very clear what my expectations are. I always make sure my expectations align with the mission and what is going to help our students succeed” (P4). “Your mission and your vision is always first. When you talk to parents and the community, your vision and your mission always have to be first. When you're talking with your faculty and your staff, your vision and your mission always have to be first. You have to let them know this is the road we're taking. Some people are not going to like that, but you've got to stay focused on it. Like this is what drives the school. That has always been my talk, whether I'm talking to whomever” (P5).

(b) Enacting ethical and equitable responsibility

Adhering to ethics and exhibiting equitable responsibility is a nonnegotiable for

school principals who were previously school counselors. Participants discussed how it is the responsibility of the school principal to protect all children. Even when a student is in the wrong, they still have to be protected. When it comes to being ethical with the faculty and staff, staying professional is key to acting in an ethical way. “I have a priority on fairness and equity. If we're doing something for one student, then it needs to apply to everybody that's in that same boat” (P2). “You have to be consistent across the board. I make sure that things are clear” (P3). “For my faculty, when I'm in this building, I am the principal. We're partners in this work. I stay professional, and I expect the faculty to stay professional also” (P3). “Friend, no friend, your kid. If you veer from policy, you're going to set yourself up for disaster. Follow policy. Also, I tell parents, I'd rather make you upset on the front end than on the back end. I am going to stick to policy when it comes to the students, even when it makes parents upset” (P4). “I am going to be a professional regardless of who pushes me where” (P5).

(c) Acting as instructional leaders.

Participants act as instructional leaders by attending professional development and trainings. They then take the information learned back to the school setting. Participants also discussed how they have to be familiar with all of the curriculums being taught. Visiting classrooms and supporting teachers is another way that participants act as instructional leaders. “I went to training with teachers. I went and learned with the faculty as an administrator. I was also constantly being in classrooms formally and informally. I loved to go in classrooms, especially when asked, to be a cheerleader and a support” (P1). “I was very knowledgeable about the courses, the prerequisites, the pathways, the different pathways from students. This helped me

support both the students and the teachers” (P2). “So one thing you have to do as an administrator is be okay with saying, I am not the expert. You are the expert, but I know best practices. I know student engagement. I know how all classes should start. I know how everyone should go through their learning targets. I know how everyone should have checks for understanding. All those teachers, they are the experts, but you know what should be happening. You know how to check for standards. So you can go and pull the standards that they should be teaching. You can match it to their lesson plans. There are easy ways for you to be an instructional leader. You need to make sure that they’re doing the best things, that they’re doing what they’re supposed to do. They’re on track. Their pacing is correct” (P3). “We all have strengths and weaknesses. I know what my weaknesses are, so I hire people around me that are good with that. I’m great at organization. I’m great at telling people what to do. I understand data, but I don’t like pulling data and getting data. I can read the data, but I need you to gather the information and let’s meet” (P4). “Professional development helped me a lot. My faculty and staff understood my mission and my vision and where I was trying to take the school. They knew where we’re trying to go. I would go learn what I needed to learn, then bring it back to faculty and staff to get trained and implement” (P5).

(d) Collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders.

Participants spoke about attending extracurricular events at the school as a means of collaborating and interacting with their school community and stakeholders. They also talked about the importance of attending school board meetings, developing relationships with those at their central office, and getting to know those who hold government positions. Participants talked about communicating with parents and finding

ways for them to get involved at school as another way to help in collaboration and interaction. “I tried to make sure I found ways for parents to be involved” (P1). “I communicated with my parents. I told them what I needed and how they could help us” (P2). “We have an adopt a school partner. I utilize our partners to help any chance I get. ... I leverage parent connections for resources when needed. Personally, I do not mind begging if it’s for something that will benefit our students and school” (P3). Participant 4 discussed how important it is to show up for everything from extracurricular activities to school day events. They also talked about the importance of talking with the students and getting to know them. This participant also spoke about building a relationship with parents and outside organizations as a means of collaborating and interacting. “You’re going to be everywhere. If they had city meetings, I would be there. Look, I would be in the grocery store talking to parents. It doesn’t matter where you are. You’re going to meet them where they are. I went to school board meetings. I met lots of people there. You need to know who your district leaders are, I know what our vision and our mission is and they know that I’m always talking that up. I talk about how we’re going to move this middle school, how we’re going to make this district great again. I also make sure that we were all a team because that’s what it takes” (P5).

(e) Creating and maintaining professional work relationships.

To create and maintain professional working relationships, participants say they express genuine care. They talk to their faculty and staff. They invest in them by hosting luncheons and supporting them in the classroom. Participants also know the importance of professional boundaries when it comes to creating and maintaining professional work relationships. “You have to care and engage but maintain a professional distance. It’s

important to not get too close to one individual or to not show favoritism in any way” (P1). “I think it's very important for people to feel supported. It is very important for the teachers to feel supported, even if I did not want to 100% agree with everything they did all the time. I always found a way for them to feel like they're supported and to help them” (P2). “For me, I'm going to always do the right thing, even if it's not what everybody agrees with, even if it's not what I like in the moment, there are going to be times where you don't agree with what decision you had to make, but it was the right decision according to policy. I am going to stay professional. Always” (P3). “I have hard conversations with people. That's probably the hardest thing for a lot of people. Let people know your expectations from the beginning. Be honest and real with what is going on” (P4). “I am constantly walking around, talking to everyone at this school. If I ask you, hey, how are you doing? I really want to know how you're doing. Knowing that you have a family and children, I'm asking about them. Being genuine. It's really important to care about the people at your school” (P5).

(f) Continuous improvement.

To focus on continuous improvement, participants utilize data analysis in all areas of a school. They try to see the big picture and keep the goal of moving students in mind when it comes to making decisions. One participant, P5, discussed how they put together a school improvement team that met often. This team analyzed data and came up with an improvement plan to implement within the school. “Data analysis is the first step. Look at test scores and AP scores. School safety is very important, from physical safety to emotional safety. Ask, can students approach teachers or participate in class? Listen to the faculty and the community. What are their concerns? Where do

they think improvement needs to occur" (P1). "You've got to look at a really big picture. Analyze a lot of data, ask where you want to be, what fulfills our mission?" (P2). "You have to know how the data comes out, how the report card is calculated. For us, there's always room for improvement. There is always room for growth. That is where we have to focus. How do we grow and what do we need to do to improve?" (P3). "We look at scores. You have to move every kid, whether they are the lowest, highest, or in the middle. You have to look at student weaknesses and ask what can we do to move them and help them improve. I expect my teachers to give a lot of input on ways we can improve and help move these students. The teachers know them the best. Their input is valuable" (P4). "Putting our school improvement plan together, we had a real team. Most of them would be like grade level chairs. They would go back and relay with their department. They got information and then we put it all together. We had a real plan and we put our plan on display so everyone knew what we would be doing" (P5).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summary of the Study

This hermeneutic phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. The research focused on the lived experiences of these school principals and how they relate to being purpose and focus oriented, enact ethical and equitable responsibilities, act as instructional leaders, collaborate and interact with the school community and stakeholders, create and maintain professional work relationships, and focus on continuous improvement. "Each participant's experiences are translated through the researcher by comparison and contrast with the accounts of other participants discussing their experience of the same phenomenon" (Peoples, 2020, pp. 64-65).

