

**School Administrators' Perceptions of Alabama's ACCESS Distance Learning Program**

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine Alabama high school principals' perceptions about ACCESS Distance Learning. An exploratory research design was used and data were collected by survey. The survey was emailed to 508 Alabama high school principals representing the 132 school districts statewide (as of 2013). Fifty-two surveys were completed, returned, and analyzed, yielding a 10% return rate. Demographic information was collected and used as variables when analyzing other data. Quantitative survey responses were analyzed using means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages, and Pearson's *r*. Findings reveal that there was no statistical significance between principal demographics and the variables of student level of learning and instructional processes. However, results indicated that there is a positive correlation between the variables of instructional processes and levels of learning. Findings suggest the majority of principals participating in this study are supportive of ACCESS in relation to course preparedness, the learning environment, assessment procedures, high quality instruction, its personnel, and its logistics. However, they perceive that student motivation, sufficient student feedback, level of student interaction, and instructional delivery that meets students' needs are concerns. Additionally, when asked about whether or not ACCESS provides equal to or better than face-to-face instruction, principals favored face-to-face instruction (N=35, 67.2%). This is troubling, since ACCESS received high praise from students and teachers in five external reviews (Roblyer, Bielefeldt & Olszewski, 2010; Roblyer, Bielefeldt, Sampson-Gruener & 2009; Roblyer, Freeman, Stabler, & Schneidmiller, 2007a, 2007b, 2008). ACCESS

policymakers should consider the feedback and expertise of principals who are directly responsible for the success of their students when making policy decisions in the future.

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## CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

This research study examines the perceptions of Alabama high school principals about distance learning, with respect to instructional processes and levels of student learning. This chapter provides a brief synopsis of background information related to the study, situates the study purpose within relevant literature, briefly describes the methods used to explore the topic and the significance of the research, and offers explanation of the underlying assumptions, limitations, and definitions pertinent to the study.

### **Background of the Study**

Internet-based distance education has caused an important paradigm shift in America's educational system (Levy, 2003). Across the state of Alabama, distance learning has been seen as a key strategy to address educational inequities, while offering a powerful tool to improve access to quality education, particularly in rural communities (Roblyer, Freeman, Stabler, & Schneidmiller, 2007a). In the past, schools in the most remote areas have had extensive difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified teachers who have the appropriate subject matter expertise and credentials, thus making it difficult for these schools and districts to offer a full range of course options (Crocker, 1989; Crocker & Riggs, 1979; House, 1986; Riggs, 1987). Distance learning may offer an alternative to these inequities, while enhancing instructional quality (Roblyer et al., 2007a).

The Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide (ACCESS) program was created to deliver instruction to rural and low-income students in Alabama who

have limited course offerings for students (Roblyer, Freeman, Donaldson, & Maddox, 2007).

The ACCESS Distance Learning Initiative was launched on November 1, 2004, with funding of \$10.3 million starting October 1, 2005 (Roblyer, Freeman, Stabler, & Schneidmiller, 2007a).

The distance education initiative was the culmination of research and planning by Governor Bob Riley's Task Force on Distance Learning.

Alabama's distance learning program is on the cutting edge of such a framework (Roblyer et al., 2007a). Current literature about ACCESS has shown that there appears to be no statistically significant differences between students who attend classes through Asynchronous Learning versus Interactive Video Conferencing (Roblyer, Freeman, Donaldson, & Maddox, 2007). Current literature about ACCESS also infers that teachers and students were reported as being "generally satisfied with the instructional strategies used in both IVC and online courses and view them as beneficial to support learning" (Roblyer et al., 2007a). Notwithstanding, there is a lack of research addressing the perceptions, attitudes, and contextual differences among Alabama high school principals regarding the ACCESS program, particularly with respect to the instructional processes involved and the levels of learning and academic success of their students in the program. This study explores the perceptions of Alabama high school principals and also examines the relationships among demographic characteristics of Alabama high schools, such as school size, location of the school district, and the number of years the principal has as a school administrator and principal views on ACCESS.

Distance learning, since its inception, has been and will likely continue to be a form of instructional delivery that may rescue students in times of need and provide them with an additional opportunity to excel. The expansion of distance learning in America's high schools has become commonplace, and oftentimes this has been out of necessity (Cavanaugh, Barbour,

& Clark, 2009). Virtual schools and distance learning educational settings are either asynchronous online (Internet web-based or computer-based learning with no teacher present), or synchronous (videoconferencing, classroom lectures, and online chat rooms) (Clark, 2001).

Virtual schools and distance learning are seen as a solution to overcrowded schools, a lack of qualified teachers, and to serve students who need to learn at a nontraditional pace or place different from the school classroom (Cavanaugh & Clark, 2007). Consequently, virtual schools and distance learning programs have developed in many different ways, so as to meet students' needs. Clark (2001) indicated that there were different types of virtual schools, based on funding and governance, which he categorized into seven ways:

- State-sanctioned, state level schools
- College and university-based
- Consortium and regionally-based
- Local education agency-based
- Virtual charter schools
- Private rural schools
- For-profit providers of curricula, content, tools and infrastructure

Virtual schools may be ideally suited to meet the needs of stakeholders who are calling for school choice, high school reform, and workforce preparation in 21st century skills (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, & Blomeyer, 2004). Barbour and Reeves (2009) have classified virtual schooling benefits could be divided into the following areas:

- expanding educational access
- providing high quality learning opportunities
- improving student outcomes and skills, allowing for educational choice

- achieving administrative efficiency

According to Cavanaugh et al. (2004), the many thousands of K–12 students who participate in online education programs are attracted to virtual schooling because it offers advantages over classroom-based programs. Among the benefits of distance education for school-age children are increases in enrollment or time in school as education programs reach underserved regions, broader educational opportunity for students who are unable to attend traditional schools, access to resources and instructors not locally available, and increases in student-teacher communication (Cavanaugh & Clark 2007; Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

After the initial technological investment costs have been absorbed, school districts can generally assume costs associated with offering online courses with less financial burden because they do not have to hire a certified teacher for that course. In addition to being less expensive, students in virtual schools have shown to have improved student outcomes and skills (Berge & Clark, 2005; Zucker & Kozma, 2003). As distance education is currently practiced, educators and other stakeholders can reasonably expect learning in a well-designed distance education environment to be equivalent to learning in a well-designed classroom environment (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, & Blomeyer, 2004). Essentially, these advantages have been shown by researchers to have more benefit than their traditional counterparts, assuming they have been well-designed (Bernard et al., 2004). In light of Bernard et al.'s research, Roblyer, Freeman, Donaldson, and Maddox (2007) found no significant differences in achievement when online environments were compared to Interactive Video Conferencing environments, which are not traditional.

Given the advantages posed here for incorporating distance learning into America's high schools, distance learning is not for every student. Successful completion of distance education



offerings requires students to be firmly ensconced in self-control, have self-directed focus, and intrinsic motivation (Cavanaugh, 2007; Kellog & Politoski, 2002). Learning any subject in such a format has its own specific challenges, not least of which is the need to develop self-awareness and acquire good self-management skills as part of developing autonomy as defined by Hurd et al. (2001) in their investigation of strategy instruction and learner support in relation to distance language learning. They stress that conscious selection of strategies and self-directed involvement are characteristics of an autonomous approach, and particularly relevant to those learning in independent contexts (Hauck & Hurd, 2005).

Distance learning is still an area with controversy. School leaders and researchers have conflicting views about its effectiveness and benefits. Critics have found distance learning classes to be ineffective, claiming that these classes almost always reflect higher student failure and dropout rates (Kozma & Zucker, 2003). This is a finding consistent with some researchers examining postsecondary populations (Bernard et al., 2004). Additionally, these findings have also been refuted (Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess & Blomeyer, 2004; Kearsley, 2000). Several studies report no significant differences between K–12 distance education and traditional education in relation to academic achievement (Falk et al., 1997; Goc Karp & Woods, 2003; Hinnant 1994; Jordan, 2002; Kozma et al., 2000; Mills, 2002; Ryan, 1996). The effectiveness of distance education appears to have more to do with who is teaching, who is learning, and how that learning is accomplished, and less to do with the medium (Rice, 2006). As a result of negative criticism, states have been focused on designing and implementing distance learning environments that support their learners and show positive results (Rice, 2006).

## **ACCESS as a Bridge to Rural and Underserved Students**

Distance learning in Alabama's public schools is fast becoming a way towards bridging rural and underserved students with more opportunities in their education (Maddox, 2008). With the advent of the Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide (ACCESS) initiative, teachers and students statewide use interactive videoconferencing as one avenue of instructional delivery. ACCESS is viewed by some as pivotal in its ability to offer students opportunities to take classes that are currently not available at their respective campuses (Maddox, 2008). ACCESS offers its students an instantaneous expansion of course offerings that have Alabama certified teachers (Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Roblyer, Bielefeldt, & Olszewski, 2010; Roblyer, Porter, Bielefeldt & Donaldson, 2009). With ACCESS, students can choose to enroll in interactive videoconferencing classes (IVC), through asynchronous web-based coursework, or through both. According to the ACCESS website (Alabama State Department of Education, 2011), ACCESS provides Alabama's high school students the following:

- Equal Access to High Quality Instruction
- An Infrastructure That Delivers Quality Learning Opportunities
- Greater Equity for all Alabama Public High School Students Through Cutting-Edge Technology
- Wide Range of Courses Available to Relatively few Alabama Students Today

## **ACCESS Expands Course Offerings**

It is claimed that courses offered through ACCESS expand school systems' abilities to better serve their students, and give them opportunities to further their learning beyond the offerings of their respective schools (Task Force on Distance Learning, 2011). Students who are

part of Alabama's "Advanced Diploma" option oftentimes need specific higher-level courses that may or may not be offered at their campus. The same can be said for students who are participating in Advanced Placement (AP) coursework. ACCESS can also give these students opportunities to enroll in AP courses that their campus may not offer. Students who wish to participate in dual enrollment and take classes that count as both high school and college credits but cannot due to their school's lack of certified teachers in those content areas are able to participate with ACCESS (Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b).

### **Equal Opportunity**

Another claim is that ACCESS has the potential to offer equal opportunity for course access to all of Alabama's students, including those who are in need of extra assistance in meeting their school's graduation requirements, or possibly with passing the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) (Governor's Task Force, 2004). Students who need to recover credits lost due to disciplinary reasons, who transfer from another institution either in-state or out of state, or who need remediation for passing the AHSGE are able to take advantage of ACCESS's offerings (Roblyer et al., 2007).

Another claim is that students in Alabama have equal access to ACCESS courses. Students interested in the program simply discuss the program with their counselor, and then enroll in the classes that they have chosen as part of their diploma requirements. If students choose to withdraw from the coursework, they have the option to do so, just as if they were in a traditional classroom setting (Roblyer et al., 2006, 2007a).

### **Use of Multimedia and Technology**

ACCESS incorporates a key best practice found in traditional classrooms: it utilizes multimedia and technology to enhance technology, and not overtake it (Roblyer et al., 2007a,

2007b, 2008; Roblyer et al., 2009; Roblyer et al., 2010). Virtual field trips, podcasting, and interaction with teachers and classmates from other parts of the state and nation are all key features of ACCESS's ability to incorporate multimedia and technology into what students' are learning at a particular time in their coursework (Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Roblyer et al., 2009; Roblyer et al., 2010).

### **Commitment to ACCESS**

The State of Alabama's commitment to ACCESS has prompted changes within the Alabama Administrative Code (AAC). For example, the AAC removed restriction on number of credits students can earn through online courses (Alabama Administrative Code, §290-3-1-02(8) a-d (2011)). There are numerous reasons for the state's support of ACCESS, most of which pertain to keeping students on track for graduation and not falling behind in their studies (Roblyer et al., 2007). Another change in the AAC involved added wording to allow normal school day to include night school, summer school, and other extended day periods (Alabama Administrative Code, §290-3-1-02(8) a-d (2011)). As a result, non-traditional students, such as teen mothers, summer school students, and also students who are of majority age or who work full-time and need only a few credits of coursework to graduate can now be included through ACCESS. Homebound students are allowed to participate in online classes, pending their Superintendent's approval (Alabama Administrative Code, §290-3-1-02(8) a-d (2011)). Again, the goal of being able to offer equal access to high-quality instruction is a core value of ACCESS. By allowing all students of all needs to be participants of ACCESS, this goal is met (Governor's Task Force, 2005; Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b; Task Force on Distance Learning, 2011).

## **Quality Teachers, Technology, and Facilitators**

Before using ACCESS classes, a three-day professional development session is provided for ACCESS teachers, ACCESS facilitators (support personnel who manage the Interactive Video Conferencing, web-based courses, and the technology hardware used in the ACCESS lab), and technology coordinators within the school or district. In addition, school systems that choose to participate in ACCESS are provided with current technology that is designed for optimum learning and interaction. Examples include the following:

- Tablet Computers (1-1)
- Document Camera
- Microsoft Office Suite
- DVD/VCR
- Laptop Cart
- Wireless Router
- Printer/Phone/Fax
- Interactive Whiteboard
- Multimedia Projector
- Portable IVC Station (Including “Presenter,” Camera(s), Plasma Monitor, and Wheeled Cart) (Roblyer et al., 2007a)

## **Outside Evaluator**

When designing ACCESS, The State of Alabama decided to remove its personal biases from the evaluation process (Governor’s Task Force, 2004). As a result, ACCESS has utilized an outside, independent agency to evaluate its progress, its successes, and failures. The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) was chosen to be the outside

evaluator. According to the Roblyer et al. (2007b), ISTE reported that ACCESS met all deadlines for implementation, and met all of the needs presented to the Governor's Task Force. Additionally, the ISTE findings reported that ACCESS met or exceeded all of its goals for Phase I implementation (Roblyer et al., 2007a).

Student and teacher responses to the ISTE evaluation of ACCESS were generally favorable. Students reported that the experience of being an ACCESS student was "positive". Over 75% of the student participants reported to ISTE that their ACCESS experience was as good as or better than their traditional school experience. Also, two-thirds of these participants reported to ISTE that their expectations were met. Over 82% of school personnel reported the virtual school experience was as good as or better than other, traditional courses (Roblyer et al., 2008).

### **Transformational Instruction**

ACCESS has a unique delivery method for Alabama's students. This method has been coined "Transformational Instruction" because it has literally transformed how students learn (Maddox, 2008). There are three different modes of instruction. Coursework is presented in traditional settings, through IVC, as well as through online instruction. This hybrid model uses different modes of instruction to support traditional instruction (Roblyer et al., 2009). In addition to focusing on student learning styles, ACCESS offers students opportunities to learn a myriad of skills that they may not be able to learn or use elsewhere. Skills such as collaboration, research, critical thinking, self-direction, interpersonal communication, creativity, leadership, ethics, personal responsibility/accountability, social responsibility, and productivity are all key components for young adults to become successful adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Afshari, Bakar,

Luan, Saman, & Foori, 2008). The ability to interact with colleagues and utilize these skills while learning course content is valuable beyond measure (Dinham, 2005).

ACCESS can be used as an alternative used for students who choose to participate in dual-enrollment college credit and advance placement courses. Additionally, this mode of instruction is used for students who choose to enroll in credit recovery coursework, as well as for remedial students who need extra assistance and additional resources towards meeting graduation requirements. ACCESS also offers students the opportunity to participate in elective coursework that is not currently being offered at their respective campus. Further, Alabama's distance learning program provides teachers with additional multimedia and technology tools to enhance instruction (Roblyer et al., 2009).

Distance learning opportunities open doors students from diverse backgrounds (Governor's Task Force, 2004). Distance education in Alabama's public schools has been well-received by school districts in Alabama, especially in schools where the need to provide students with courses that cannot be offered by faculty within a school district is a concern (Governor's Task Force, 2004; Roblyer et al., 2007a). It also serves to reduce scheduling conflicts, and to meet the need for specialized courses that have enrollments that are not cost-effective and too small to justify delivery (Governor's Task Force, 2004; Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b). Furthermore, ACCESS provides courses to meet the requirements of special student populations (Picciano & Seaman, 2007). Since its inception in 2004, Alabama's public schools have seen an influx of high school students enrolling in the ACCESS program (Roblyer, et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008).