The research suggests that the candidate pool for school principals is shrinking. With a recent change in an Alabama Administrative Code, school counselors are eligible to become school principals sooner than in previous years which could help in filling the shrinking candidate pool. This study investigated how school principals who were previously school counselors lead. After a comparative analysis of the ASCA Standards, PSELs, and Alabama Standards for School Leadership, six common themes among the standards emerged, becoming the conceptual framework of this research study. These six themes formed the original conceptual framework of this research study and are listed in the image below. This original conceptual framework was formed by the researcher. It is based on how the standards for both school counselors and school principals overlap and have many similarities.

Key findings of this study revealed five main themes that school principals with school counseling experience exhibit. These are:

- Relationships are at the heart of leadership.
- Leadership is student centered.
- School counseling experience serves as great preparation for a school principal.
- Whole child education while viewing everything through a dual perspective lens is a critical component of a leader.
- Growth mindset is important as a school leader.

After the research was complete and data was analyzed, the researcher revamped the image above. The five themes discovered coincide with the common guiding principles.

Figure 2 below reflects this.

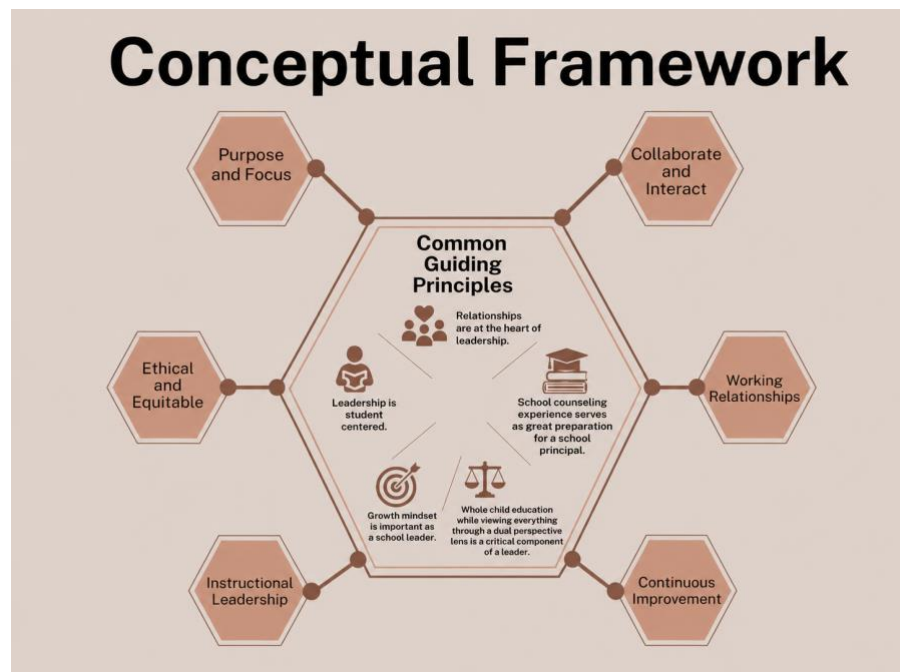


Figure 2. Revised Conceptual Framework

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds?
- (2) How do these school principals with a school counseling background relate to:
 - (a) being purpose and focus oriented
 - (b) enacting ethical and equitable responsibility
 - (c) acting as instructional leaders
 - (d) collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders
 - (e) creating and maintaining professional work relationships
 - (f) continuous improvement

Review of Methodology

The researcher utilized the phenomenological qualitative research method for this study. This method was chosen so that the lived experiences of participants could be thoroughly explored. Five participants were interviewed using questions pertaining to the two research questions that were aligned with the study's conceptual framework. Participants completed a short survey afterwards that collected demographic and follow up information. Interviews and surveys were transcribed and coded for meaning units. These meaning units led to the discovery of five common themes between each participant.

Limitations

1. The study focuses only on school principals with a school counseling background in the state of Alabama.
2. The overall sample size will be considered small. (4 - 6 participants reached saturation)
3. Participation is voluntary.
4. The researcher is a current school counselor.
5. The researcher aspires to become a school principal in the future.

Major Findings Related to Literature and Interpretations of Interviews and Surveys

Participants reported that their easiest transitions as a school principal included communication with parents, having difficult conversations, and having a busy daily schedule. "Being a school counselor, you're thrown into the fire because you have to deal with very touchy situations and have hard conversations. You have to deal with students' mental health. You have to call parents. You do all the things. You have to deal with the community. You have to deal with resources. Moving into a school principal, all those things helped me to easily be able to have difficult conversations with parents, to easily make difficult decisions, to easily put my kids at the forefront, and to build relationships with parents. It was the smoothest transition for me" (P2). "Speaking with parents, being liaison from school and central office, there are so many similarities with administration and counseling" (P5).

Participants reported that their hardest transition as a school principal involved dealing with discipline. "As a counselor, you have so much empathy for everybody and

everything. So to somehow figure out how you can still have empathy and how you can still be respectful and how you can lay the groundwork during tough times was a hard transition for me” (P2). Counselors do not address any discipline issues, as that goes against the ethics of being a counselor (ASCA, 2025). Therefore, the field of discipline was relatively new and something school principals with school counseling experience found was one of the more difficult aspects of becoming a school principal. “The hardest transition was not being so sympathetic or empathetic, because when you move into being an administrator, there's discipline there” (P5).

Theme 1: Relationships Are at the Heart of Leadership

Participants made it known that relationships were at the heart of their leadership styles. “When kids build a relationship with you, they tend to come back to you. They know they can trust you” (P4). This was an expected finding. Relationships with students, faculty and staff members, parents, and other school community members are important for school principals with school counseling experience. “Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 16). Through building and establishing these positive relationships, school stakeholders are able to collaborate effectively and make decisions that are properly aligned with a school’s mission and vision and will aid in a caring school community and student success (Atici, 2014; Ishimaru, 2019).

Theme 2: Leadership Is Student Centered

It is the responsibility of school principals to ensure that each and every student has an opportunity to learn in a safe environment that is conducive to success

(Barkman, 2015; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; NPBEA, 2015; Young & Bryan, 2015; Waalkes et al., 2018). “I know that as the principal of the school, the decisions I make will impact my students. It’s priority to me that those decisions are ones that will directly help my students” (P3). Participants in this study consistently discussed the importance of keeping students at the center of every decision made. This was an expected finding.

“Every decision - discipline to club offering to course offering - must be student focused which is part of the mission and vision” (P1). Keeping students at the forefront of every decision, school principals with previous school counseling experience ensure that all students have an environment where they can grow and learn. By developing, advocating, and enacting a school’s mission, vision, and core values, an effective school principal is actively working to help students achieve (NPBEA, 2015).

Theme 3: School counseling experience serves as great preparation for a school principal.

All five participants in this research study commented on how their position as a school counselor greatly prepared them for the role of a school principal. “It was the smoothest transition for me” (P3). This participant stated this as they were referencing already knowing how to communicate with parents, have flexibility in their daily plans, make tough decisions, and develop strong relationships within a school. “I knew all the school rules, regulations, and procedures. It was a very easy transition” (P2).

There are many similarities in the role of a school counselor and school principal. The experience gained from being in a school counseling position greatly prepared the participants for a school principal position. The ASCA Standards state that a school counselor is a leader and leadership skills are a critical component of being a school

counselor (ASCA, 2025). Many of the skills developed throughout the school counseling experience were vital in helping these participants transition into the school principal role. These skills and the experience gained from being a school counselor greatly helped the participants prepare for the role of the school principal.

Theme 4: Whole Child Education Viewed Through a Dual Perspective Lens

Throughout interviews, the participants talked a great deal about ensuring students were being educated through the lens of the whole child. This includes seeing the student through mental, social, and academic lenses. “From test scores and AP scores to school safety to physical safety and emotional safety, it’s all very important” (P1). “As a principal, you’re basically responsible at some level for everything in your buildings, including the buildings. You have to look at facilities constantly. You have to look at safety and security constantly. You have to look at academics. You have to look at emotional support services” (P2). Participants discussed how important the mental health aspect of students can be. “You have to deal with students’ mental health. That’s a priority. Students cannot learn to the best of their ability when their mental health is struggling” (P3). “Mental health and exercise. Two of the most important things in a school day” (P4).

Being able to see the full scope and aiming to view everything from a dual perspective lens is important when it comes to being an effective leader (Satyawati, 2024). “You have to be able to get the people to see another side” (P4). Throughout the interviews, a consistent theme discussed was seeing both sides of the story and looking at multiple perspectives. “You have to look at both sides of the story. You have to look at the student side, you have to look at the teacher side, and you have to kind of see

where does all of that meet in terms of the mission of the school? What are we here to accomplish? How do we best accomplish that? It really gives you a much broader view of how things are working academically, how things are working with classroom management, how things are working with all sorts of aspects of the school” (P2).

Being able to view dual perspectives while keeping the whole child in mind can help leaders in terms of making decisions that are equitable and aid in student success. This finding was common amongst all five participants in this research study. It is a key component of a school principal who has school counseling experience.

Theme 5: School Leader Growth Mindset

Growth mindset was a common topic of conversation amongst all five participants in this research study. A critical piece of school principals with previous school counseling experience is keeping improvement at the forefront every day. Participants discussed going to professional development often and bringing the information learned back to the teachers. “I like professional development. It has helped me a lot. Me learning what I needed to learn, then bringing faculty and staff to get trained” (P5). Participants discussed consistently analyzing data to see where improvements need to be made, whether it be in the classroom, in the bus line, or in terms of a student’s mental and emotional needs. School officials utilize data gathered from many areas to help in decision making (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). “A critical piece to being a good leader is willingness to learn” (P1). “You have to know how the data comes out. You have to know how the report card is calculated. There's always room for improvement. We are not asking for a miracle. Be realistic but move kids at least one year from where they are” (P3). Participants also talked about how visiting

classrooms helped them not only show support for their teachers and students, but it also helped them in seeing where improvements needed to occur. When gathering data, participants said that a firsthand view helped them absorb the data and come up with a plan for growth in that particular area.

Findings Related to the Research Problem

Chapter 1 discussed the research problem as a lowering candidate pool of school principals. This is due partially to more daily working demands, longer hours, and lower financial gains (Cierninski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2020; Sabina & Colwell, 2018). The recent change in Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-3-.34 was adjusted so that school counselors desiring a role as a school principal could achieve that in less time (ALSDE, 2025). According to the American School Counseling Association, school counselors are school leaders. They often have to exhibit many of the traits and qualities as that of a school principal in order to be an effective school counselor (ASCA, 2025a). Little research has been conducted on the lived experiences of school principals who have school counseling experience.

The findings of this study revealed that school principals with school counseling experience greatly believe in a relationship centered leadership style. Priority is placed on forming and maintaining positive relationships. They are also confident that leadership should be student centered. Focusing all decisions on what will help students achieve and find success while maintaining the school's mission is a top priority of school principals with school counseling experience. The participants in this study indicated that their time as a school counselor greatly prepared them for their role as a school principal. It helped them in terms of placing priority on educating the whole child.

The participants in this study talked about the importance of ensuring not only academic success, but also of ensuring students were learning and growing socially and emotionally as well. Viewing everything from a dual perspective lens was another finding of this study. Being able to see the multiple perspectives aids in making solidified decisions that benefit students while staying aligned with a school's mission. Lastly, maintaining a growth mindset is important for school principals who were previously school counselors. Analyzing data and working to improve in all areas of a school are a priority of these school principals.

Findings Related to the Practice of School Principals

Throughout the interviews of this study, it was found that school principals with school counseling experience placed a priority on having positive relationships with those in the school community. In comparison, other literature surrounding school principals indicates that relationships are more of a strategy than the core of leadership styles (Chan et al., 2019; Reid, 2020; Schneider & Burton, 2005).

Another priority discussed during the interviews of this research study was placing students at the forefront of decision making and leading with a student-centered mindset. Literature surrounding school principals indicates that leadership strategies and decision-making tactics are often more data centralized/instructional improvement focused (Barkman, 2015; Chan et al., 2019; Schneider & Burton, 2005). While participants in this study do maintain a growth mindset and find data analysis important, they continue to stay focused on making improvement decisions that are sure to help students succeed while fulfilling the mission of the school.

All five participants in this study indicated that their experience as a school counselor was excellent preparation for their positions as a school counselor. Participants contribute their success in the school principal position to tactics and skills solidified during their time in the school counseling experience. The literature surrounding school principals mainly discusses preparation programs and mentoring as well as experience as an assistant principal (Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Parfitt & Rose, 2020; Parylo et al., 2013)

Significance of the Study

Research indicates there is a lack of qualified candidates for a school principal position. To aid in the lack of qualified candidates, administrators are utilizing succession planning to recruit and determine potential candidates (Cieminski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Ritchie, 2020; Sabina & Colwell, 2018). The recent change in Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-3-.34 was adjusted so that school counselors desiring a role as a school principal could achieve that in less time (ALSDE, 2025). The similarities of both school principals' and school counselors' standards and job responsibilities indicate that school counselors can be viable candidates for becoming exemplary school principals.