## Conceptual Framework

Principals' perceptions about distance learning generally are focused on the instructional processes used in instruction and the levels of student learning (Dzwonek, 2007). Additionally, the roles of the principal being an effective and influential leader of school improvement, instruction, technology integration and implementation are explored. An effective 21st century instructional leader has the ability to understand, integrate, and support technology within schools (McCoy-Thomas, 2012). Being an effective integrator of technology is a critical component towards guiding the teaching-learning process necessary for preparing today's students with the relevant knowledge and skills needed to become a productive citizen of the 21st century (McCoy-Thomas, 2012).

Distance learning has grown and evolved exponentially over the last fifteen years, researchers have discussed at length the notions that the educational landscape that governs distance learning is difficult to navigate due to inconsistent policies or ones that are nonexistent across the states (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Picciano & Seaman, 2007; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010). To further compound the complexities related to distance learning, terminology used to describe distance learning is inconsistent across the United States (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Picciano & Seaman, 2007; Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010). Additionally, at the national level, the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires states to offer alternative schooling options to students attending schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) (Huett, Huett & Ringlaben, 2012). This mandate has forced many schools to consider alternatives to traditional site-based learning. Additional factors such as increasing student populations, teacher shortages, budget cuts, competition from virtual and charter schools, and improved mobile technologies have forced educators to re-examine their operation as K-12



schools in the future of education (Huett, Huett, & Ringlaben, 2012). Online learning is a rapidly growing phenomenon in K–12 education and it is a paradigm shift occurring in the educational landscape (Huett, Huett, & Ringlaben, 2012).

According to Picciano and Seaman (2010), high school administrators perceive online learning as “meeting the diverse needs of their students whether through Advanced Placement, elective college courses, or credit recovery” (pp. 19–20). Online and blended learning offerings are two ways that high school administrators often cite as ways to provide courses not otherwise available to their students (Picciano & Seaman, 2010). This supports the concept that online technologies can facilitate teachers’ ability to differentiate instruction and therefore offer more choices for high school administrators when developing their schools’ academic programs (Picciano & Seaman, 2010). Additionally, distance learning is perceived to be cost-effective (Mupinga, 2005).

While ACCESS was designed to provide equity and opportunity to the students of Alabama while meeting accountability mandates from national and state governments in a blended learning model, it is the role of the principal to be a technologically proficient leader, to be an effective leader for school improvement, and to be an effective influential instructional leader who ensures the integration of technology in the teaching-learning process. Each of these contributes to making the student learning experience a success.

Secondly, the significance of the role of the high school principal in terms of student achievement, graduation rates, and student efficacy, as well as the growing emergence of reliance on distance learning to assist students, the role of the high school principal as an instructional leader, a leader for positive change, and promoter of technology is critical (Baylor & Ritchie, 2002; Fullan, 2001).

Given the research-based qualities of successful instructional leaders (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Olson & Hendrie, 1998) school districts should employ leaders who echo, who embrace, and who emulate these traits daily to all stakeholders in the school community. Additionally, successful leaders are able to be collaborative effectively, be collegial, be courageous, and be committed towards doing what is right and just for their school (Erb, 2005). According to Williams (2008), Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2003), and Cotton (2003), effective leadership in schools includes:

- (a) a clear purpose, a positive school culture and shared beliefs
- (b) effective teacher and student engagement in an organized curriculum
- (c) educational opportunities offered through differentiated instruction

Other researchers such as Blum, Butler, and Olson (1987), Hallinger and Murphy (1986), Levine and Lezotte (1990), and Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore (1995) theorized similar characteristics of effective leaders adding the following:

- (a) provide safe teaching and learning environments
- (b) provide quality educational opportunities
- (c) be an effective manager of personnel, resources, students, and accountability
- (d) participate in, and offer opportunities for, professional development
- (e) offer respect and trust colleagues as equals.

Being an effective leader encompasses the ability to understand, integrate, and support technology within schools (McCoy-Thomas, 2012). Effective technology leadership is a key component in guiding the teaching-learning process necessary for preparing today's students with the relevant knowledge and skills necessary to become a productive citizen of the 21st century (McCoy-Thomas, 2012).

These foundational components of the roles of the principal as an effective instructional leader, particularly related to technology integration, form the conceptual framework for this study. This research explores the extent that instructional processes, levels of student learning, and the leadership theories impact principals' perceptions of ACCESS distance learning.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the positive feedback that students, teachers, and counselors gave ACCESS, (Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Roblyer et al., 2009; Roblyer et al., 2010) school leaders were not surveyed in these external evaluations about their perceptions of ACCESS with respect to the levels of learning that they perceive to occur in ACCESS classes, and the types of instructional processes that they perceive are being used in ACCESS classes. While ACCESS may be argued to be a success towards bridging the gap between rural schools and underserved students, it has not evaluated how successful high school principals perceive it to be to their schools. Additionally, high school administrators have not been a part of the refinement and development of ACCESS until 2011, when an expert panel created the ACCESS 5-year plan covering the years 2011–2016 (Alabama State Board of Education, 2011). This poses a concern for school leaders, since they are the ones responsible for the students' achievement (Code of Alabama, §Section 16-6B-1 (Acts 1995, No. 95-313, p. 620, §1; Act 2000-753, p. 1705, §1.)).

The research literature is well represented by studies that seek to identify effective best practices in the face-to-face K–12 classroom. Previous distance learning literature devoted itself towards establishing whether or not distance learning was equivalent to face-to-face learning. Clark (1994), Roblyer et al. (2007b), and Cavanaugh et al. (2004) all found no significant differences between face-to-face and distance learning outcomes.

An essential component to developing and maintaining any successful learning initiative that has a positive impact on student achievement is effective leadership (Kelly, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2004). Effective leaders always place a high priority on student academic success. Waters, Marzano and McNulty (2004) reinforced the importance of leadership on student achievement in K–12 education by suggesting that effective leadership is more than just knowing what to do, but in knowing when, how, and why to do it. In their meta-analysis, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) identified 21 critical leadership qualities that impact student achievement. Of these 21 leadership qualities, three areas are critical: principal as instructional leader, principal as change agent, and principal as technology leader. These three areas are also critical towards principals being successful in executing state level policy revisions to all facets of education, including ACCESS.

The Alabama State Department of Education established an additional requirement for incoming freshman in the 2009–2010 school year through the “First Choice Diploma” program (ALSDE, 2008a). It is likely that these course requirements will lead to a greater availability of ACCESS courses, and through the facilitation of course listing and registration, a greater enrollment of high school students in distance learning courses in Alabama (Code of Alabama 290-3-1-.02(8)(d)(4)). The high school principal plays a pivotal role in the selection and implementation of ACCESS courses.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Alabama High school principals with respect to the instructional process and level of learning in Alabama’s ACCESS distance online program. The relationships between demographic variables (years of experience,

school size) and principal's perceptions regarding (a) the instructional process and (b) the level of learning were explored.

### **Research Questions**

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of Alabama high school principals regarding:
  - a. School size?
  - b. Location of district?
  - c. Years of experience in school administration?
2. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional process of distance learning courses and important indicators of student learning?
3. What is the relationship, if any, exists between Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the instructional processes of distance learning courses, level of learning, and demographics?
4. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the level of learning in distance courses?
5. What is the relationship, if any, Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the level of learning in distance courses and school or principal demographics?
6. What is the relationship between Alabama high school principals' perceptions of the instruction processes and level of learning in Alabama distance learning courses?
7. What information is used by Alabama high school principals to make judgments about Alabama distance learning courses?

## **Research Methods**

This study utilized quantitative research methods and two open-ended questions to survey high school principals' perceptions. A survey instrument was adapted from a study completed by Dzwonek (2007), and tested for reliability and validity. The survey was conducted in January of 2013. The researcher sent a recruitment email, detailing the purpose of the study. Also, the researcher sent email invitations to all 508 high school principals in Alabama. The email invitation included a hyperlink that connected the participants to the researcher's online survey. The researcher sent email reminders weekly to all participants, encouraging them to participate during the month of January. A full explanation of research methods is provided in Chapter 3.

## **Significance of the Study**

This research examines high school principals' perceptions regarding Alabama's distance learning education courses that are offered through the ACCESS program. Additionally, this study may inform both school leaders and distance education instructors about how high school principals view instructional processes and level of learning in Alabama's distance learning courses. Finally, this study may provide insight about the processes Alabama's principals utilize to select and enroll students in distance learning courses.

## **Assumptions of the Study**

The assumptions made consisted of the following:

1. For the purpose of this study, it is assumed that high school principals have a common understanding of distance learning courses.
2. It is assumed that high school principals have a deeper level involvement with distance education course offerings for students than teachers, and therefore, are an appropriate group for studying perceptions about distance education.

3. It is assumed that the principals completed the surveys rather than assigning the survey to someone else.

### **Research Limitations**

1. The study is limited to high school principals in the State of Alabama whose campuses participate in ACCESS distance learning.
2. The reliability and validity of data obtained in this study are limited by the willingness of the respondents to answer candidly.

### **Definition of Terms**

The definitions of terms used in this study are presented below:

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Classroom:** A technology-infused classroom equipped with a tablet computer for every student, wireless access, videoconferencing equipment with capabilities to send courses to at least three additional sites, interactive whiteboard, digital projector, document camera, and software to enable communication over distance (Governor’s Task Force, 2004).

**Acceptable Use Policy (AUP):** Policy that ensures all participants adhere to local and state guidelines regarding ACCESS.

**Advanced Placement (AP):** The Advanced Placement (AP) program is a curriculum in the United States sponsored by the College Board which offers standardized courses to high school students that are generally recognized to be equivalent to undergraduate courses in college (The College Board, 2003).

**Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide (ACCESS):** This is Alabama’s Distance Learning Program which is referred to throughout the study.

**Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE):** The Alabama State Department of Education is the primary governing body of ACCESS Distance Learning.

**Asynchronous Distance Learning:** Communication that does not have to occur at the same time. Examples include online classroom, online discussions boards, and email (Governor’s Task Force, 2004). A two-way, communication between teacher and students that involves a time-delay between the transmission and receipt of a message (Dzwonek, 2007).

**Blended Learning:** General term used to describe a multimedia method of teaching and learning that includes a mix of Web-based instruction, and also streaming interactive video conferencing (IVC) in the ACCESS distance learning model (Roblyer, Freeman, Donaldson, & Maddox, 2007).

**Distance Education:** An educational program with the physical separation of teacher and learners that contains non-contiguous communication between the student and teacher mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986).

**Distance Learning:** “The acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance” (United States Distance Learning Association, 2007).

**Facilitator:** Employee at the Local Education Agency (LEA) who is responsible for handling technical issues, using the learning management system, facilitate students in receiving distance learning courses, and managing a distance learning classroom. This person serves as the face-to-face supervisor of ACCESS students.

**High School Level:** For the purposes of this study refers to grades 9, 10, 11, and 12.

**Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC):** A two-way interactive event where video and audio are simultaneously transmitted to students at high-school campuses in different locations.

**Instructional Process:** A measure of the educational impact of teaching practice; for this study it will include the dimensions of assessment and grading, motivating students to learn,



subject matter knowledge, course preparation and organization, respect for students, interaction and student feedback.

**Level of Learning:** A measureable criterion for assessing the academic accomplishments of students; in this study, level of learning is related to student outcomes in distance learning versus traditional face to face courses. For this study it will include the dimensions of the alignment to content standards, adequate preparation for future educational endeavors, preparation for post secondary education, and comparison to face-to-face courses.

**Local Education Agency (LEA):** The local school within the school district.

**Online Courses:** Web-based courses which are usually defined as courses which are offered over the Internet.

**Online Learning:** An encapsulating term used to describe any education, training, or professional development that occurs over the Internet or electronically.

**Synchronous:** Communication that must take place at the same time. Examples include videoconferencing, classroom lectures, and online chat rooms.

**Support Center:** A regional division established to provide support to schools offering distance learning (DL) by hiring, managing, and evaluating the performance of distance learning teachers; providing assistance and appropriate professional development to DL teachers, facilitators, and school systems for all distance learning delivery methods.

**Technical Infrastructure:** Defined as the physical network, hardware, and software elements utilized in providing an information transport network for statewide and Internet connectivity (ALSDE, 2006).

**Web-based Courses:** Courses delivered through a process of asynchronous (not real time) course delivery using a learning management system via the Internet (ALSDE, 2006).

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter I presented an introduction that provided the background of the study, the role of ACCESS distance learning in Alabama, and a brief review of pertinent literature. The purpose of this research, statement of the research problem, the research questions, overview of research methods, and significance of the study, research limitations, and definition of terms were presented. Chapter II offers a review of literature focusing on educational theories and concepts that have a relationship to distance education learning processes. The second chapter also presents educational theories and concepts that were evolving during the same time period as distance education programs and their relationship to distance education programs. Chapter III presents a description of the methods used for the research study and a rationale for their use. The methods section describes the design of the study, the specific aspects of the research sample, the survey instrument, the collection process, and the data analysis process.

Chapter IV provides the findings as a result of conducting this research study. The findings present high school principals' perceptions regarding Alabama's ACCESS distance learning education courses, the instructional process, and level of learning. Chapter V provides a summary of the research study, discussion of findings and their implications, and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

This study investigated perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional processes and levels of learning in ACCESS classes offered throughout the state. Leaders at the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) indicated that many rural and low income schools in Alabama have limited course offerings for students (Governor's Task Force, 2004). In order to better serve these schools, the ALSDE committed to offer distance education learning opportunities through the Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide (ACCESS) Distance Learning Program, a statewide system of courses delivered through the World Wide Web and Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC) (Governor's Task Force, 2004; Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Roblyer, Bielefeldt, & Olszewski, 2010; Roblyer, Porter, Bielefeldt & Donaldson, 2009). Consequently, the ALSDE stated their commitment to provide equitable access to high quality instruction to improve student learning through the use of distance learning opportunities, while also expanding learning opportunities available through technology (Governor's Task Force, 2004). The following literature review provides an overview of research that is relevant to distance learning in Alabama. The role of principal as instructional leader is also examined in this review because the success and future of distance education depends on effective leadership.

## **The Advent of Distance Education and Online Learning**

Distance education has a long history, but its popularity and use has grown exponentially as more advanced technology has become available. As of 2008, online learning programs at the K–12 level were available in 44 states and several others were in the planning stages (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2011).

The first K–12 virtual schools were created in Canada in 1995 (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Two years later, virtual schooling began in the United States, with the creation of the Virtual High School and the Florida Virtual School (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). In the 15 years that have passed since the inception of North American virtual schooling to the time of this study, the virtual school movement has expanded to all nine Canadian provinces (Barbour & Stewart, 2008) and to all fifty states in the United States (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010).

### **No Child Left Behind, Adequate Yearly Progress and Online Learning**

As the field of K–12 online learning evolves, researchers such as Barbour and Reeves (2009), Picciano and Seaman (2007), and Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, and Rapp (2010) have noted that it is difficult to accurately describe the shifting educational landscape related to distance learning due to inconsistent or nonexistent policies across states as well as disagreement over definitions of terms that describe distance and online learning at this level. Compounding this lack of clarity, at the national level, the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires states to offer alternative schooling options to students attending schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) (Huett, Huett & Ringlaben, 2012). This mandate has forced many schools to consider alternatives to traditional site-based learning. With student populations increasing faster than new facilities can be built, combined with teacher shortages, budget cuts, increased

competition from state-sponsored virtual schools and online charter schools, as well as rapid advances in mobile technologies, even school districts that currently make AYP are still turning to online learning in record numbers (Huett, Huett, & Ringlaben, 2012). This is causing considerable debate about each district's institutional mission as well as the future of education in general (Huett, Huett, & Ringlaben, 2012). Online learning is a rapidly growing phenomenon in K–12 education and it is changing the educational landscape (Huett, Huett, & Ringlaben, 2012).