There is clear evidence that school principals should stay purpose and focus oriented, enact ethical and equitable responsibilities, act as instructional leaders, collaborate and interact with school community and stakeholders, create and maintain professional working relationships, and continuously strategize and implement ways for school improvement. There is little evidence, however, on how a school counseling background can impact these factors. Therefore, it is beneficial and meaningful to

understand these experiences. By doing so, more knowledge surrounding these influences is gained. Findings from this study may help in understanding these experiences so that more knowledge and information regarding school principals with a school counseling background can be conveyed.

This research supports school principals with school counseling experience. Through interviews conducted during this study, we have learned that school principals who were previously school counselors found the transition relatively easy due to the skills solidified while being a school counselor. These individuals placed a priority on developing the whole child and keeping decisions student centered to ensure that students can find success during their school years.

Future research in the area of school principals with school counseling experience should continue to focus on their lived experiences. Valuable information can be gained through understanding how these individuals lead. Efforts should be made to continue to fill the gap on information related to school principals who were previously school counselors. Future research should also include expanding the research to include more participants, especially with participants holding no classroom teaching experience.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

This study has articulated the positive effects having school counseling experience can have on school principals. While all participants in this study did not intend to become school principals when starting their educational journey, they were all influenced by a colleague or school administrator to pursue the school principal pathway. All participants undeniably said that their time as a school counselor greatly

benefited and helped them during their time as a school principal. This research supports the idea that school counselors have the ability to be exemplary school principals and can help in filling the shrinking candidate pool for the school principal position.

References

- Alabama State Department of Education. (2024). *Rule 290-4-3-.04 Alabama standards for school leadership*. Alabama Administrative Code.
<https://admincode.legislature.state.al.us/api/rule/290-4-3-.04>.
- Alabama State Department of Education. (2025, January). *Chapter 290-3-3: Educator Preparation*. Alabama Administrative Code (AMEND_20250124_290-3-3_...pdf). Alabama Achieves.
- American School Counselor Association. (2025a). *ASCA school counselor professional standards & competencies*. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org>
- American School Counselor Association. (2025b). *ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs* (5th ed.). Author.
<https://www.schoolcounselor.org>
- Atici, M. (2014). Examination of school counselors' activities: From the perspectives of counselor efficacy and collaboration with school staff. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 14(6), 2107–2120.
<https://doi-org.spot.lib.auburn.edu/10.12738/estp.2014.6.2554>
- Bardhoshi, G., & Duncan, K. (2009). Rural school principals' perception of the school counselor's role. *Rural Educator*, 30(3), 16–24.
- Barkman, C. (2015). The characteristics of an effective school leader. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 7(1), 14–18.
- Bloomberg, L. D. (2022). *Completing your qualitative dissertation* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Boulden, R., & Schimmel, C. (2022). Factors that affect school counselor retention in rural settings: An exploratory study. *Rural Educator*, 43(4),

1–14. <https://doi.org/10.55533/2643-9662.1334>

Bush, T. (2022). Succession planning for school principals: System control or leader agency? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(3).

351–353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221090727>

Chan, T. C., Jiang, B., Chandler, M., Morris, R., Rebisz, S., Turan, S., Shu, Z., & Kpeglo, S. (2019). School principals' self-perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in six countries. *New Waves-Educational Research and Development Journal*, 22(2), 37–61.

Cieminski, A. B. (2018). Practices that support leadership succession and principal retention. *Education Leadership Review*, 19(1), 21–41.

Craft, K., Slate, J. R., & Bustamante, R. M. (2009). Elementary school mission statements of exemplary and academically unacceptable campuses in Texas. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 4(4).

Dollarhide, C. T., Smith, A. T., & Lemberger, M. E. (2007). Critical incidents in the development of supportive principals: Facilitating school counselor-principal relationships. *Professional School Counseling*, 10(4), 360–369.

Easley, J., II. (2008). Moral school building leadership: Investigating a praxis for alternative route teacher retention. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(1), 25–38. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230810849790>

Farley-Ripple, E. N., Raffel, J. A., & Welch, J. C. (2012). Administrator career paths and school district stratification. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 50(6), 788–816. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231211264648>

Fink, D. (2010). *The succession challenge: Building and sustaining leadership capacity*

through succession management. SAGE Publications.

Fontanez, E. (2023). *Qualities of a school counselor and principal partnership that foster student learning and school culture: a qualitative study*. (Publication No. 3174767413) [Doctoral dissertation, Eastern Kentucky University]. ProQuest LLC.

Froeschle, J. G., & Nix, S. (2009). A solution-focused leadership model: Examining perceptions of effective counselor leadership. *Journal of School Counseling*, 7(5).

Fusarelli, B. C., Fusarelli, L. D., & Riddick, F. (2018). Planning for the future: Leadership development and succession planning in education. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 13(4), 286–313.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775118755153>

Gibson, D. M., Dollarhide, C. T., Conley, A. H., & Lowe, C. (2018). The construction and validation of the school counseling transformational leadership inventory. *Journal of Counselor Leadership & Advocacy*, 5(1), 1–12.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2326716X.2017.1399246>

Graf, E., & Yavuz, O. (2023). Urban high school faculty members speak up: What they need from a school counseling program from school counselors and principals.

Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 7(1).

Gurley, D. K., Peters, G. B., Collins, L., & Fifolt, M. (2015). Mission, vision, values, and goals: An exploration of key organizational statements and daily practice in schools. *Journal of Educational Change*, 16(3), 217-242.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-014-9229-x>

Hayes, S. D., & Burkett, J. R. (2021). Almost a principal: Coaching and training

- assistant principals for the next level of leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*, 31(6), 502–525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684620912673>
- Ishimaru, A. M. (2019). From family engagement to equitable collaboration. *Educational Policy*, 33(2), 350–385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904817691841>
- Kirchner, G. L., & Setchfield, M. S. (2005). School counselors' and school principals' perceptions of the school counselor's role. *Education*, 126(1), 10.
- Lambert, M., & Bouchamma, Y. (2019). Leadership requirements for school principals: Similarities and differences between four competency standards. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 188, 53–68.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). School leadership that works: From research to results. ASCD, Alexandria, VA.
- Merino, I., Membrive, A., Largo, M., & Engel, A. (2025). School projects with the community: Educational practices that promote connection between learning contexts and experiences. *Acta Psychologica*, 255. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104893>
- National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2015). *Professional standards for educational leaders*. Author.
- Nelson, J., & Bustamante, R. M. (2009). Preparing professional school counselors as collaborators in culturally competent school administration. *International Journal Of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 4(1).
- Northouse, P. G. (2021). Introduction to leadership: Concepts and practice, 5th edition. SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.

- Parfitt, C. M., & Rose, A. L. (2020). Informal mentoring for aspiring school leaders: A phenomenological study. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 28(3), 278–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2020.1778837>
- Parylo, O., Zepeda, S. J., & Bengtson, E. (2013). Career paths in educational leadership: Examining principals' narratives. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 58(4), 565–599. <https://doi.org/10.55016/ojs/ajer.v58i4.55610>
- Peoples, K. (2020). *How to write a phenomenological dissertation: A step-by-step guide* (1st ed.). Sage Publications.
- Reid, D. B. (2020). US principals' sensemaking of the future roles and responsibilities of school principals. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(2), 251-267. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219896072>
- Regan, S. D. (1998). Becoming a dean: The impact of humanistic counselor training on a career in academic administration. *Journal of Humanistic Education & Development*, 37(1), 21. <https://doi-org.spot.lib.auburn.edu/10.1002/j.21644683.1998.tb00402.x>
- Ritchie, M. (2020). Succession planning for successful leadership: Why we need to talk about succession planning! *Management in Education*, 34(1), 33–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020619881044>
- Sabina, L. L., & Colwell, C. (2018). Challenges of principal succession -- Examining the challenges of hiring internal vs. external candidates. *Athens Journal of Education*, 5(4), 375–395.
- Satyawati, S.T. (2024). Analysis of effective principal leadership based on trait approach

in improving education quality. *Journal Pedagogy*, 11(3), 508–517.

<https://doi.org/10.33394/jp.v11i3.10235>

Schneider, A., & Burton, N. (2005). An ideal “type”?--The characteristics of effective school principals as perceived by aspiring principals both from within education and those from an alternate career path. *Management in Education*, 19(2), 6–9.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/08920206050190020201>

Schulte, D. P., Slate, J. R., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2010). Characteristics of effective school principals: A mixed-research study. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 56(2), 172–195.

Tygret, J., Mendez, S., Arndt, A., Lovato, D., & Scott, M. (2020). The need for collaboration: Experiences and perceptions of preservice principals and school counselors. *Journal of Counselor Preparation & Supervision*, 13(4), 1–26.

Ummanel, A., McNamara, G., & Stynes, M. (2016). The career paths of primary school principals in Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies*, 35(1), 57–71.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2016.1151373>

Waalkes, P. L., DeCino, D. A., Haugen, J. S., & Dalbey, A. (2018). The relationship between job roles and gender on principal–school counselor relationship quality.

Professional School Counseling, 22(1), 1–9.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26784473>

Wahlstrom, K. L., & Louis, K. S. (2008). How teachers experience principal leadership: The roles of professional community, trust, efficacy, and shared responsibility.

Educational Administration Quarterly, 44(4), 458–495.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X08321502>

- Windham, H. D., & Tuttle, M. (2023). Perceptions of school counselors and administrators on the role of school counseling. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*, 10, 117–142.
- Wilkins, N. J., Verlenden, J. M. V., Szucs, L. E., & Johns, M. M. (2023). Classroom management and facilitation approaches that promote school connectedness. *Journal of School Health*, 93(7), 582–593.
<https://doiorg.spot.lib.auburn.edu/10.1111/josh.13279>
- Wojeski, C. G. (2011). *The leadership practices of school superintendents with a background in school counseling* (Doctoral dissertation, The Sage Colleges).
- Young, A., & Bryan, J. (2015). The school counselor leadership survey: Instrument development and exploratory factor analysis. *Professional School Counseling*, 19(1), 115. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90014784>
- Young, A. A., & Dollarhide, C. T. (2017). Introduction to the special issue: A case for school counseling leadership. *Professional School Counseling*, 21(1b), 1–8.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/90023604>
- Zalaquett, C. P., & Chatters, S. J. (2012). Middle school principals' perceptions of middle school counselors' roles and functions. *American Secondary Education*, 40(3), 89–103.

Appendix A



EXEMPT RESEARCH PROTOCOL TEMPLATE

Exempt Categories

Please select the exempt category that best describes your research:		
	Exempt Category	Criteria
	Exempt 1: Normal Educational Practices	Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
	Exempt 2: Educational Tests, Surveys or Interviews, or Public Observation	Research that only includes interactions (<i>may not include interventions</i>) involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7). <i>Children may participate in Exemption 2 (i) and (ii) if the research is limited to educational tests or the investigator(s) do not participate in the activities being observed during observation of public behavior.</i>



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

☐	Exempt 3: Benign Behavioral Intervention	Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection and at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; - or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7). The benign behavioral interventions must be brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the subjects, and the investigator has no reason to think the subjects will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing. NOTE: If the research involves deceiving the subjects regarding the nature or purposes of the research, this exemption is not applicable unless the subject authorizes the deception through a prospective agreement to participate in research in circumstances in which the subject is informed that he or she will be unaware of or misled regarding the nature or purposes of the research. <i>Children are not eligible for Exempt 3 research.</i>
☐	Exempt 4: Secondary Use of Data or Specimens	Secondary research for which consent is not required: Secondary research uses of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens, if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens are publicly available; (ii) Information, which may include information about biospecimens, is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, the investigator does not contact the subjects, and the investigator will not re-identify subjects; For criteria (iii) and (iv), please visit https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/45-cfr-46/common-rule-subpart-a-46104/index.html **If your research ONLY involves secondary use of data, please complete HRP 900 – APPENDIX – SECONDARY USE OF DATA. However, if your research involves any activities other than secondary use of data, documents, records, or specimens, continue with this form.



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Approved 11/30/2025 to 11/30/2028
Protocol STUDY0000972

Page 2 of 8

Version Date: 09/19/2024



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

☐	Exempt 5: Federal Research and Demonstration Projects	Research and demonstration projects that are conducted or supported by a Federal department or agency, or otherwise subject to the approval of department or agency heads (or the approval of the heads of bureaus or other subordinate agencies that have been delegated authority to conduct the research and demonstration projects), and that are designed to study, evaluate, improve, or otherwise examine public benefit or service programs, including procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs, possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures, or possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs. For additional criteria please visit https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/45-cfr-46/common-rule-subpart-a-46104/index.html
☐	Exempt 6: Taste and Food Quality	Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies: (i) If wholesome foods without additives are consumed, or (ii) If a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
☐	Exempt 7: Storage or Maintenance of Secondary Research	Storage or maintenance for secondary research for which broad consent is required: Storage or maintenance of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for potential secondary research use if an IRB conducts limited IRB review (see HRP-319 - WORKSHEET - Limited IRB Review and Broad Consent). For research involving secondary use of data, documents, records, or specimens, please attach the completed HRP-900 - APPENDIX – Secondary Use of Data under 'Local Site Documents'. Please note that at this time, AU does not have the institutional infrastructure to support this category of research.
☐	Exempt 8: Secondary Research	Secondary research for which broad consent is required: Research involving the use of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for secondary research use (see HRP-319 - WORKSHEET - Limited IRB Review and Broad Consent). For research involving secondary use of data, documents, records, or specimens, please complete and attach HRP-900 under 'Local Site Documents'. Please note that at this time, AU does not have the institutional infrastructure to support this category of research.

NOTES:

- Prisoners may not be included in exempt research, except for research aimed at involving a broader subject population that only incidentally includes prisoners.
- Exemption categories 7 and 8 require broad consent. The AU IRB has determined the regulatory requirements for legally effective broad consent are not feasible within the current institutional infrastructure. Exempt categories 7 and 8 will not be implemented at this time.