According to Cavanaugh et al. (2004), many thousands of K–12 students who participate in online education programs are attracted to distance learning because it is perceived as offering advantages over classroom-based programs. Among the benefits of distance education for school-aged children are increases in enrollment or time in school as education programs reach underserved regions, broader educational opportunity for students who are unable to attend traditional schools, access to resources and instructors not locally available, and increases in student-teacher communication (Cavanaugh et al., 2004).

Learning any subject via distance learning has its own specific challenges, not least of which is the need to develop self-awareness and acquire good self-management skills as part of developing autonomy, according to Hurd, Beaven, and Ortega (2001) in their investigation of strategy instruction and learner support in relation to distance language learning. They stress that conscious selection of strategies and self-directed involvement are characteristics of an autonomous approach, and particularly relevant to those learning in independent contexts (Hauck & Hurd, 2005).

## **ACCESS in Alabama**

Educational equity and opportunity for students in Alabama’s high schools were concerns that Governor Bob Riley and the Alabama Legislature addressed in 2004. In 2003, Alabama ranked 14th of 16 southern states with only 99 Advanced Placement (AP) exams administered per 1,000 juniors (Governor’s Task Force on Distance Learning, 2004). In addition, Alabama had a tremendous need for a remediation plan that would increase the high school graduation rate (Task Force on Distance Learning, 2011). According to the Governor’s Task Force on Distance Learning (2004) which was created by legislative mandate to develop a plan to improve access to distance learning, not all high school students in Alabama have access to Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, and elective courses each year that will provide them with the competitive advantage to succeed in college and in the technical workforce (Roblyer, Freeman, Stabler, & Schneidmiller, 2007). Cavanaugh, Barbour, and Clark (2009) concur with the opinion of Roblyer et al. (2007a); Alabama’s issues are national issues. Additionally, Cavanaugh and Clark (2007) suggest that K–12 online learning is another avenue with which to accommodate students who need to learn at a pace or in a place different from a school classroom.

At the time of development, several major topics were intended to be addressed by ACCESS: broadening the curriculum for rural schools with a comprehensive curriculum; recruiting, retaining, and adequately paying teachers; meeting the requirements of No Child Left Behind (many rural school were facing difficulty meeting the “highly qualified” teacher requirements); shortages in funding and access to resources, including technology; additional opportunities for high school graduation; and education knowledge consolidation (Governor’s Task Force on Distance Learning, 2004).

Picciano and Seaman (2010) reported that high school administrators see online learning as “meeting the diverse needs of their students whether through Advanced Placement, elective college courses, or credit recovery” (pp. 19–20). A major reason high school administrators cite for inclusion of online and blended offerings is to provide courses that otherwise would not be available to students (Picciano & Seaman, 2010). This strongly supports the concept that online technologies can facilitate teachers’ ability to differentiate instruction and offer more choices for high school administrators when developing their academic programs (Picciano & Seaman, 2010). A study conducted by Mupinga (2005) mentioned that participants saw e-learning, another word for distance learning, as cost-effective instruction. In summary, some claim that distance learning offers creative cost-effective solutions for educational opportunities. However, there are other researchers who have concerns about how effective distance learning may be for all students (Bernard et al., 2004; Kozma & Zucker, 2003).

### **Leadership in ACCESS**

During the initial implementation of ACCESS, the Governor’s Task Force permitted the ALSDE to determine which of its agencies would supervise ACCESS. The ALSDE assigned the Office of Technology Initiatives to serve as a single point of contact in school system technology planning. This office also implements the Alabama Technology Plan for K–12 Education which encompasses administering federal grant programs for technology, filing for e-rate discounts, responding to requests made by agencies and organizations requesting technology data, and maintaining a database of technology compiled from year reports from agencies within the ALSDE (Roblyer et al., 2007a). Currently, ACCESS is under the supervision of the Alabama State Department of Education, in partnership with the Governor’s Office, the Alabama Supercomputer Authority, and local school districts (Task Force on Distance Learning, 2011).

## **Blended Learning**

In Alabama, ACCESS incorporates a blended learning model for the majority of its IVC classroom environments. This model utilizes several instructional delivery models such as face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced asynchronous learning models. The Blended Learning model also incorporates multimedia opportunities, such as podcasting, IVC, and correspondence via email. The goal of Blended Learning is to optimize achievement of learning objectives by applying the “right” learning technologies to match each student’s personal learning style in order to increase transfer of knowledge and development of skills to the individual students at the “right” time (Roblyer et al., 2007a). According to Roblyer et al., (2007a), blended learning offers five benefits:

- Allowing the students to repeat an online lesson when necessary
- Allowing the teacher to be free to offer individual help while online learning is taking place
- Allowing traditional classroom time to answer questions or supplement course materials
- Allowing a student to work at his or her own pace
- Improving learning by supporting different learning styles

For asynchronous courses, students access coursework online in the ACCESS distance learning lab at their respective campuses. The software delivers content via text, graphics, audio, video, drills, an online teacher, games, assessments, and physical materials or labs. Students submit work to online teachers via a virtual dropbox, and the teacher is supposed to respond later with feedback and guidance (Davis, 2012; personal communication). According to ALSDE policy, all ACCESS teachers have to be Alabama certified and meet NCLB standards for “highly



qualified” (2004). Because the online delivery method in Alabama is mostly asynchronous, online teachers can theoretically teach in traditional classrooms during the day and then manage an online course from their homes at night (Davis, 2012; personal communication). According to ACCESS personnel, teachers had to be recruited to teach, but over time a wait list formed. ACCESS pays its online teachers \$150 per student per half-credit. ACCESS’s support centers recruited and trained 659 ACCESS teachers by the end of 2010 (Davis, 2012; personal communication). Professional development followed the Southern Regional Education Board’s (SREB, 2009) “Guidelines for Professional Development of Online Teachers” (Davis, 2012; personal communication). The ACCESS program also offered professional development for superintendents, technology coordinators, counselors, and principals (Davis, 2012; personal communication) which identified general policies for this program as well as those for students enrolled in ACCESS courses. It also provides information on financial benefits for those schools and teachers who provide videoconferencing instruction (VCI) available to students in other parts of the state. ACCESS purchased perpetual licenses for 32 courses from Florida Virtual School and 13 from Aventa Learning (Governor’s Task Force, 2004). It also has created 20 of its own courses, as well as five non-credit remediation modules to prepare students for the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (Governor’s Task Force, 2004).

### **ACCESS Implementation at the Local Level**

ACCESS was designed to be implemented locally by a school team, comprised of teachers, a facilitator, the school counselor, with the support of the principal and educational technology coordinator. Currently, there are three regional support centers that provide real-time helpdesk support. These centers are located in Huntsville, Tuscaloosa, and Troy, Alabama (Governor’s Task Force, 2004; Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Roblyer et al., 2009; Roblyer

et al., 2010). ACCESS is coordinated through these three regional support centers to high school campuses statewide. These three support centers were created to coordinate the student registration, course offerings, alignment of school calendars, and teacher and e-facilitator training. The ACCESS coordination acts as a regulator and quality control entity. The model is being revised continually and seeks active feedback from stakeholders in order to continuously improve the ACCESS program capacity to respond to the legislative mandates (Roblyer et al., 2007a).

### **External Evaluation**

ACCESS undergoes an annual external evaluation from representatives of the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). Past statewide survey research conducted by the ISTE captured levels of counselor, teacher, student, and facilitator satisfaction, including progress made from previous evaluations. Detailed interviews are conducted annually which also document these stakeholders' viewpoints about what aspects of ACCESS were successful or not. Recommendations from these ISTE evaluations are integrated into planning for the next school year in ACCESS.

During the initial pilot year (2006–2007), ISTE conducted a needs assessment by interviewing students, teachers, and administrators about their experiences and needs related to distance learning. Teachers were also surveyed, and final student grade data were collected and analyzed. During 2007-2008, those surveys were repeated with a different sample of students and teachers. School counselors and course facilitators were also included in the survey. Additional questions were added to the counselor and facilitator version of the survey to gain information about Alabama's three Regional Support Centers. The addition of counselor and facilitator survey data provided a more robust view of the ACCESS program (ALSDE, 2010). In

2008-2009, staff surveys were supplemented with teacher focus groups and ISTE—ACCESS Evaluation Year 4 interviews. A particular focus of the evaluation was on changes in teaching practice that resulted from working in an online system (Roblyer et al., 2009). Students were not surveyed in 2008-2009.

### **ISTE’s Evaluation Findings**

By the end of 2010, ACCESS was the third-largest state virtual school in the country, with 29,415 enrollments and 11,746 non-credit enrollments in 2010 (ALSDE, 2010). ACCESS’s enrollment growth rate declined in 2010 relative to that of other state virtual schools, largely because of ACCESS’s focus on deploying technology infrastructure in 2010 rather than on increasing enrollments. Alabama’s K–12 education system claimed several successes during the span of ACCESS’s existence. The number of AP test takers in Alabama public schools almost doubled from 2004 to 2010; the number of African American AP test takers more than quadrupled; and the number of qualifying exam scores more than doubled (Staker, 2011). Between 2002 and 2008, Alabama’s high school graduation rate climbed from 62.1 to 69.0 percent, a gain that was 4.3 percentage points above the national average for that time period. Although other factors may have contributed to these improvements, ACCESS was likely a driving force in bringing advanced coursework and alternative education options to Alabama.

### **Future Policy Considerations and ACCESS**

Alabama has mandated that the Advanced Academic Endorsement Diploma be the default diploma for the class of 2013 (Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-1-02(8) (a), (b) and (c)). This diploma requires the completion of at least 20 hours of an online course or experience. The state has also removed the seat-time requirement to allow for credit recovery and credit advancement based on demonstrating competency rather than on completing a certain number of

hours of coursework (Alabama Administrative Code 290-3-1-02(8) (a), (b) and (c)). These policy changes have given school leaders more creative and innovative scheduling options for schools. ACCESS piloted two credit-recovery courses in the spring of 2010 (Staker, 2011). Staker (2011) also reported that ACCESS intends to focus on bringing digital resources into traditional classrooms in the years ahead, as well as to find ways to help face-to-face teachers use the learning management system and ACCESS's other resources as sustaining technologies in their face-to-face classrooms. With the changes in Alabama's diploma options, and ACCESS evolving to better suit students, principals must address logistical concerns beforehand so that they can determine how ACCESS can best serve their students.

Kirby (1998) identified several key factors that shape how school leaders determine if distance learning can be a potential instructional avenue for their students:

- Course designs must meet students' needs.
- Schools must have the technological resources to support the course.
- Course calendars and school calendars must mesh.
- Students' prerequisite skills must be identified and known by the instructor.
- Local facilitators and collaborating teachers play a pivotal role in the distance learning classroom.

Principals must be influential in meeting students' needs while also adhering to policy changes in diploma tracts in Alabama, while attempting to convince students and stakeholders that ACCESS is a sound model and can produce student success. Additionally, principals must evaluate their students' needs, and determine how a student can be a successful ACCESS student. High school principals are influential in selecting the appropriate avenues of instruction for their students.

Consequently, the success or failure of their respective schools may hinge on their influential leadership abilities.

### **High School Principals as Influential Leaders**

High school principals are instructional leaders and play a crucial role in the success or failure of their respective schools. They serve as the instructional leader, the leader of positive change, and also as the leader in promoting integration of technology in the classroom (McCoy-Thomas, 2012). Alabama invested vast amounts of resources towards infrastructure and curricular materials to support the transition to 21<sup>st</sup> Century classrooms for all students. The state has invested in technology, viewing it as a critical tool for delivering differentiating instruction. Consequently, state leaders, local stakeholders, and most importantly students, have expectations that principals embrace and encourage the usage of technology hardware and software as avenues for facilitating the improvement of student achievement, morale, and student self-efficacy.

High school principals must make sound policy decisions about their students and school daily; their students and the school community rely on the high school principal's experience and ability to make fair judgments. While guidance counselors design students' schedules, principals make final policy decisions regarding the disposition of students. Whether or not students have met graduation requirements, whether or not they may enroll in traditional classes or ACCESS classes, or whether or not students may enroll to complete advance coursework on ACCESS are vastly significant decisions that high school principals make throughout the school year. Given the significance of the role of the high school principal in terms of student achievement, graduation rates, and student efficacy, as well as the growing emergence of reliance on distance learning to assist students, the role of the high school principal as an instructional leader, a leader

for positive change, and promoter of technology is critical (Baylor & Ritchie, 2002; Fullan, 2001).

The primary roles of principals as instructional leaders have many interpretations. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) defined instructional leadership as “leading National Association of Elementary School Principals learning communities.” Nettles and Herrington (2007) indicated that principals are facilitators, who guide and encourage an educational environment in which administrators and teachers work collaboratively to diagnose and solve the problems facing schools. Principals are essentially the chief executive officer of their campus (Nettles & Herrington, 2007). They are responsible for a myriad of tasks, such as managing the day-to-day operations of their school, managing personnel and human resource concerns, as well as assuming the role of instructional leader for students and teachers.

Blasé and Blasé (2000) defined instructional leadership as a series of seven effective principal behaviors: (a) making suggestions, (b) giving feedback, (c) modeling effective instruction, (d) soliciting opinions, (e) supporting collaboration, (f) providing professional development opportunities, and (g) giving praise for effective teaching. In addition to Blasé and Blasé’s (2000) definition is the concept of effective instructional leadership. It is derived from having eight common characteristics: (a) recognizing teaching and learning as the main purpose of the school, (b) communicating the school’s mission clearly and consistently to all stakeholders, (c) fostering standards for teaching and learning that are high and attainable, (d) providing clear goals and monitoring the progress of students towards meeting them, (e) spending time in classrooms and listening to teachers, (f) promoting an atmosphere of trust and sharing, (g) building an effective staff and making professional development a top priority, and (h) not tolerating ineffective teachers (Olson & Hendrie, 1998). Given the aforementioned traits

of successful instructional leaders, school district leaders must carefully consider whether or not the principal truly echoes, embraces, and emulates these traits on a daily basis to all stakeholders in their respective school communities. Without these research-based traits, one could surmise that the tenure of said principal would be short-lived, and that the culture of the campus would not be as supportive of student achievement, meeting accountability standards, and creating an environment of collegiality, innovation, and creativity via the 21st Century classroom (McCoy-Thomas, 2012).

### **Effective Leadership**

Effective leaders are collaborative, collegial, courageous, and committed towards doing what is right and just for their school (Erb, 2005). To be effective, leaders understand that within the organization the most critical component is the human factor (Evans, 1996). Development, goal setting, cultural change, and growth all depend on the individual (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Developing effective educators relates to the leader's ability to identify teachers that have leadership potential and provide the necessary conditions, opportunities, and supports to build the skill set and confidence to implement the habits and conditions of best practices (Clark & Clark, 2004). Capacity building for leadership relies on the ability of the leader to understand team-building, to be able to implement a philosophy of shared decision-making, and foster an environment where collegiality is an expected and a respected process of engagement (Apple & Beane, 2000; Frost & Durrant, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Lambert, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1992).

As leaders plan their course of action, they focus on developing shared goals, a plan to monitor performance, and strategies to insure that all stakeholders have received necessary ongoing communications (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Sergiovanni

(1992) adds that this plan requires the leader to have a clear vision, to create an action plan and energize others, thereby gaining acceptance for the vision and ultimately the leader's plan of action. For principals, this is an absolute truth; principals must define a vision, gain acceptance, and create a culture that works towards fulfillment of the vision through the building of collaborative processes (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstron, 2004).

Research conducted by Williams (2008), Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (2003), and Cotton (2003) indicates that effective leadership in schools is characteristic of: (a) clear vision, (b) mission – the plan for carrying out the vision, (c) the culture of the school [defined by the attitudes and beliefs], (d) teacher beliefs, (e) student engagement, (f) organization of the curriculum, and (g) opportunities for students to learn, evidenced through differentiation.

Blum, Butler, and Olson (1987), Hallinger and Murphy (1986), Levine and Lezotte (1990), and Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore (1995) all offered parallel characteristics of effective leaders adding the following: (a) the ability to establish and maintain a safe environment, (b) the ability to deeply understand quality instruction, with demonstrated results, (c) the ability to continuously monitor school performance, (d) the ability to foster shared-decision making, (e) the ability to identify, evaluate, and acquire necessary resources, (f) the ability to identify professional development opportunities for teachers, and participates in professional development, and (g) the ability to respect and trust colleagues as equals. In summary, effective school leaders understand teaching and learning are the main functions of the school; communicate effectively to all stakeholders the vision, mission and goals of the school; and promote an atmosphere of trust and collaboration through the use of professional development (Bauck, 1987; George & Grebing, 1992; Weller, 1999).



## **Principal Technology Acumen**

The need for effective leadership is not a new phenomenon. For the last two decades, improving the quality of principal preparation and development has been the focus of reform agendas nationwide (Hale & Moorman, 2003). McLeod et al. (2005) note the response of leadership programs to making changes related to technology integration has not been comparable to new innovations. The inclusion of the necessary coursework and/or training to understand, integrate, and support technology within schools requires the involvement of higher education (McCoy-Thomas, 2012). Currently, if technology is discussed, the context is often focused on using office suite applications to address other school issues such as using spreadsheets to manage budgets or word processing to draft a letter to parents (McCoy-Thomas, 2012). The problems of not being able to understand, integrate, and support technology pose serious concerns for principals. These are realized once the position of educational leader is attained. Rarely are principals included in professional development that addresses technology proficiencies. Principal professional development for technology integration and success hinges on two areas: (1) tasks and activities of administrative functions, and (2) tasks and integration (Kajs et al., 1999). To ensure competency and support for those areas, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) offers standards that can be used for aligning instructional opportunities and creating targeted professional development (Lessen & Sorensen, 2006). The standards identify the following as central elements of technology proficiency: (1) operating an information system, (2) using various software applications, (3) understanding and integrating technology into the instructional process, and (4) identifying and evaluating technology-based materials (Lessen & Sorensen, 2006). Collaboration amongst district-level administration and universities has fostered the development of technology proficiencies for future educational

leaders in graduate educational leadership programs. Consequently, upon assuming the role as principal of a school, the new leader is able to cultivate a common language and vision for the effective integration of technology into the curriculum. Technology standards for school administrators work to provide a framework to foster an integration that is as seamless and familiar a tool as a pencil.

### **Technology Standards for School Administrators**

Providing strong technology leadership has arisen as one of the many requirements to be considered an effective school leader. According to Mehlinger and Powers (2002), “It is no longer possible for administrators to be both naïve about technology and be good school leaders” (p. 218). In 2001, a national set of standards for school administrators was developed. The standards provide principals with a tool to reflect on their practices in lieu of promoting proficiency (Technology Standards for School Administrators, 2001). Revised in 2009, the standards include performance indicators that are prescriptive for “digital age” leadership, representing a consensus of what educational stakeholders identify as a set of skills necessary for comprehensive and appropriate use of technology as effective school leaders. The standards have been adopted by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) and are referred to as the National Educational Technology Standards for Administrators (NETS-A). Reddish and Chan (2007) stated that understanding the principal's role and their authority for creating and supporting policies helps us to understand how the proficiency of the leader impacts the level of teaching proficiency and actual amount technology is being integrated within their respective school. Hence, the educational leader is the gatekeeper who holds the key towards successful technology integration.

## **Technology Leadership**

Effective leadership is a key component in guiding the teaching-learning process necessary for preparing today's students with the relevant knowledge and skills necessary to become a productive citizen of the 21st century. According to Dinham (2005), leadership is important both in developing effective innovative schools and in facilitating quality teaching and learning. Today's principals must not only manage the day-to-day activities of a school but also focus on student learning, standards, data-driven decision making and restructuring efforts (Afshari, Bakar, Luan, Saman, & Fooi, 2008). Principals play an essential role in integrating technology (Wilmore & Betz, 2000). This role is crucial in helping teachers create today's ideal learning environment for students. Wilmore and Betz (2000) stated that "Information technology will only be successfully implemented in schools if the principal is actively supports it, learns as well, provides adequate professional development, and supports their staff in the process of change" (p. 15). Therefore, principals are one of the key leaders of change at the school level. Their actions, interests, and self-efficacy can have a profound impact on program change and instructional practice. Consequently, effective administrators must have knowledge, dispositions, and performance related to instructional leadership and an appreciation for the roles that technology can play in student learning. Afshari, Bakar, Luan, Saman, and Fooi (2008) state that the knowledge entities are those things that an effective administrator should believe or value, and the performance entities are what an effective administrator should do.

In the digital information age, principals must be able to integrate technology into their daily practice and provide consistent and positive leadership for technology use in the teaching-learning environment (Alabama State Department of Education, 2005). According to Hope, Kelly, and Guyden (2000), technology leadership involves both understanding the technologies

and how they can be applied to accomplishing tasks. Gibson (2002) emphasized that school principals must focus their energies on ten technology categories: existing practice, planning, curriculum, resources, staff issues, communications, support, obstacles, staff development, and implementation. These are the key components in guiding the teaching-learning process necessary for today's students with relevant knowledge and skills in today's society to become productive citizens of the 21st Century (Afshari, Bakar, Luan, Samah, & Fooi, 2002). In this way, principals need to understand the capacities of the new technologies, to have a personal proficiency in their use, and be able to promote a school culture which encourages exploration of new techniques in teaching, learning, and management (Schiller, 2003).

As school change efforts progress, the needs of the individuals within the organization may change (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Therefore, it is critical that school leaders are aware of and, if possible, meet those needs, which may be situated within the symbolic, structural, political, or human resource frames (Bolman & Deal, 1991). Effective school leadership acknowledges and adapts to make such changes a reality, and in doing so, keeps people focused on the organization's goals (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

In schools, organizational change is impossible without effective school leadership, and the "...educational change literature consistently points to school administrators as vital agents for creating the conditions in which school reform can succeed" (Hargreaves, Moore, & Manning, 2001). This opinion further illustrates the multi-dimensional context of school change and the essential roles of school leaders.

While educational leaders strive to assist, educators must ideally recognize that we, our new teachers, and our leaders, need to have a balance in how school change develops and culminates. There is a need for reflection and analysis: dialogue with one's self and with other

colleagues to search for a means to solve issues. Through communication and collaboration, individuals may become more effective and able to assume greater responsibility for their own performance. Through collaboration and communication, they engage more closely and more productively with others in the workplace (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993).

Reflective practice, which is an increased awareness of one's professional performance, can result in considerable improvement of performance (Blasé & Blasé, 2004). Modeling effective practices can increase the awareness of effective teaching strategies for teachers.

Principals can model effective teaching strategies for students and teachers, they can do a brief observation, they can engage in dialogue with teachers, and most importantly (and least given) they can offer praise. By modeling quality teaching, principals may inspire teachers to think of new ways to teach their subject matter that are more relevant for students and inspire creativity (Blasé & Blasé, 2004). By doing short observations and offering formative feedback, principals may cause teachers to reflect on their teaching and consequently make behavioral changes (Blasé & Blasé, 2004). Teachers feel that they are important; they are "valued", they are more motivated to teach better and to explore better ways of teaching when they feel valued (Blasé & Blasé, 2004). When principals encourage their teachers, provide them with feedback, and question instruction, they are trying to improve the quality and professionalism of their teachers, and also encourage their teachers to think about what they are doing- -and how they can best implement their talents. They encourage their teachers to examine their feedback given by their principals; they cause constant thinking and adjustments from the teacher. By exploring new ways to teach the material, and to invoke more continuous thinking, the quality of teaching is improved, and teachers think things through better, causing more desirable professional behaviors from the teacher in their classroom (Blasé and Blasé 2004). When school leaders

praise their teachers, they are focusing on the positive behaviors that yield the best outcomes for students' behaviors and their achievement. When they praise their teachers, they encourage and support their teachers to increase their thinking about improving their teaching, and enhancing their problem-solving.

While educational and organizational theories are frequently changing and evolving (Blasé & Blasé, 2004), there are some constants: change is always happening, change is learning (Blasé & Blasé, 2004), it is a journey (Blasé & Blasé, 2004), and change is systemic (Evans, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, Moore, & Manning, 2001). Evans (1996) noted about people: there will be “hot” ones, “cool” ones, and “cryogenic” ones. The “hot” ones are excited and inspired to change. The “cool” ones are lukewarm at best about making change, while the “cryogenic” ones are stone cold set against the change. It is the job of the principal to steer as many colleagues from “cryogenic” to “cool” or “hot” as possible. This epitomizes effective leadership. Steering people towards productive and effective change is the product of an effective leader.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Alabama High school principals with respect to the instructional process and level of learning in Alabama's ACCESS distance online program. The relationships between demographic variables (years of experience, school size) and principal's perceptions regarding (a) the instructional process and (b) the level of learning were explored.

### **Summary**

Distance learning is the newest version of providing students with additional opportunities to further their education and remove barriers from whatever contexts may

intervene and prevent them from achieving their full potential as high school graduates. Some claim that Alabama's ACCESS program made the idea of giving students opportunities to further their education beyond any barriers a successful reality (Maddox, 2008). Its course offerings, the ways in which it addresses non-traditional students' needs, and its ability to blend effective best practices of instruction such as the Transformational Instruction Model, make ACCESS seem to be a success for Alabama. The ability for a student in Coffee County, Alabama to learn Calculus I from a teacher in Huntsville, Alabama is a prime example of how ACCESS can help to remove barriers. ACCESS was created out of need, but designed using research-based findings to support its design. Yet, without effective school leadership, students may miss out on the opportunities available through ACCESS. Consequently, the high school principal has an important role in leading stakeholders into the 21st Century classroom.

## CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY

Following a review of relevant literature, this research study was developed to examine Alabama's high school principals' perceptions of the Alabama Connecting Classrooms Educators, & Students Statewide (ACCESS) distance learning program. This study explored relationships between high school principals and district demographics and their views on how successful or unsuccessful distance learning is in relation to improving student achievement, offering innovative instruction, and identifying other information principals may use to make judgments about distance learning.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions that Alabama high school principals have about distance learning in the following areas:

1. What are the characteristics of Alabama high school principals regarding:
  - a. School size?
  - b. Location of district?
  - c. Years of experience in school administration?
2. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional process of distance learning courses and important indicators of student learning?
3. What is the relationship, if any, between Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the instructional processes of distance learning courses, level of learning, and demographics?



4. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the level of learning in distance courses?
5. What is the relationship, if any, exists between Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the level of learning in distance courses and school or principal demographics?
6. What is the relationship between Alabama high school principals' perceptions of the instruction processes and level of learning in Alabama distance learning courses?
7. What information is used by Alabama high school principals to make judgments about Alabama distance learning courses?

### **Instrument**

The survey used in this study was developed based upon a review of the literature regarding the quality of instructional processes and the level of learning as perceived by high school principals in South Dakota (Dzwonek, 2007). The original survey contained fourteen questions and was divided into three sections. Permission to adapt the survey was granted by Dzwonek and the survey was edited by this researcher for administration in Alabama.

The revised survey instrument was grouped into three sections which incorporated multiple items that addressed each concept. Section one contained items pertaining to high school principals' perceptions of the quality of instruction in distance learning classes. Section two contained items pertaining to high school principals' perceptions of level of learning in distance learning classes. Principals were asked to specify their level of agreement with each of the survey items in sections one and two based on a five point Likert-type scale. The scale items included options of *Always* equaling five points, *Often/Frequently* equaling four points,

*Occasionally* equaling three points, *Seldom* equaling two points, and *Never* equaling one point (Dzwonek, 2007).

For the Alabama study, the investigator developed an additional question for a total of fifteen questions. The survey remained divided into three sections: high school principals' perceptions of the quality of the instructional processes, high school principals' perceptions of level of learning in distance learning, and demographic questions about the principal and the school. Questions regarding demographics included student enrollment, geographic location, gender, comfort level and frequency of technology usage, and years of experience as a principal.

### **Validity and Reliability**

**Content validity.** The instrument developed for this study was based on an instrument from a previous study conducted by Dzwonek (2007) and adapted after an updated literature review. A survey critique was conducted for the Dzwonek instrument using an expert panel of five education administrators from outside of South Dakota. The survey instrument was revised based on the information acquired from the critique. The survey was revised in the areas of clarity of directions, construction of the items, and appropriateness of the items in relation to the results being measured. Additionally, the length of time to complete the survey was provided by respondents.

A second survey critique was conducted by the author of the current study to determine how well the survey items matched the constructs after the instrument was revised and expanded to incorporate items related to the context of distance learning in Alabama. Six educational leaders from Alabama were contacted electronically or by telephone to serve as an expert panel. Members of this expert panel included a curriculum and instruction supervisor from a school district within the metropolitan Birmingham, Alabama area, three distance learning

administrators from the State of Alabama, and two educational leadership professors who also previously served as educational leaders in Alabama school districts. The information obtained by the investigator suggested that no additional changes were needed. Twenty-seven of the thirty items from the survey critique yielded perfect agreement scores. Two of the remaining three items yielded eighty-three percent agreement among the expert panel. One of the remaining three items yielded sixty-seven percent agreement among the expert panel.

**Reliability.** Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate internal consistency because of its versatility and ability to confirm reliability of instruments containing items to be scored with three or more possible values (Huck, 2000). Reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .76 for both constructs of instructional processes and level of learning in the current sample.

### **Participants**

The survey was sent to all high school principals in the State of Alabama. A list of high school principals was retrieved electronically from the Alabama State Department of Education website under the "Reports" tab. Next, the researcher selected the heading labeled "Schools listing (including principals)", which contained an Excel file, containing the names of all principals in Alabama. The Excel file was downloaded onto the researcher's computer and the researcher sorted through the names, eliminating all elementary schools and schools where no current contact information was available (Alabama State Department of Education, 2012). Respondents included fifty-two principals from a total of 508 possible for a 10% return rate in January, 2013.

### **Procedures**

The investigator was granted permission to begin the study on December 6, 2012, after obtaining approval to conduct the research study from Auburn University's Institutional Review

Board (IRB; see Appendix D). Permission was also obtained from Dr. Dzwonek to adapt and use his survey in order to conduct this current research so that it incorporates addressing questions related to Alabama's Distance Learning program (see Appendix B). The survey was administered via e-mail using Qualtrics (Appendix C). The survey responses are considered new data and are anonymous. Dzwonek (2007) used electronic survey research to investigate the perceptions of South Dakota high school principals regarding the quality of instruction and level of learning in distance courses. This researcher sent a recruitment e-mail to invite all Alabama high school principals to be a participant in the current research study. Principals who were interested were asked to send an e-mail to the investigator. Upon receipt of this e-mail indicating interest, an information letter was sent to high school principals. Included in the information letter was a hyperlink re-directing the participant to the electronic survey. The researcher administered the survey in January, 2013 via anonymous online Internet response. All respondents were principals of Alabama high schools. A reminder was sent by email to all principals indicating interest in study participation to increase the response rate.

### **Data Source**

The survey instrument was distributed electronically via Qualtrics, a web-based survey software endorsed by Auburn University. The survey instrument was originally developed by Dzwonek (2007) on the basis of a valid research instrument. For this study, the researcher concentrated on fifty-two principals' responses. Analysis focused on the principals' responses to questions regarding their perceptions of the quality of instruction and level of learning in distance learning classes by their student body.