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Approved 11/30/2025 to 11/30/2028
Protocol STUDY00000972

Page 3 of 8

Version Date: 09/19/2024



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

PROTOCOL TITLE: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of School Principals with a School Counseling Background

VERSION DATE: 1

ANTICIPATED START DATE: January 2026

ANTICIPATED END DATE: March 2026

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Name: Dr. Ellen Hahn

Department: College of Education

Email address: reameseh@auburn.edu

☒ PI is not a student.

☒ I have read the PI eligibility statement in HRP 103 – INVESTIGATOR MANUAL and confirm that the above named PI meets criteria to be a PI on an IRB protocol at AU.

****ALL KEY PERSONNEL MUST BE ADDED THROUGH 'LOCAL STUDY TEAM MEMBERS' IN ENDEAVOR. PLEASE ENSURE THAT ALL PERSONNEL HAVE COMPLETED THE NECESSARY MODULES TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AS SPECIFIED IN HRP-103 – INVESTIGATOR MANUAL. YOU CAN CHECK THE STATUS OF CITI TRAINING BY CLICKING ON THE 'TRAINING' TAB IN ENDEAVOR. TRAINING THAT OCCURS OUTSIDE OF CITI MUST BE UPLOADED UNDER THE 'LOCAL SITE DOCUMENTS' SECTION OF YOUR PROTOCOL.****

DEPARTMENT HEAD/CHAIR:

Name: William Murrah

Email address: wmm0017@auburn.edu

Please Note: Undergraduate and graduate students are not allowed to be the Principal Investigator on a research study. For further information on who is eligible to serve as a Principal Investigator, see HRP-103 – INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

Is this study part of a dissertation or thesis?

☒ Yes

☐ No

Is this study part of a capstone project?

☐ Yes

☒ No

FUNDING INFORMATION:

Check all that apply.

☒ Not funded by any source.

☐ Internal funding. Provide the source/mechanism of internal support:

☐ U.S. Federal government funding (i.e., DoD, NIH, NSF, etc.) via one or more direct awards or a sub-award. Provide the source of federal support:



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Approved 11/30/2025 to 11/30/2028
Protocol STUDY0000972

Page 4 of 8

Version Date: 09/19/2024



AUBURN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board

☐ Other sources of funding (please specify):

Please complete the table below and identify all the study procedures that will be conducted in this study:

Check any applicable boxes:		☒ Interviews	☐ Benign E
☐ Normal Educational Practices	☐ Taste and Food Quality	☐ Observation of Public Behavior	☐ Seconda
☒ Surveys	☐ Educational Experiments		☐ Other (s)

1. Purpose and rationale of the study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Specifically, how do these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement. Participants will be asked questions related to their backgrounds and the above factors via one-on-one interviews. A follow up survey will then be completed. Results will be reported along with themes and commonalities discovered. Sarah Moncrief will be the researcher of the study gathering the data. Sarah Moncrief is seeking IRB approval from the Auburn University IRB.

2. Study procedures:

Through one-on-one interviews, participants will be asked questions about their lived experiences and how their school counseling backgrounds influenced factors pertaining to being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement. Participants will be current or previous school principals who have a background in school counseling. A survey will be sent after interviews are conducted with demographic questions and follow-up questions. An email invitation will be sent to potential participants using contact information collected from the Alabama State Department of Education and through the use of word of mouth. Time for study: The interviews will take approximately 30 minutes, and the follow-up survey will take approximately 15 minutes. Provisions to protect participants are described in Q11 below. The researches will collect names and email addresses for the purpose of scheduling interviews and for the purpose of emailing the gift card. The research will audio/video record the one-on-one Zoom interviews after participant permission has been given.

3. Study population: Participants will be current or previous school principals who have a background in school counseling.

- How many participants will be enrolled?** Approximately 5-10 potential participants will be contacted with an email invitation. I expect 4-8 respondents/participants.
- How many subject records will be obtained or received?** 0
- How many subject specimens will you receive?** 0





AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

Does the study target any of these special populations (check all that apply):

☐ Pregnant people/fetuses	☐ Known interpersonal relationships	☐ At risk for/Experiencing substance use disorder	☐ LGBTQIA+
☐ Minors	☐ At risk of/Experiencing homelessness	☐ Refugees	☐ American Indian/Alaskan Native
☐ Prisoners/Justice-Involved	☐ Persons with economic disadvantages	☐ Disabled people/People with disabilities	☐ AU faculty, staff, students
☐ Persons with educational disadvantages	☐ Decisionally or intellectually impaired	☐ Unauthorized immigrants	☐ Non-AU Students

4. Recruitment: An email will be sent to recruit participants who meet the research criteria of being a current or former school principal with a school counseling background. Participants will not be associated with Auburn University. Recruitment will be conducted via email notice. At the end of the email, an opt-in link will be available for participants wishing to participate. If they do not wish to participate, they do not click the link.

5. Study Location(s): Zoom for interviews; Qualtrics online

Will this research occur at an external or non-AU entity? ☒ Yes ☐ No

If your research involves AU students' records, do you have permission from the AU Registrar to conduct the research?

- ☒ This research does not include AU students' records
☐ Yes
☐ No

6. Potential Risks to Participants: Minimal risk of breach of confidentiality

7. Benefits to Participants: None

8. Consent Process: The initial recruitment/information email will contain a link to opt-in to participate and schedule a one-on-one interview. Embedded within this link will be the informed consent form. The consent form will be electronic due to the plan to have the consent in the Qualtrics survey. The research presents no more than minimal risk or harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of research context. The recruitment/information email covers the interview and survey portions of the study.

Will participants be asked to sign the consent document? ☐ Yes ☒ No
Will you use an electronic consent document? ☐ Yes ☒ No



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
 Approved 11/30/2025 to 11/30/2028
 Protocol STUDY00000972

Page 6 of 8

Version Date: 09/19/2024



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board

☐	Waiver of Consent (Including existing de-identified data)
☐	Waiver of Documentation of Consent (Use of Information Letter, rather than consent form requiring signatures)
☐	Waiver of Parental Permission (in Alabama, 18 years-olds may be considered adults for research purposes)

Provide the rationale for the waiver request: This is a minimal risk study. Collecting additional identifiers would increase the risk of breach of confidentiality.

9. Participant Compensation: A \$20.00 Amazon Gift Card would be sent electronically to the participants who complete the one-on-one interviews and complete the Qualtrics survey.

10. Personally Identifiable Information

Identify all personally identifiable information (PII) or protected health information (PHI) you will receive, collect, or record **even if you plan to anonymize the data or specimens.**

Check any **applicable** boxes.