Section three on the survey contained demographic information about the principals completing the survey and their schools. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the

participants' responses to items in section three of the survey. Participants were asked to complete three statements that provided information regarding school size, geographic location of the district, and years of experience in school administration. Additionally, principals were asked to describe their reasoning related to decision making about distance learning and provide information about their considerations when selecting distance learning courses.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 21. The collected data were used to generate descriptive statistics, which were used to describe the principals' perceptions regarding the quality of instruction and level of learning in distance learning classes. This study also examined the demographic characteristics of school size, geographical location, and years of administrative experience and the possible relationship among these and principal perceptions about ACCESS. Descriptive analyses including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated for demographic items. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess whether there were relationships between the perceptions of Alabama high school principals about the instructional process, level of learning, school size, and years of experience in school administration.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of high school principals on their students' level of learning and the instructional processes used in the distance learning classroom. The researcher used data from a modified survey to investigate the variables through Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics. Chapter Four presents the findings from the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Alabama high school principals with respect to instructional processes and level of learning in ACCESS distance learning courses. The demographic traits of school size, location of district, years of experience as an administrator, and size of high school population were included in the study. These traits were explored to determine if they showed a relationship between high school principals' perceptions of instructional process and level of learning in ACCESS distance learning. Perceptions about the instructional processes and level of learning in distance learning course offerings were collected from Alabama's high school principals using a researcher-designed survey instrument. Data from this survey were explored to determine whether or not there is a statistically significant relationship ( $p < 0.05$ ) existed between each of the demographic traits measured and principals' perceptions about instructional processes and/or level of learning. Data from this survey were explored to determine whether or not a statistically significant relationship ( $p < 0.05$ ) existed in the differences in perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional processes when compared to the demographic factors of school size, and years of experience as an administrator. Secondly, the researcher investigated whether or not a statistically significant relationship ( $p < 0.05$ ) existed between the differences of perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the level of learning when compared to the demographics of school size, and years of experience as an administrator. Additionally, the researcher explored whether or not there is a statistically significant relationship between

Alabama high school principals' perceptions of the instructional processes and level of learning in Alabama ACCESS distance learning courses.

The research questions analyzed in this chapter include:

1. What are the characteristics of Alabama high school principals regarding:
  - a. School size?
  - b. Location of district?
  - c. Years of experience in school administration?
2. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional process of distance learning courses and important indicators of student learning?
3. What is the relationship, if any, between Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the instructional processes of distance learning courses, level of learning, and demographics?
4. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the level of learning in distance courses?
5. What is the relationship, if any, exists between Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the level of learning in distance courses and school or principal demographics?
6. What is the relationship between Alabama high school principals' perceptions of the instruction processes and level of learning in Alabama distance learning courses?
7. What information is used by Alabama high school principals to make judgments about Alabama distance learning courses?

## **Participants**

The survey instrument was administered electronically by the researcher in January of 2013. The survey was sent by email to all Alabama high school principals. Respondents included fifty-two principals from a total of 508 possible for a 10% return rate. A 10% return rate for online surveys is considered average and reasonable, especially when a population hasn't been surveyed previously (Query Group, 2013; Survey Monkey, 2013; Constant Contact, 2013).

The survey instrument included demographic questions related to the school size of the participants, the regional in-service where they are located, and years of administrative experience. Gender and how technology is used in their lives were also explored. Instructional Process was measured as the educational impact of teaching practice. It included the dimensions of assessment and grading, motivating students to learn, subject matter knowledge, course preparation and organization, respect for students, interaction and student feedback. Level of Learning was measured as a criterion for assessing the academic accomplishments of students. The level of learning was related to student outcomes in distance learning versus traditional face to face courses. It included the dimensions of the alignment to content standards, adequate preparation for future educational endeavors, preparation for post secondary education, and comparison to face-to-face courses.

Research question one findings are reported in Tables 1 through 3. Table 2 provides frequency distribution of participants by Regional In-Service Center, the frequency of each category, and the percentage of each In-Service district.



Table 1

*Distribution of Participants by School Size*

| Number of Students | N  | Percent |
|--------------------|----|---------|
| 0–499              | 32 | 62      |
| 500–1499           | 20 | 38      |
| Total              | 52 | 100     |

Table 2

*Distribution of Participants by Regional In-Service Center*

| In-Service District | N  | Percent |
|---------------------|----|---------|
| Region One          | 5  | 9.6     |
| Region Two          | 3  | 5.7     |
| Region Three        | 8  | 15.3    |
| Region Four         | 3  | 5.7     |
| Region Five         | 4  | 7.6     |
| Region Six          | 6  | 11.5    |
| Region Seven        | 4  | 7.6     |
| Region Eight        | 0  | 0       |
| Region Nine         | 7  | 13      |
| Region Ten          | 3  | 5.1     |
| Region Eleven       | 9  | 17.3    |
| Total               | 52 | 100.0   |

*Note.* Region Eight had zero participants

Table 3 represents the frequency distribution of participants by years of administrative experience. Data gathered from the surveys were placed into five groups based on the frequency distribution of the responses as shown in Table 3. Table 4 displays the frequency distribution and percentages of the participants by gender.

Table 3

*Distribution of Participants by Years of Administrative Experience*

| Years of Experience | N  | Percent |
|---------------------|----|---------|
| 1 to 5              | 9  | 17.3    |
| 6 to 10             | 19 | 36.5    |
| 11-15               | 18 | 34.6    |
| 16-20               | 4  | 7.7     |
| 21 or More          | 2  | 3.8     |
| Total               | 52 | 99.9    |

*Note.* Totals do not equal 100 because of rounding off

Table 4

*Gender of Participants*

| Indicator | N  | Percent |
|-----------|----|---------|
| Male      | 40 | 77      |
| Female    | 12 | 23      |
| Total     | 52 | 100     |

The role of the principal as a technology leader personally and professionally is paramount towards integrating technology into their schools. The principal's level of technological proficiency is directly related to the level of technology integration that they choose to integrate in their school (McCoy-Davis, 2012). Hence, their level of technology use is congruent to their role as technology leader at their school. Table 5 presents the frequency distribution and percentages of how the participants use technology in their personal and professional lives.

Table 5

*How Participants Use Technology in Their Personal and Professional Lives*

| Technology Use                             | N  | Percent |
|--|----|---------|
| E-Mail                                     | 48 | 92      |
| Office suite (i.e. Microsoft Office)       | 42 | 81      |
| Web 2.0 tools, such as weblogs and wikis   | 22 | 42      |
| Web-based Office suite and storage devices | 29 | 56      |

## Results

This study examined in detail the perceptions Alabama High School Principals have of the instructional processes and level of student learning used in ACCESS distance learning class offerings. This chapter is organized in terms of the seven specific research questions posed in Chapter 1. It first reports the perceptions that principals have about distance learning courses with respect to demographic data; it then examines principals' perceptions in the instructional processes involved and the level of learning.

## **Perceptions of Alabama High School Principals Regarding Instructional Processes of Distance Learning Courses**

The survey participants' responses indicated that they frequently saw the indicators for instructional processes present in ACCESS courses. Over 84% of respondents generally reported favorable perceptions of the instructional processes used in these ACCESS distance learning courses (see Table 6). Participants' responses about the levels of preparedness and organization in ACCESS courses show that a strong majority of survey participants think there is a high level of preparedness and organization.

Table 6

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions about Levels of Preparedness and Organization in ACCESS Courses*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Occasionally (3)       | 8         | 15.4    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 38        | 73.1    |
| Always (5)             | 6         | 11.5    |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

## **Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of Adequate Motivation for Student Learning in ACCESS Courses**

Based on participants' responses to a question asking about the level of motivation for students to complete ACCESS courses, more administrators perceive there to be less than adequate motivation in ACCESS courses. As indicated in Table 7, 30 administrators perceived

there to be inadequate motivation (57.7%) versus 22 who viewed there to be adequate motivation (42.3%).

Table 7

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions about Adequate Motivation in ACCESS Courses*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Seldom (2)             | 9         | 17.3    |
| Occasionally (3)       | 21        | 40.4    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 21        | 40.4    |
| Always (5)             | 1         | 1.9     |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

**Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of Instructional Delivery of Appropriate Subject-Level Knowledge in ACCESS Courses**

Participants indicated appropriate subject-level knowledge was delivered in ACCESS courses. Participants were overwhelmingly supportive of the instructional delivery model used (N = 49; 94.2%). (See Table 8.)

Table 8

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of Instructional Delivery of  
Appropriate Subject-Level Knowledge in ACCESS Courses*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Occasionally (3)       | 3         | 5.8     |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 39        | 75.0    |
| Always (5)             | 10        | 19.2    |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

**Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of Sufficient Student Interaction**

Participants' responses indicated that there was more insufficient interaction than sufficient student interaction in the ACCESS classroom. Participants reported that they seldom (N = 2, 11.5%) or only occasionally (N = 21, 40.4%) perceived the degree of student interaction to be sufficient. Conversely, the participants reported that they often / frequently (N = 23, 44.2%) or always (N = 2, 3.8%) perceived that there was sufficient student interaction between teachers and students in ACCESS distance learning. (See Table 9.)

Table 9

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of Sufficient Student Interaction*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Seldom (2)             | 6         | 11.5    |
| Occasionally (3)       | 21        | 40.4    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 23        | 44.2    |
| Always (5)             | 2         | 3.8     |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0-  |

**Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of Sufficient Feedback to Students**

As illustrated in Table 10, most administrators perceived that ACCESS classes offered sufficient feedback to students from their teachers.

Table 10

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of Sufficient Feedback to Students*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Seldom (2)             | 5         | 9.6     |
| Occasionally (3)       | 17        | 32.7    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 24        | 46.2    |
| Always (5)             | 6         | 11.5    |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

**Distribution of Administrators’ Perceptions of How Instruction and Delivery Provide a Respectful Learning Environment for Students**

Administrators frequently reported that ACCESS teachers have been delivering a learning environment that is respectful of students and their needs (see Table 11).

Table 11

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Occasionally (3)       | 8         | 15.4    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 34        | 65.4    |
| Always (5)             | 10        | 19.2    |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

**Distribution of Administrators’ Perceptions of How Instruction and Delivery Meets Students’ Needs**

Administrators' perceptions were divided related to instruction and delivery meeting students’ needs. As indicated in Table 12, a majority of administrators believe that students’ needs are being met (see Table 12.)



Table 12

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of How Instruction and Delivery Meets Students' Needs*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Seldom (2)             | 1         | 1.9     |
| Occasionally (3)       | 23        | 44.2    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 24        | 46.2    |
| Always (5)             | 4         | 7.7     |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

**Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of How Instruction and Delivery of Distance Education Courses Provided Appropriate Procedures and Processes for Assessment**

Administrators showed high levels of support towards ACCESS teachers with respect to assessment procedures and processes. Forty-three out of fifty-two school administrators indicated that procedures and processes for assessment of students were being provided at either frequent or always rates (see Table 13).

Table 13

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of How Instruction and Delivery of Distance Education Courses Provided Appropriate Procedures and Processes for Assessment*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Occasionally (3)       | 9         | 17.3    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 37        | 71.2    |
| Always (5)             | 6         | 11.5    |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

**Distribution of Perceptions on How Instruction and Delivery of Distance Education Courses Offer Appropriate Grading Processes**

School leaders perceived that appropriate grading processes were implemented to a very high level of appropriate grading (see Table 14.)

Table 14

*Distribution of Perceptions of How Instruction and Delivery of Distance Education Courses Offer Appropriate Grading Processes*

| <i>Indicator</i>       | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Occasionally (3)       | 9                | 17.3           |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 34               | 65.4           |
| Always (5)             | 9                | 17.3           |
| Total                  | 52               | 100.0          |

**Distribution of Administrators’ Perceptions of How Instruction and Delivery of Distance Education Courses Offered Through ACCESS Provides High Quality Instruction**

A majority of administrators (65.4%) reported that they often, frequently, or always thought that high quality instruction existed in ACCESS courses. However, approximately one-third of these principals indicated that they seldom or occasionally thought that high quality instruction existed in ACCESS courses (34.6%) (see Table 15).

Table 15

*Frequency Distribution of How Instruction and Delivery of ACCESS Courses Provides High Quality Instruction*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Seldom (2)             | 1         | 1.9     |
| Occasionally (3)       | 17        | 32.7    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 30        | 57.7    |
| Always (5)             | 4         | 7.7     |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

**Distribution of Administrators’ Perceptions Regarding Learning Outcomes Equal To or Better Than Face-To-Face Courses**

School administrators’ responses in relation to a question comparing distance learning and face-to-face learning outcomes were fairly evenly divided. The responding high school principals reported that distance learning outcomes were often, frequently, or always better than face-to-face courses 32.6% of the time, and occasionally better 36.5% of the time. Conversely,

30.7% of respondents perceived the learning outcomes to be never, or seldomly better than those in face-to-face courses (see Table 16).

Table 16

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions Regarding Learning Outcomes Equal To or Better Than Face-To-Face Courses*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Never (1)              | 1         | 1.9     |
| Seldom (2)             | 15        | 28.8    |
| Occasionally (3)       | 19        | 36.5    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 15        | 28.8    |
| Always (5)             | 2         | 3.8     |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

### **Differences in Perceptions of Instructional Processes Based and Demographics**

The third research question investigated the relationship between perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional processes in ACCESS classes and school size, regional in-service center, and years of experience in school administration. The research question explored whether or not a statistical significance appeared when assessing the relationship between instructional processes with demographics. An insignificant correlation was found ( $r = .21, p = .14$ ), between the variables of instructional processes and school size. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between instructional processes and administrative experience. An insignificant correlation was found ( $r$

= -.05,  $p = .72$ ) between the variables of instructional processes and administrative experience.

An insignificant correlation was found ( $r = .20$ ,  $p = .17$ ) between the variables of school size and years of administrative experience in distance learning courses (see Table 17).

Table 17

*Correlations Between Instructional Processes, School Size and Administrative Experience*

|                                       |                     | Instructional<br>Processes | Years of<br>Administrative<br>Experience |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Instructional Processes               | Pearson Correlation | 1                          | -.05                                     |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                            | .72                                      |
|                                       | N                   | 52                         | 52                                       |
| Years of Administrative<br>Experience | Pearson Correlation | -.05                       | 1  |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .72                        |  |
|                                       | N                   | 52                         | 52                                       |
| School Size                           | Pearson Correlation | .21                        | .20                                      |
|                                       | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .14                        | .17                                      |
|                                       | N                   | 52                         | 52                                       |

**Relationship between Level of Learning and Regional In-Service Centers**

Descriptive statistics were computed to describe level of learning scores by regional in-service centers. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 18.

Table 18

*Mean Level of Learning Scores as a Function of Regional In-Service Center*

*(with Standard Deviations in Parentheses)*

| Regional Inservice Center | Mean (N = 52) |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| 1                         | 3.45 (.39)    |
| 2                         | 3.94 (.05)    |
| 3                         | 3.80 (.58)    |
| 4                         | 3.79 (.37)    |
| 5                         | 3.22 (.28)    |
| 6                         | 3.68 (.70)    |
| 7                         | 3.71 (.44)    |
| 8                         | NA*           |
| 9                         | 3.95(.27)     |
| 10                        | 4.06 (.68)    |
| 11                        | 3.57 (.44)    |

*Note.* There were no participants in Regional In-service Center 8.

### **Perceptions of Alabama High School Principals Regarding the Level of Learning in**

#### **ACCESS Distance Learning Courses**

Research question four addressed participants' perceptions of the level of learning in distance learning courses regarding four indicators which are presented in Tables 19 through 22.

A majority of participants indicated that ACCESS distance learning courses always/often align to

the current content standards, prepare students for future secondary courses, prepare students for college entrance exams, and meet the expected learning outcomes.

Table 19

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of the How Often ACCESS Classes Align to Current Content Standards*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Occasionally (3)       | 3         | 5.8     |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 24        | 46.2    |
| Always (5)             | 25        | 48.1    |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

Table 20

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of How Well ACCESS Courses Prepare Students for Future High School Courses*

| <i>Indicator</i>       | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Seldom (2)             | 1                | 1.9            |
| Occasionally (3)       | 12               | 23.1           |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 36               | 69.2           |
| Always (5)             | 3                | 5.8            |
| Total                  | 52               | 100.0          |

Table 21

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of How Often Instruction and Delivery of Distance Education Courses Offered Through ACCESS Prepare Students for College Entrance Exams such as ACT or SAT Test*

| Indicator              | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Seldom (2)             | 1         | 1.9     |
| Occasionally (3)       | 20        | 38.5    |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 28        | 53.8    |
| Always (5)             | 3         | 5.8     |
| Total                  | 52        | 100.0   |

Table 22

*Distribution of Administrators' Perceptions of How Often Instruction and Delivery of Distance Education Courses Offered Through ACCESS Meet the Expected Learning Outcomes*

| <i>Indicator</i>       | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Occasionally (3)       | 18               | 34.6           |
| Often / Frequently (4) | 30               | 57.7           |
| Always (5)             | 4                | 7.7            |
| Total                  | 52               | 100            |

### **Differences in Perceptions Regarding Level of Learning Based and Demographics**

The fifth research question investigated the relationship between perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the level of learning in distance learning classes, school size,



and years of experience in school administration. The level of learning construct was developed by taking the means of the items measuring instructional processes. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess the existence of relationships. A non-significant correlation was found ( $r = .17, p = .24$ ) between the variables of level of learning and school size. A non-significant correlation was found ( $r = .20, p = .17$ ), between the variables of school size and years of administrative experience. A non-significant correlation was found ( $r = -.08, p = .17$ ) between variables of level of learning and years of administrative experience. The findings are presented in Table 23.

Table 23

*Correlations Between Years of Administrative Experience, School Size, and Level of Learning*

|                                    |                     | Years of Administrative Experience | School Size |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| Years of Administrative Experience | Pearson Correlation | 1                                  | .20         |
|                                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                                    | .17         |
|                                    | N                   | 52                                 | 52          |
| School Size                        | Pearson Correlation | .20                                | 1           |
|                                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .17                                |             |
|                                    | N                   | 52                                 | 52          |
| Level of Learning                  | Pearson Correlation | -.08                               | .17         |
|                                    | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .59                                | .24         |
|                                    | N                   | 52                                 | 52          |

## Relationship Between Perceptions of the Instructional Processes and Level of Learning

Research question six explored the relationship between Alabama high school principals' perceptions of instruction and level of learning in ACCESS distance learning courses. The perception of instructional processes construct and the level of learning construct were developed by taking the means of the items measuring each construct. The relationship between each dimension of quality of instruction and level of learning was determined by computing a Pearson product-movement correlation. A significant correlation was found ( $r = .724, p = < .01$ ), indicating a positive linear relationship between the variables of instructional processes and level of learning in distance learning courses. Principals who perceived distance learning courses as often/frequently having instructional processes present also perceived these courses as often/frequently having indicators of high levels of learning present. Results are reported in Table 24.

Table 24

*Correlations between Instructional Processes and Level of Learning*

|                         |                     | Level of Learning | Instructional Processes |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Level of Learning       | Pearson Correlation | 1                 |                         |
|                         | Sig. (2-tailed)     |                   | .000                    |
|                         | N                   | 52                | 52                      |
| Instructional Processes | Pearson Correlation | .724**            | 1                       |
|                         | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .000              |                         |
|                         | N                   | 52                | 52                      |

## Purposes and Factors for the Selection of Distance Learning Courses

Participants were asked two open-ended questions to address research question seven. The first open-ended question asked the participants to identify the primary reason why they select ACCESS distance learning courses. The second open-ended question asked the participants to identify the factors used when selecting ACCESS distance learning courses. The open ended responses were grouped into categories, and the most frequently mentioned responses were reported in Table 25.

Table 25

### *Frequency Distribution of Purposes for Course Selection*

| <i>Indicator</i>                      | <i>N</i> |
|---------------------------------------|----------|
| Student Needs                         | 17       |
| Availability / Schedule               | 16       |
| Face-to-Face Courses Not Offered      | 5        |
| Costs                                 | 3        |
| Credit Recovery / Remediation Options | 3        |
| Technology Used                       | 3        |
| Quality / Outcomes                    | 2        |
| Relationship with Provider            | 1        |
| AP / Higher Level Offerings           | 0        |

## Factors

Participants were asked to identify the factors used for selecting ACCESS distance learning courses. Responses were analyzed and categorized into the following eight categories: meets student needs (n = 16), availability/schedule (n = 16), reputation of the provider (n = 0), costs (n = 4), faculty/staff recommendation (n = 6), academic ability/student readiness (n = 2), information from provider (n = 2), and administrator choice (n = 5). The categories and frequency distributions are included in Table 26.

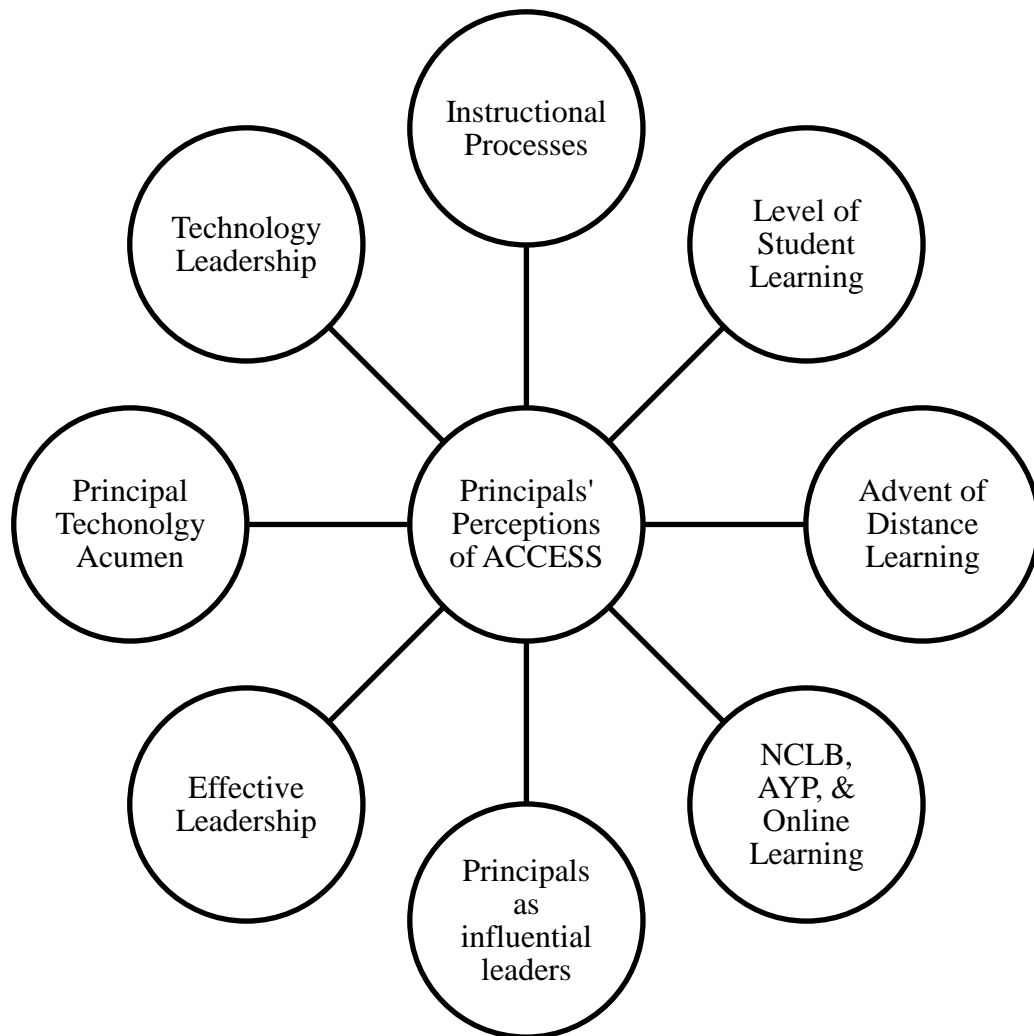
Table 26

### *Factors for Course Selection*

| Indicator                          | N  |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Student Needs                      | 16 |
| Availability/Schedule              | 16 |
| Reputation of the Provider         | 0  |
| Costs                              | 4  |
| Faculty/Staff Recommendation       | 6  |
| Administrator Choice               | 5  |
| Academic Ability/Student Readiness | 2  |
| Information from the Provider      | 2  |

The .05 significance was used for all Pearson product-moment correlations. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to describe the strength of the relationship between variables. Means were used to compute the variables.

Instructional processes, levels of student learning, and leadership theories are three key elements that influence principals' perceptions of ACCESS as represented by each arm of the radial in Figure 1. The conceptual model (Figure 1) illustrates additional elements that contribute to principals' perceptions of ACCESS.



*Figure 1.* The Impact of Instructional Processes, Levels of Student Learning, and Leadership Theories on Principals' Perceptions of ACCESS.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate high school principals' perceptions of quality of instruction and level of learning with respect to ACCESS distance learning. Demographic factors including school size, location of the school (inservice region), and the years of experience in administration were examined to determine if there was a relationship between each of these and administrator perceptions. A detailed summary and a discussion of the findings and their implications are presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

### **Introduction**

Current literature about ACCESS has shown that there appears to be no statistically significant differences in student achievement between students who attend classes through Asynchronous Learning versus Interactive Video Conferencing (Roblyer, Freeman, Donaldson, & Maddox, 2007). Current literature about ACCESS also infers that teachers and students were reported as being “generally satisfied with the instructional strategies used in both IVC and online courses and view them as beneficial to support learning” (Roblyer et al., 2007). Notwithstanding, there is a lack of research addressing the perceptions, attitudes, and contextual differences among Alabama High School Principals regarding the ACCESS program, particularly with respect to the instructional processes involved, and the levels of perceived learning of their students in the program. This study offers new insights into the perceptions of Alabama High School Principals of ACCESS distance learning, regarding strengths, preferred uses, and areas for continued improvement. These findings may be useful to the Alabama State Department of Education and ACCESS administrators, as they can be interpreted as being areas for continuous improvement. ACCESS administrators and the ISTE external evaluations have not sought out the views and perceptions of high school principals. The potential feedback and viewpoints that principals could offer to state leaders may illustrate opportunities to improve

delivery of instruction to students, and possibly increase the levels of ACCESS's efficacy for students, teachers, and administrators statewide.

### **Review of Methodology**

The study relied chiefly on a survey instrument developed by Dzwonek (2007), and modified by the researcher to be applicable to his study. After conducting reliability and validity analyses, the researcher sent a recruitment e-mail to invite all Alabama high school principals to be a participant in the research study. Principals who were interested were asked to send an e-mail to the investigator. Upon receipt of this e-mail indicating interest, an information letter was sent to high school principals. Included in the information letter was a hyperlink re-directing the participant to the electronic survey. The survey instrument was distributed to 508 principals in Alabama electronically through Qualtrics, a web-based survey software endorsed by Auburn University. The researcher collected completed surveys for the entire month of January, 2013. As each week progressed, the researcher sent out weekly e-mail reminders to all prospective participants who had not completed a survey, inviting them to do so before the end of the month. The researcher conducted the survey in January, 2013 via anonymous online Internet response. The respondents were principals of Alabama high schools. The data set was received January 31, 2013.

This chapter discusses the findings of each research question. Conclusions of each research question, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research study are also provided.

Earlier research on ACCESS distance learning indicated that school leaders perceive that their students are receiving a high quality education, as prescribed by ACCESS (Alabama State Department of Education, 2011; Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Roblyer, Bielefeldt, &



Olszewski, 2010; Roblyer, Porter, Bielefeldt & Donaldson, 2009). However, no research has been conducted by ISTE to support this finding. Principals' perceptions and viewpoints have largely been ignored and not researched by ISTE, nor the ALSDE. This is concerning, since the principal is a key stakeholder in their school community, and the gatekeeper for the ultimate success or failure of their respective school (Dzwonek, 2007). Not since 2004, when Governor Bob Riley assembled the Governor's Task Force on Distance Learning, has the input of high school principals been sought and received in policymaking decisions for ACCESS. While it has been known that ACCESS is under the supervision of Alabama State Department of Education, in partnership with the Governor's Office, the Alabama Supercomputer Authority, and local school districts, the high school principal's role is that of policy enforcer, and not one of stakeholder who may give input towards improving ACCESS and thus, their students (Task Force on Distance Learning, 2011). This research is crucial towards determining whether or not ACCESS distance learning is perceived to be truly effective for a Principal's campus. This research utilized a quantitative design, while attempting to discern the meaning of the perceptions offered by the high school principal participants.

The resulting data were analyzed and research findings discussed in Chapter 4. Survey data obtained from the submitted surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages, and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient by SPSS version 21.

The research questions were:

1. What are the characteristics of Alabama high school principals regarding:
  - a. School size?
  - b. Location of district?

- c. Years of experience in school administration?
2. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional process of distance learning courses and important indicators of student learning?
3. What is the relationship, if any, between Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the instructional processes of ACCESS distance learning courses, level of student learning, and principal demographics?
4. What are the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the level of student learning in distance courses?
5. What is the relationship, if any, exists between Alabama high school principals' perceptions regarding the level of student learning in distance courses and principal demographics?
6. What is the relationship between Alabama high school principals' perceptions of the instruction processes and level of student learning in Alabama distance learning courses?
7. What information is used by Alabama high school principals to make judgments about ACCESS distance learning courses?

### **Demographic Characteristics of ACCESS Schools and Their Principals**

The first research question examined the demographic characteristics of high school principals with respect to school size, location of district, and years of experience in administration. Descriptive statistics indicate that participants were primarily from rural and low income schools in Alabama that have limited course offerings for students (ALSDE, 2004; ISTE, 2009). Demographic findings are listed below.

## **Demographic Findings**

- The largest percentage of participants (62%) reported working in schools with enrollment of less than 500 students.
- Principals with six to 10 and 11 to 15 years of administrative experience represented the largest number of participants (71.1%).
- The greatest number of participants were associated with Regional In-service Centers 3, 6, and 11 (44.1%). These areas included northeast Alabama, east-central Alabama, and also southeast Alabama.
- Of the 52 participants, 40 were men (77%), while only 12 were female (23%).

Participants state that they use technology in their personal and professional lives. The highest percentages were associated with principals who use e-mail (92%) and Office Suite productivity software (81%).

Based on these demographic findings, the researcher concluded that principals from small rural schools benefit the most from ACCESS distance learning. This is consistent with other publications research that argue that the state's ACCESS distance learning intent was to primarily serve students from rural and low income schools in Alabama (ALSDE, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007; ISTE, 2009).

## **Perceptions of Instructional Process and Student Learning**

The second research question examined the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the instructional process of distance learning courses and the eleven important indicators of student learning (Dzwonek, 2007). Data for research question two were generated by computing the means and standard deviations for each of the relevant survey items. The eleven indicators are listed below:

- Appropriate subject level knowledge
- Appropriate grading processes
- Well prepared and organized courses
- A learning environment that is respectful to students
- Appropriate procedures and processes for assessment
- A high quality of instruction
- A learning environment that meets the students' needs
- Adequate motivation for students to learn
- Sufficient feedback for students
- Sufficient interaction for the student
- Learning outcomes equal to or better than face-to-face courses

### **Perceptions of Instructional Processes, School Size, Years of Experience, and Regional In-service Center**

Data for research question three were generated by computing Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients to assess the relationship between instructional processes, school size, years of administrative experience of principals, and regional in-service center.