☐ None	☐ IP addresses
☒ Names	☐ Date of births
☒ Email addresses	☐ Zip Codes
☐ Phone numbers	☐ Social security numbers
☐ Medical record numbers	☐ Student or employee numbers
☐ PHI	☐ Web URL
☐ Other: <i>Describe</i>	

11. Provisions to Protect Participant Privacy and Data Confidentiality: Interview transcripts and survey data will be kept in a secure Box folder. The interviews will not be anonymous. Video recordings of interviews will be kept in the secure Box folder. The recruitment email and participation link with consent will be sent to the potential participants via email. Potential participants who wish to participate will click the link for consent and to opt in for the interview. A reminder email will be sent to the potential participants one week after the initial email. After this, no further emails will be sent to potential participants. After participant interviews have been conducted, a survey link will be emailed to interview participants with demographic and follow-up questions. A reminder email for survey completion will be sent one week after the initial survey link email. The survey protocol will be amended (modified) based on themes and findings from the interviews. The names and emails of participants will be deleted once all



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Approved 11/30/2025 to 11/30/2028
Protocol STUDY0000972

Page 7 of 8

Version Date: 09/19/2024



interviews and surveys have been conducted and an Amazon gift card has been emailed. Final reports and presentations will not include participant names or email addresses. Zoom recordings will be deleted once transcripts have been downloaded from the researcher's Zoom account. All identifiable information will be deleted and removed from the transcripts once they have been downloaded. Data will be kept in a Box folder for no more than 3 years.

12. Describe how the results of this study will be used.

Results of the study will be used to help add to the existing literature of school principals who were previously school counselors. Specifically, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and continuous improvement.

As a reminder, please upload all additional materials supporting your protocol to 'Local Site Documents' in Endeavor. This may include, but is not limited to:

- Data collection instruments
- Letters of support/permission
- Debriefing forms
- Vendor vetting documentation
- Scripts
- Data use agreements
- Conflict of Interest (COI) management plans
- Referral lists
- Emergency Action Plans (EAPs)
- Data Safety Monitoring Board (DSMB) plans
- Data security plans
- Recruitment materials (i.e., flyers, social media posts, etc.)
- Additional training certificates that are external to CITI (i.e., phlebotomy certificates, youth protection training, etc.)
- Clinical trial registration confirmation
- Relevant appendices (i.e., mental health safety plan, MRI appendix (HRP-901), anonymous data collection assurance (HRP-902), etc.)



Appendix B: Information Letter

An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of School Principals with a School Counseling Background

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Sarah Moncrief, Auburn University doctoral student, is inviting you to volunteer for a research study.

Study Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Specifically, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement.

Voluntary Consent: Participation is voluntary, and you have the option not to participate.

Activities and Procedures: Your part in the study will be to complete a one-on-one interview with the researcher and a follow up online survey. If you choose to participate, you will participate in a 30 minute one-one Zoom interview with the researcher. You will also submit a completed survey directly to the researcher via Qualtrics.

Participation Time: It will take you about 30 minutes to complete the interview and about 15 minutes to participate in the follow-up survey.

Risks and Discomforts: The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. If there are survey or interview questions that make you uncomfortable or that you would like to skip, you can choose not to respond to those questions. All data presented in reports and presentations will be presented in anonymous form.

Possible Benefits: You may not directly benefit from taking part in this study; however, findings from this study can help inform the field of educational leadership about the practices of school principals who have a background in school counseling.

INCENTIVES

Participants who complete the interview and survey will receive an Amazon gift card for \$20.00. The gift card will be sent electronically via email.

AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING

If you volunteer to participate and give permission for the interview to be recorded, an audio/video recording and transcript for the interview will be created via Zoom. Any identifiable information (including names and email addresses collected for interview scheduling purposes) will be deleted from the transcript. Audio/video recordings will be deleted upon download of the transcript as well.

PROTECTION OF PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations.

Identifiable information collected during the study will be removed, and the de-identified information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the participants or legally authorized representative.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Auburn University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 334-844-5966 or irbadmin@auburn.edu. The Auburn IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Auburn IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.

If you have any study related questions or if any problems arise, please contact Sarah Moncrief, doctoral student, Auburn University, Department of Educational Leadership, 251-564-4286, sad0001@auburn.edu.

CONSENT

By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, been allowed to ask any questions, and you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study.

The survey begins on the next page.

If you would prefer not to participate, please do not fill out the survey.

If you consent to participate, please complete the survey.

Appendix C: Email Recruitment Letter

Initial Recruitment Email:

Subject Line: Research Study Invitation: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of School Principals with a School Counseling Background

Email Message Body:

To Whom It May Concern,

I hope this message finds you well. I am inviting you to participate in a research study that has been approved by Institutional Review Boards at Auburn University. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Specifically, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement.

I am seeking participants who have experience as a school counselor before becoming a school principal. Your insights and reflections are invaluable, and findings from this study can help inform the field of educational leadership. Participation is voluntary. If you are not a school principal with a school counseling background, please disregard this email.

If you would like to participate, please complete the form below via Qualtrics. The Qualtrics feature that collects IP addresses is turned off. Once you have completed the form, you will be contacted to schedule a 30 minute one-on-one interview with the researcher. You will also have the opportunity to participate in a follow-up survey that will take approximately 15 minutes.

If you decide to participate, please complete the following steps:

1. Click on the link to the form below.
2. Read the consent form.
3. Complete the form.
4. Submit the form electronically.
5. Consider volunteering to participate in a follow-up survey at a later date.

We estimate the form will take approximately 5 minutes to complete. If you participate in the 30 minute interview and 15 minute follow up survey, you will receive an Amazon gift card for \$20.00. The gift card will be sent electronically via email.

Here is the link to the consent form and the survey for you to review and complete if you wish to do so:

https://auburn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7P8mmFDS6vbskR0

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact Sarah Moncrief 251-564-4286, sad0001@auburn.edu.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to share your experiences and contribute to this important research.

Best regards,

Sarah Moncrief

Follow-up Recruitment Email:

Subject Line: REMINDER: Research Study Invitation: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of School Principals with a School Counseling Background

Email Message Body:

To Whom It May Concern,

This is a follow-up message concerning my earlier invitation for you to complete the form to sign up for a one-on-one 30 minute interview to gain insight and explore the lived experiences of school principals with a school counseling background. If you already have returned the survey, please ignore this message.

Here is the link to the consent form and the survey for you to review and complete if you wish to do so:

https://auburn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7P8mmFDS6vbskR0

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact Sarah Moncrief 251-564-4286, sad0001@auburn.edu.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to share your experiences and contribute to this important research.

Best regards,

Sarah Moncrief

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Interview questions:

- 1) How long were/have you been a school principal?
- 2) How long were you a school counselor before becoming a school principal?
- 3) What was your reasoning for leaving your position as a school counselor and wanting to become a school principal?
- 4) What do you feel was the easiest transition from school counselor to school principal?
- 5) What was the hardest transition from school counselor to school principal?
- 6) How do you stay purpose and focus oriented?
- 7) How do you enact ethical and equitable responsibility?
- 8) How do you act as an instructional leader?
- 9) How do you collaborate and interact with the school community and stakeholders?
- 10) How do you create and maintain professional work relationships?
- 11) How do you focus on school improvement?
- 12) How did your time and experience as a school counselor contribute to your practices and beliefs as a school principal?