### **Perceptions of the Level of Student Learning in ACCESS Distance Learning Courses**

Data for research question four were generated by frequencies and percentages in four areas:

- Principals' perceptions of how ACCESS classes' alignment to current content standards,
- Principals' perceptions of how ACCESS courses prepare students for future high school courses,

- Principals' perceptions of how instruction and delivery of ACCESS courses
- Principals' perceptions of how instruction and delivery of ACCESS distance learning courses meet the expected learning outcomes

### **Perceptions on Level of Student Learning Based on Demographics**

Data for research question five were generated by computing Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients to assess the relationship between principals' perceptions of the level of student learning in ACCESS classes and school size, years of administrative experience of principals, and regional in-service center.

### **Perceptions of the Instructional Processes and Level of Student Learning**

Data for research question six were generated by computing Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients to assess the relationship between principals' perceptions of instructional processes and the level of student learning.

### **Criteria Used by Alabama High School Principals to Evaluate ACCESS Courses**

Two open-ended questions were asked to identify the ultimate reason that principals select ACCESS distance learning courses and to identify the selection processes used for distance learning courses for research question seven. The open-ended responses were grouped by similarity and the most frequently mentioned responses were reported.

## **Discussion**

ACCESS distance learning in Alabama began through the efforts of a Task Force led by Governor Bob Riley and State Superintendent of Education, Dr. Joe Morton, in 2004 (Governor's Task Force, 2004). Based on this task force's recommendations, the Alabama Distance Education Plan was created. The purpose of the plan was to propose a strategy to improve student achievement statewide, especially in the rural and low income schools that have

limited course offerings for students (Governor's Task Force, 2004; Roblyer et al., 2009). In order to better serve these schools, the ALSDE committed to offer distance education learning opportunities through the Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide (ACCESS) Distance Learning Program, a statewide system of courses delivered through the World Wide Web and Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC) (Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b; Roblyer et al., 2009). Consequently, the ALSDE aimed to provide equitable access to high quality instruction to improve student learning through the use of ACCESS distance learning opportunities, while also expanding learning opportunities available through technology (Governor's Task Force, 2004).

The role of principal as instructional leader is also examined in this review because the continuing success and future of distance education depends on effective leadership. The ACCESS distance learning model developed by the Alabama Department of Education has made a positive impact on principals' perceptions of ACCESS distance learning. This plan needs to be continued and expanded to include more opportunities for principals to collaborate with the Alabama Department of Education and share their expertise in designing, modifying, or creating new ACCESS distance learning courses or initiatives. The only documented time when principals' feedback was noted occurred during Gov. Riley's Task Force on Distance Learning (2004). The four external reviews conducted by the ISTE did not measure principals' perceptions of ACCESS distance learning, ask for any feedback they may have had, nor did they ask for or consider any policy recommendations that principals felt would be helpful. .

ACCESS distance learning courses became available to every student in Alabama beginning in 2005 (Governor's Task Force, 2004). ACCESS is the first statewide initiative in Alabama that has focused on bringing equitable educational opportunities to all Alabama public

high school students, while meeting specific student scheduling needs, regardless of where they attend school (Task Force on Distance Learning, 2011).

A previous study of principals' perceptions of distance learning concluded that they were especially positive about the existence of instructional processes and level of student learning in distance learning courses (Dzwonek, 2007). The high school principal is the instructional leader, change agent, and technology leader who shapes the organizational culture of their school (Dzwonek, 2007). Their perceptions of the instructional processes and the level of student learning may influence the course options available to their students (Dzwonek, 2007). Consequently, their perceptions are highly valuable towards ensuring their students' learning needs are met.

Distance education programs are often sought after in underserved regions because they provide broader educational opportunities for students who are unable to attend traditional schools, access to resources and instructors not locally available, and increases in student-teacher communication (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). Successful implementation of technology integration to improve teaching and learning is less effective without the active involvement of a key administrator, reinforcing the importance of the high school principal as technology leader (Anderson & Dexter, 2005).

This study found that Alabama principals' perceptions regarding ACCESS distance learning courses were not statistically significant based on the demographic factors of school size, regional in-service center, and years of administrative experience. This study used a 5-point Likert-type scale to assess the perceptions of high school principals. According to the findings of this study, there is a positive attitude about the existence of the instructional processes and level of student learning in ACCESS distance learning courses. Additionally, the

relationship between these two variables yielded statistical significance, meaning that the more that principals perceive that instructional processes exist in ACCESS distance learning courses, the higher the level of student learning that is perceived to exist.

### **Implications**

The data from this study may be useful for ACCESS administrators from the Alabama State Department of Education to if they are interested in implementing changes to ACCESS in areas where the participants' perceptions were not favorable. However, due to the small response rate, caution should be used when considering the findings in this study. Areas of concern to high school principals include:

- student interaction
- sufficient student feedback
- student motivation
- how instruction and delivery meet students' needs
- learning outcomes equal to or better than face-to-face instruction

The participants' level of technological proficiency may have influenced their perceptions. The data from this study indicated that a majority (71.1%) ( $n = 37$ ) of the participants had between six and fifteen years of experience as an administrator. These participants had assumed the principalship before the Alabama Continuum for Instructional Leadership Development was fully implemented in 2012 as part of principals' evaluations in *LEADAlabama* (ALSDE, 2013). As a result, their technology training and proficiency may not be concurrent with Standard 6 of the Alabama Continuum for Instructional Leadership Development. Additional opportunities for professional development must be offered to these leaders so that they can meet the expectations of the Alabama Continuum in this standard



(ALSDE, 2005), and also succeed in their LEADAlabama evaluations. Professional development in technology via e-Learning, via their regional in-service center, at the local level with technology coordinators, and also in ACCESS distance learning can serve as additional opportunities for these leaders to develop and maintain their proficiency as technological leaders.

High school principals' perceptions of ACCESS distance learning were favorable with respect to quality teaching and logistical preparations. Student needs and logistics were the key factors that principals cited as to why they selected ACCESS courses.

Listed below are pertinent findings of the principals' perceptions:

- High school principals' perceived the level of preparedness and organization in ACCESS courses as frequently or often meeting the indicators (84.6%).
- High school principals did not perceive adequate motivation as frequently or often meeting the indicators (57.7%) in ACCESS courses.
- The perceptions of high school principals about the instructional processes in ACCESS distance learning courses did not yield a statistically significant correlation based on school size, regional in-service center, and years of administrative experience.
- The perceptions of high school principals about the level of student learning in ACCESS distance learning did not yield a statistically significant correlation based on school size, regional in-service center, and years of administrative experience.
- The perceptions of high school principals about ACCESS distance learning yielded a statistically significant correlation between the variables of instructional processes and level of student learning.

- High school principals perceived the level of student learning mean scores of the Instructional Processes yielded a range between 3.22 and 4.06 respectively.
- The processes most frequently stated for selecting ACCESS distance learning courses were student needs ( $n = 16$ ), and availability/schedule ( $n = 16$ ).

High school principals are considered to be the gatekeeper of their respective campuses.

Research shows that effective principals are viewed as the instructional leader, the change agent, and the technology leaders of their schools (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). They must be effective in their decision-making towards improving student success and achievement. Limiting their voice on potential opportunities for improvements is a concern, especially since ACCESS distance learning is expected to be available and utilized on their campus. The perceptions, views, and expertise of principals as instructional leaders, as change agents, and as technology leaders appears to be either not reported or ignored in ACCESS' growth, development, and management. However, this was not always the case. When ACCESS was in the development stage, high school principals were included as stakeholders in the policy-making process of Governor Bob Riley's Task Force on Distance Learning (2004). While ACCESS has enjoyed positive ratings from teachers and students in previous external reviews (Roblyer et al., 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Roblyer et al., 2009; Roblyer et al., 2010), principals have not been part of ACCESS' evaluation processes as stakeholders. While the results of this study suggest that ACCESS distance learning is perceived by principals as being successful in the instructional processes and level of student learning, there are some concerns that need to be addressed. As the building leader, it is the responsibility of the principal to be the change agent at the local level in all facets, including ACCESS distance learning, if necessary.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

1. Repeat this survey with high school principals in Alabama.

There was a low return rate (N = 52) for this study. The target population for the survey was all Alabama public high school principals. In the online administration of the survey, a total of 508 Alabama high school principals were invited to participate. The researcher received a 10.2 percent response rate with 52 completed surveys returned that were compiled for analysis. This is a limitation of this study and suggests that caution should be used when considering the study's findings.

2. Repeat this survey using private schools and academies in Alabama.

This survey focused only on public school systems in Alabama. Private schools may or may not have a higher percentage of students using distance learning. This would allow for a better understanding of ACCESS distance education offerings in all Alabama secondary schools. It is possible that more private schools allow students to earn online credits for high school graduation and research should be conducted to explore this possibility.

3. A qualitative study should be developed to investigate technology coordinators'/ directors' perceptions of distance education statewide and allow for more descriptive input. Their expertise in this arena can offer policymakers at ACCESS more ways to improve the instructional processes and levels of student learning. This study focused on school administrators' perceptions, and they should have familiarity with distance education. Technology directors and coordinators, on the other hand, may have a higher and more disparate level of familiarity with online education.

4. This study should be replicated in other states. By using one particular state in a region of the United States it is not possible to make generalizations nationwide or to have much certainty about perceptions of best practices related to state initiatives such as ACCESS.

5. Future research should be conducted to investigate the competency of Alabama high school principals' levels of technology literacy, usage, and experience levels with ACCESS distance education courses.

### **Summary**

This research was conducted to obtain information about principals' perceptions about instructional processes and level of student learning in ACCESS Distance Learning. Distance education is being affected nationwide by new federal legislation and the realization that curricula must meet the academic rigor of federal, state, and local mandates (Rice, 2006). There is a continuing need to study the K–12 distance learner due to the growth of K–12 distance learning (Dzwonek, 2007) and high school students are an appropriate group to study because they are the largest consumer group of K–12 distance courses nationwide in public schools (Cavanaugh, 2007). Principals, as school leaders, influence student achievement through school climate and effective, data-driven instructional strategies derived from assessments (Malcolm, 2007). High school principals are essential leaders on their respective campuses, thus reinforcing the importance of discovering how these educational leaders view ACCESS distance learning.

The continuing success and future of distance education depends on effective leadership (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2004). Creating a vision for the future, providing direction for the effective use of technology, managing ensuing change, supervising staff, and guiding faculty in transitioning from face-to-face learning environment to

the virtual environment and using the right pedagogy requires effective leadership (Nworie, 2013). Leaders in the distance learning environment must understand the application and consequences of leadership theories as an expression of themselves, their core values, and the needs of their institution (Nworie, 2013). Effective leadership requires the principal to understand, engage, and care for followers while enabling those followers to maximize their contributions. Adopting the right kind of mental model can lead to a better understanding of the context and equip the leader to function optimally within their institutions and in the evolving environment (Nworie, Haughton, & Oprandi, 2012).

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## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment E-mail

### Information Letter E-Mail

## E-MAIL INVITATION FOR ON-LINE SURVEY

Dear Educator,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Education, Foundations, Leadership and Technology at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to study perceptions of High School Principals. You may participate if you are High School Principal that uses distance learning at your campus. You *may not participate* if you are a High School Principal that does not use distance learning at your campus.

Participants will be asked to respond to a short survey that will last approximately 10 minutes.

There is a continuing need to study the K-12 distance learner in light of the growth of K-12 distance education. Furthermore it is critical to understand how educational leaders view distance education. High school students are the biggest consumers of K-12 distance education courses. The high school principal is the pivotal educational leader in the arena of K-12 distance education. This investigation will determine perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the quality of instruction in distance learning courses.

As with any research, there are risks to breach of confidentiality. I have taken measures to ensure that no security breach will occur. The online survey is hosted by Qualtrics, a web-based survey software company that is endorsed and used by Auburn University, and many high-profile businesses worldwide. The survey will be accessible through a secure HTTPS connection and firewalls are in place to ensure the highest levels of security. Neither you nor your school

district will be identified in connection with any results or reporting. All information received will be held confidential and treated with the utmost professional discretion.

Your participation in this project is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any penalty. There are no direct benefits to you in participating in the study. However, your participation will enhance the knowledge base related to distance education in Alabama. Returning the completed survey implies your informed consent.

There is no cost to you the participant. Additionally, information garnered from this study can be used by educational leaders in determining what steps can be taken to improve distance learning locally and statewide.

If you would like to know more information about this study, an information letter can be obtained by sending me an email to [schofse@auburn.edu](mailto:schofse@auburn.edu) If you decide to participate after reading the letter, you can access the survey from a link in the letter.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (334) 498-1023 or my advisor, Dr. Cindy Reed, at (334) 844-4488

Thank you for your consideration,

Shawn E. Schofield

Dear Educator,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Education, Foundations, Leadership and Technology at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to study perceptions of High School Principals. You may participate if you are High School Principal that uses distance learning at your campus. You *may not participate* if you are a High School Principal that does not use distance learning at your campus.

Participants will be asked to respond to a short survey that will last approximately 10 minutes.

There is a continuing need to study the K-12 distance learner in light of the growth of K-12 distance education. Furthermore it is critical to understand how educational leaders view distance education. High school students are the biggest consumers of K-12 distance education courses. The high school principal is the pivotal educational leader in the arena of K-12 distance education. This investigation will determine perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the quality of instruction in distance learning courses.

As with any research, there are risks to breach of confidentiality. I have taken measures to ensure that no security breach will occur. The online survey is hosted by Qualtrics, a web-based survey software company that is endorsed and used by Auburn University, and many high-profile businesses worldwide. The survey will be accessible through a secure HTTPS connection and firewalls are in place to ensure the highest levels of security. Neither you nor your school district will be identified in connection with any results or reporting. All information received will be held confidential and treated with the utmost professional discretion.

Your participation in this project is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any penalty. There are no direct benefits to you in participating in the study. However, your participation will enhance the knowledge base related to distance education in Alabama. Returning the completed survey implies your informed consent.

There is no cost to you the participant. Additionally, information garnered from this study can be used by educational leaders in determining what steps can be taken to improve distance learning locally and statewide.

If you would like to know more information about this study, an information letter can be obtained by sending me an email to [schofse@auburn.edu](mailto:schofse@auburn.edu) If you decide to participate after reading the letter, you can access the survey from a link in the letter.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (334) 498-1023 or my advisor, Dr. Cindy Reed, at (334) 844-4488

Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,

Shawn E. Schofield  
Doctoral Student

Dr. Cynthia Reed, Gerald and Emily Leischuck  
Professor of Educational Leadership  
Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership  
& Technology

108 Ramsay Hall  
Auburn, AL 36849  
Phone: (334) 844-4488  
Fax: (334) 844-0558



Dear Educator:

As a fellow Alabama educator, I am requesting a few minutes of your time to participate in a research study entitled, *Alabama High School Principals' Perceptions of the Quality of Distance Education Courses*. This research is being conducted as part of the doctoral dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to determine the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the quality of instruction in distance learning courses.

There is a continuing need to study the K-12 distance learner in light of the growth of K-12 distance education. Furthermore it is critical to understand how educational leaders view distance education. High school students are the biggest consumers of K-12 distance education courses. The high school principal is the pivotal educational leader in the arena of K-12 distance education. This investigation will determine perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the quality of instruction in distance learning courses.

Your survey has been coded for the sole purpose of sending follow up e-mails to non-respondents and all submitted surveys will be destroyed after tabulation. The code number will be destroyed upon submission of the completed survey. The information you provide will be anonymous. become part of the data reported by group. Neither you nor your school district will be identified in connection with any results or reporting. All information received will be held confidential and treated with the utmost professional discretion.

To participate in the study, please select the following URL: [https://auburn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_9B3pUX2X8JQYUZv](https://auburn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_9B3pUX2X8JQYUZv) and complete the survey by December 30, 2012. The questions on the survey will ask you to state your personal beliefs and answer a few demographic questions. It will take approximately 10 minutes of your time to complete the survey. Your participation in this project is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any penalty. There are no direct benefits to you in participating in the study. However your participation will enhance the knowledge base related to distance education in Alabama. Returning the completed survey implies your informed consent.