Appendix E: Qualtrics Dissertation Survey

Dissertation Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q12 An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of School Principals with a School Counseling Background **KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY** Sarah Moncrief, Auburn University doctoral student, is inviting you to volunteer for a research study.

Study Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of exemplary school principals with school counseling backgrounds. Specifically, how did these backgrounds influence factors pertaining to: being purpose and focus oriented, enacting ethical and equitable responsibility, acting as instructional leaders, collaborating and interacting with school community and stakeholders, creating and maintaining professional work relationships, and interpreting data for continuous improvement. **Voluntary Consent:** Participation is voluntary, and you have the option not to participate. **Activities and Procedures:** Your part in the study will be to complete a one-on-one interview with the researcher and a follow up online survey. If you choose to participate, you will participate in a 30 minute one-one Zoom interview with the researcher. You will also submit a completed survey directly to the researcher via Qualtrics.

Participation Time: It will take you about 30 minutes to complete the interview and about 15 minutes to participate in the follow-up survey. **Risks and Discomforts:** The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. If there are survey or interview questions that make you uncomfortable or that you would like to skip, you can choose not to respond to those questions. All data presented in reports and presentations will be presented in anonymous form.

Possible Benefits: You may not directly benefit from taking part in this study; however, findings from this study can help inform the field of educational leadership about the practices of school principals who have a background in school counseling. **INCENTIVES** Participants who complete the interview and survey will receive an Amazon gift card for \$20.00. The gift card will be sent electronically via email. **AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING** If you volunteer to participate and give permission for the interview to be recorded, an audio/video recording and transcript for the interview will be created via Zoom. Any identifiable information (including names and email addresses collected for interview scheduling purposes) will be deleted from the transcript. Audio/video recordings will be deleted upon download of the transcript as well. **PROTECTION OF PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY** The results of this study may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations. Identifiable information collected during the study will be removed, and the de-identified information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent from the participants or legally authorized representative.

CONTACT INFORMATION If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Auburn University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 334-844-5966 or irbadmin@auburn.edu. The Auburn IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Auburn IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff. If you have any

study related questions or if any problems arise, please contact Sarah Moncrief, doctoral student, Auburn University, Department of Educational Leadership, 251-564-4286, sad0001@auburn.edu. **CONSENT** By participating in the study, you indicate that you have read the information written above, been allowed to ask any questions, and you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research. You do not give up any legal rights by taking part in this research study. **The survey begins on the next page.** If you would prefer not to participate, please do not fill out the survey. If you consent to participate, please complete the survey.

Page Break

Q1 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male (1)
 - ☐ Female (2)
 - ☐ Non-binary / third gender (3)
 - ☐ Prefer not to say (4)
-

Q9 What is your ethnicity?

- ☐ Hispanic or Latino (1)
 - ☐ White (2)
 - ☐ Black or African American (3)
 - ☐ Asian (4)
 - ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native (5)
 - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (6)
 - ☐ Other (Please Specify) (7)
-
- ☐ Prefer not to say (8)
-

Q2 How long were you a school counselor?

- ☐ Less than 5 years (1)
 - ☐ 6-10 years (2)
 - ☐ 11-15 years (3)
 - ☐ 16 or more years (4)
-

Q3 How long have you been a school principal?

- ☐ Less than 5 years (1)
 - ☐ 6-10 years (2)
 - ☐ 11-15 years (3)
 - ☐ 16 or more years (4)
-

Q4 What is your highest level of degree?

- ☐ Bachelor's Degree (1)
 - ☐ Master's Degree (2)
 - ☐ Specialist Degree (3)
 - ☐ Doctoral Degree (4)
 - ☐ Other (Please Specify) (5)
-

Q5 What is your highest level of degree in the area of school counseling?

- ☐ Bachelor's Degree (1)
 - ☐ Master's Degree (2)
 - ☐ Specialist Degree (3)
 - ☐ Doctoral Degree (4)
 - ☐ Other (Please Specify) (5)
-

☐ No degree in this field. (6)

Q6 What is your highest level of degree in the area of school leadership?

- ☐ Bachelor's Degree (1)
 - ☐ Master's Degree (2)
 - ☐ Specialist Degree (3)
 - ☐ Doctoral Degree (4)
 - ☐ Other (Please Specify) (5)
-

☐ No degree in this field. (6)

Q7 Did you want to become a school administrator when you first started your educational career?

- ☐ Yes (1)
 - ☐ No (2)
-



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Approved 11/30/2025 to 11/30/2028
Protocol STUDY00000972

Page 5 of 6

Q8 If you did not have a goal of becoming a school administrator when you first started your educational career, what was the reasoning for choosing to follow the school administrator pathway after beginning your career? (Please enter N/A if this was originally your goal.)

End of Block: Default Question Block



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
Approved 11/30/2025 to 11/30/2028
Protocol STUDY00000972

Page 6 of 6

Appendix F: CITI Training Certificates



Completion Date 21-Sep-2025
Expiration Date 21-Sep-2028
Record ID 72287786

This is to certify that:

Sarah Moncrief

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Responsible Conduct of Research
(Curriculum Group)
AU Basic RCR Training for ALL Faculty, Staff, Postdocs, and Students
(Course Learner Group)
1 - RCR
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Auburn University

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative
101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 06-Nov-2025. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?we03d1c02-4fac-4720-92b2-7035026140e9-72287786



Completion Date 21-Sep-2025
Expiration Date 21-Sep-2028
Record ID 59333228

This is to certify that:

Sarah Moncrief

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

IRB Additional Modules

(Curriculum Group)

Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools - SBE

(Course Learner Group)

1 - Basic Course

(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Auburn University

Not valid for renewal of
certification through CME.



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 21-Sep-2025. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w77480dd0-f22f-4012-b384-221003b83ca8-59333228



Completion Date 05-Nov-2025
Expiration Date 05-Nov-2026
Record ID 72469132

This is to certify that:

Sarah Moncrief

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Research Security: A Basic Course.
(Curriculum Group)

Research Security: A Basic Course
(Course Learner Group)

1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Auburn University

Not valid for renewal of
certification through CME.



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 06-Nov-2025. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w01dd1879-1682-4f22-b908-b37adcc006db-72469132



Completion Date 01-Nov-2023
Expiration Date 01-Nov-2026
Record ID 72469104

This is to certify that:

Sarah Moncrief

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

IRB # 2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - Non-AU Personnel
(Curriculum Group)
IRB # 2 Social and Behavioral Emphasis - Non-AU Personnel
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Auburn University

Not valid for renewal of
certification through CME.



101 NE 3rd Avenue, Suite 320
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301 US
www.citiprogram.org

Generated on 06-Nov-2025. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify?wff4c7323-54a5-4a19-a614-c35159bda9b1-72469104