If you have any questions, now or later, you may contact me by phone at 334-498-1023 or via email at [schofse@auburn.edu](mailto:schofse@auburn.edu). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a human subject, Please contact the Research Compliance Office at 334-844-5966.

Thank you very much for your time and assistance. Your participation and prompt response is sincerely appreciated.

Sincerely,

Shawn E. Schofield  
Doctoral Student

Dr. Cynthia Reed, Gerald and Emily Leischuck  
Professor of Educational Leadership  
Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership  
& Technology

108 Ramsay Hall  
Auburn, AL 36849  
Phone: (334) 844-4488  
Fax: (334) 844-0558

## APPENDIX B

### Approval To Use Survey

---

**Shawn E. Schofield**

**From:** Brian Robert Dzwonek [brian.dzwonek@duke-nus.edu.sg]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, July 14, 2009 9:14 AM  
**To:** shawn\_schofield@charter.net  
**Subject:** Dissertation Request  
**Attachments:** Dissertation.pdf

Shawn,

I have enclosed a PDF version of my dissertation for your review. Please feel free to use the survey instrument for your study. Best of luck to you, you will find that your degree will open a world of opportunities for you, it has for me. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Brian

Brian Dzwonek, EdD | Deputy Director, Medical Education Research & Evaluation Department | Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School | 8 College Road, Singapore 169857 | Tel: +65 6516 8067 | Fax: +65 6227 2698 | Email: [brian.dzwonek@duke-nus.edu.sg](mailto:brian.dzwonek@duke-nus.edu.sg) | Web: [www.duke-nus.edu.sg](http://www.duke-nus.edu.sg)

## APPENDIX C

### Survey Instrument

#### **Survey of Alabama High School Principals' Perceptions of Distance Learning Programs**

Directions: The following are statements about your perceptions or beliefs regarding ACCESS distance education courses for Alabama high school students.

SECTION ONE (continued next page)

1. To what extent does instruction and delivery of distance education courses offered through ACCESS provide...

| Click to select  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|  | Always (5)            | Often/Frequently (4)  | Occasionally (3)      | Seldom (2)            | Never (1)             |
| (1)  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Well prepared and organized courses? (2)                   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Adequate motivation for students to learn? (3)             | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Appropriate subject level knowledge? (4)                   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sufficient interaction for the student? (5)                | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Sufficient feedback to students? (6)                       | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| A learning environment that is respectful of students? (7) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| A learning environment that meets students' needs? (8)     | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

|  | Always (5)            | Often/Frequently (4)  | Occasionally (3)      | Seldom (2)            | Never (1)             |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Appropriate procedures and processes for assessment? (9)               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Appropriate grading processes? (10)                                    | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| High quality instruction? (11)   | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Learning outcomes equal to or better than face- to- face courses? (12) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

## SECTION TWO

2. To what extent do distance education courses offered through ACCESS...

|  | Click to select       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|  | Always (5)            | Often/Frequently (4)  | Occasionally (3)      | Seldom (2)            | Never (1)             |
| (1)<br>Align to the current content standards?                               | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| (2)<br>Prepare students for any future high school courses?                  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| (3)<br>Prepare students for future post secondary education?                 | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| (4)<br>Prepare students for college entrance exams such as ACT or SAT tests? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| (5)<br>Meet the expected learning outcomes?                                  | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| (6)  |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |

3. My high school receives distance learning courses from these providers:

- ACCESS Teachers (1)
- Florida Virtual School (2)
- Desire2Learn (3)
- Other (please specify) (4) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Distance learning courses in my high school are delivered using (Check all that apply):

- Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC) (1)
- Asynchronous (Web-Based) (2)
- Moodle (3)
- Flipped Classroom Model (4)
- Tablet PC's (5)
- Laptop Computer (6)

5. For which of the following purposes do you select distance education courses? (Check all that apply)

- To offer advanced level courses (1)
- To offer remedial courses (2)
- To provide courses for which we do not have qualified staff (3)
- To provide Credit recovery (4)
- None (we do not utilize distance education) (5)
- Other (please specify) (6) \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is the primary reason you select distance education courses? (Select only one)

- To offer advanced level courses (1)
- To offer remedial courses (2)
- To provide courses for which we do not have qualified staff (3)
- To provide Credit recovery (4)
- None (we do not utilize distance education) (5)
- Other (please specify) (6) \_\_\_\_\_



7. What criteria do you use to help select courses and/or providers? (Check all that apply)

- Cost (1)
- Location of the Provider (2)
- Reputation of the Provider (3)
- Technology utilized (4)
- Schedule (5)
- Content or courses offered (6)
- Other (please specify) (7) \_\_\_\_\_

8. My high school students receive distance learning instruction:

- during school hours (1)
- during non-school hours (2)
- during both school and non-school hours

9. What selection processes and information do you utilize to make these choices?

### SECTION THREE

11. The number of students enrolled in my high school is:

12. My school district is located in \_\_\_\_\_ Regional Inservice Center

13. I have been a school administrator for \_\_\_\_\_ years.

14. What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

15. I use technology in the following ways in my work and/or personal life:

- E-Mail (1)
- Office Suite (such as Microsoft Office, OpenOffice.org, etc.)
- Web 2.0 tools, such as Weblogs and Wikis
- A web-based office suite and storage service (i.e. Google Docs, Dropbox, etc.)

THANK YOU! Thank you very much for your time and assistance.

## APPENDIX D

Approval of Auburn University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD for RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS  
RESEARCH PROTOCOL REVIEW FORM**

For information or help contact THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE, 115 Ramsay Hall, Auburn University  
Phone: 334-844-5966 e-mail: hsubjec@auburn.edu Web Address: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/>

Revised 03.26.11 -- DO NOT STAPLE, CLIP TOGETHER ONLY.

Save a Copy

1. PROPOSED START DATE of STUDY: Nov 30, 2012

PROPOSED REVIEW CATEGORY (Check one): FULL BOARD EXPEDITED  EXEMPT

2. PROJECT TITLE: Alabama High School Principals' Perspectives of Distance Learning Programs

3. Shawn E. Schofield Graduate Student EFLT 334-498-1023 schofse@auburn.edu  
 PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR TITLE DEPT PHONE AU E-MAIL  
 2200 Rocky Brook Road Opelika, AL 36801 shawn\_schofield@charter.net  
 MAILING ADDRESS FAX ALTERNATE E-MAIL

4. SOURCE OF FUNDING SUPPORT:  Not Applicable  Internal  External Agency: \_\_\_\_\_  Pending  Received

5. LIST ANY CONTRACTORS, SUB-CONTRACTORS, OTHER ENTITIES OR IRBs ASSOCIATED WITH THIS PROJECT:  
 NOT APPLICABLE

6. GENERAL RESEARCH PROJECT CHARACTERISTICS

| 6A. Mandatory CITI Training   | 6B. Research Methodology  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Names of key personnel who have completed CITI:</b></p> <p>Shawn E. Schofield ✓<br/>                     Dr. Cynthia Reed ✓<br/>                     Dr. Margaret Ross ✓<br/>                     Dr. David DiRamo ✓</p> <p><b>CITI group completed for this study:</b><br/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Social/Behavioral <input type="checkbox"/> Biomedical</p> <p align="center"><b>PLEASE ATTACH TO HARD COPY ALL<br/>                     CITI CERTIFICATES FOR EACH KEY<br/>                     PERSONNEL</b></p>   | <p><b>Please check all descriptors that best apply to the research methodology.</b></p> <p>Data Source(s): <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Data <input type="checkbox"/> Existing Data<br/>                     Will recorded data directly or indirectly identify participants?<br/>                     Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br/>                     Data collection will involve the use of:<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Educational Tests (cognitive diagnostic, aptitude, etc.)<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Interview / Observation<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Physical / Physiological Measures or Specimens (see Section 6D)<br/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Surveys / Questionnaires<br/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Internet / Electronic<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Audio / Video / Photos<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Private records or files</p> |
| 6C. Participant Information   | 6D. Risks to Participants   |
| <p><b>Please check all descriptors that apply to the participant population.</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Males <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Females <input type="checkbox"/> AU students<br/> <b>Vulnerable Populations</b><br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnant Women/Fetuses <input type="checkbox"/> Prisoners<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Children and/or Adolescents (under age 19 in AL)<br/> <b>Persons with:</b><br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Economic Disadvantages <input type="checkbox"/> Physical Disabilities<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Educational Disadvantages <input type="checkbox"/> Intellectual Disabilities<br/>                     Do you plan to compensate your participants? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p> | <p><b>Please identify all risks that participants might encounter in this research.</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Breach of Confidentiality* <input type="checkbox"/> Coercion<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Deception <input type="checkbox"/> Physical<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Psychological <input type="checkbox"/> Social<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> Other</p> <p align="center">NOV 29 2012<br/>                     Research Compliance</p> <p><small>*Note that if the investigator is using or accessing confidential or identifiable data, breach of confidentiality is always a risk.</small></p>  |
| Do you need IBC Approval for this study? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes - BUA # _____ Expiration date _____  |   |

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 12/2/12 to 12/1/15. Protocol # 12-306 EX 1212

**FOR OHSR OFFICE USE ONLY**

DATE RECEIVED IN OHSR: 11/29/12 by CC PROTOCOL # 12-306 EX 1212  
 DATE OF IRB REVIEW: 12/2/12 by CC APPROVAL CATEGORY: 45CFR 46.101(b)(2)  
 DATE OF IRB APPROVAL: \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_ INTERVAL FOR CONTINUING REVIEW: 3 years  
 COMMENTS: original in 9/1/12 - reviewed, not approved by CC 10/4/12  
revisions approved 12/2/12 by CC

**7. PROJECT ASSURANCES**

**PROJECT TITLE:** Alabama High School Principals' Perspectives of Distance Learning Programs

**A. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR'S ASSURANCES**

1. I certify that all information provided in this application is complete and correct.
2. I understand that, as Principal Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the conduct of this study, the ethical performance this project, the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, and strict adherence to any stipulations imposed by the Auburn University IRB.
3. I certify that all individuals involved with the conduct of this project are qualified to carry out their specified roles and responsibilities and are in compliance with Auburn University policies regarding the collection and analysis of the research data.
4. I agree to comply with all Auburn policies and procedures, as well as with all applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding the protection of human subjects, including, but not limited to the following:
  - a. Conducting the project by qualified personnel according to the approved protocol
  - b. Implementing no changes in the approved protocol or consent form without prior approval from the Office of Human Subjects Research
  - c. Obtaining the legally effective informed consent from each participant or their legally responsible representative prior to their participation in this project using only the currently approved, stamped consent form
  - d. Promptly reporting significant adverse events and/or effects to the Office of Human Subjects Research in writing within 5 working days of the occurrence.
5. If I will be unavailable to direct this research personally, I will arrange for a co-investigator to assume direct responsibility in my absence. This person has been named as co-investigator in this application, or I will advise OHSR, by letter, in advance of such arrangements.
6. I agree to conduct this study only during the period approved by the Auburn University IRB.
7. I will prepare and submit a renewal request and supply all supporting documents to the Office of Human Subjects Research before the approval period has expired if it is necessary to continue the research project beyond the time period approved by the Auburn University IRB.
8. I will prepare and submit a final report upon completion of this research project.

My signature indicates that I have read, understand and agree to conduct this research project in accordance with the assurances listed above.

Shawn E. Schofield

Printed name of Principal Investigator

  
Principal Investigator's Signature  
(SIGN IN BLUE INK ONLY)

Nov 30, 2012

Date

**B. FACULTY ADVISOR/SPONSOR'S ASSURANCES**

1. By my signature as faculty advisor/sponsor on this research application, I certify that the student or guest investigator is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human subjects and has sufficient training and experience to conduct this particular study in accord with the approved protocol.
2. I certify that the project will be performed by qualified personnel according to the approved protocol using conventional or experimental methodology.
3. I agree to meet with the investigator on a regular basis to monitor study progress.
4. Should problems arise during the course of the study, I agree to be available, personally, to supervise the investigator in solving them.
5. I assure that the investigator will promptly report significant adverse events and/or effects to the OHSR in writing within 5 working days of the occurrence.
6. If I will be unavailable, I will arrange for an alternate faculty sponsor to assume responsibility during my absence, and I will advise the OHSR by letter of such arrangements. If the investigator is unable to fulfill requirements for submission of renewals, modifications or the final report, I will assume that responsibility.
7. I have read the protocol submitted for this project for content, clarity, and methodology

Cynthia Reed

Printed name of Faculty Advisor / Sponsor

  
Signature (SIGN IN BLUE INK ONLY)

11-27-2012

Date

**C. DEPARTMENT HEAD'S ASSURANCE**

By my signature as department head, I certify that I will cooperate with the administration in the application and enforcement of all Auburn University policies and procedures, as well as all applicable federal, state, and local laws regarding the protection and ethical treatment of human participants by researchers in my department.

Sherri Downer

Printed name of Department Head

  
Signature (SIGN IN BLUE INK ONLY)

11/27/12

Date

**8. PROJECT OVERVIEW: Prepare an abstract that includes:**

(400 word maximum, in language understandable to someone who is not familiar with your area of study):

**I.) A summary of relevant research findings leading to this research proposal:**

*(Cite sources; include a "Reference List" as Appendix A.)*

**II.) A brief description of the methodology,**

**III.) Expected and/or possible outcomes, and,**

**IV.) A statement regarding the potential significance of this research project.**

I. Dzwonek (2007) examined South Dakota principals' perceptions of instructional processes and level of learning in high school distance courses. Principals' perceptions of the instructional process and level of learning were analyzed by school size, geographic location, and years of administrative experience. Dzwonek (2007), Cavanaugh, (2004), Nettles & Herrington, (2007), Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, (2004) indicated that principal leadership is the most critical facet when determining the level of success a school will have with distance learning. Dzwonek's findings indicated that high school principals positively perceived the instructional processes and level of learning for distance learning in South Dakota. Further examination of the Dzwonek (2007) study data identified a strong positive relationship between the perceptions of the instructional processes and level of learning in distance courses. Dzwonek (2007) opined the need to replicate his research in other states to determine if similar results are obtained regarding high school principals' perceptions of distance learning courses. This research proposal seeks to further Dzwonek's research within the framework of programs being utilized in Alabama High Schools. School leaders in New Jersey (Carr, 2007) and Alabama (Governor's Task Force on Distance Learning, 2004) see distance learning as a cost effective instructional alternative, a solution for schools that cannot offer courses due to logistics, funding, or lack of qualified personnel.

II. Each participant will be asked to answer a brief electronic survey. The survey will be divided into three sections and will contain multiple items for each concept addressed. Section one will contain items related to high school principals' perceptions of the quality of instruction in distance education courses. Section two will contain items related to high school principals' perceptions of the level of learning in K-12 distance education courses. Demographic information about principals completing the survey and their schools will be obtained through the survey items in section three. Respondents will be asked to complete seven statements that will provide information about school size, location of district, years of experience in school administration, experience in distance education, gender, and their own technology proficiency.

III. The expected outcomes include showing that administrators in Alabama generally have a very strong and positive perception of distance education, but that improvement in teacher and facilitator training is needed.

IV. Findings will be shared with key personnel at the Alabama State Department of Education. Findings will indicate how building level administrators perceive the successful implementation of distance education in their campuses across the state. They will also suggest areas of strength and weakness that administrators perceive to exist in distance education. The findings in this research will be an avenue that can be used by administrators towards improving instruction, to further influence student success, to enhance quality teaching, and to communicate principals' expectations that effective best-practices will be employed based on their students' assessments when utilizing distance education courses.

**9. PURPOSE.**

**a. Clearly state all of the objectives, goals, or aims of this project.**

The goal of this project is to investigate the Principals' Perceptions of the instructional processes and level of learning in distance courses offered to Alabama high school students via distance learning.

**b. How will the results of this project be used? (e.g., Presentation? Publication? Thesis? Dissertation?)**

Dissertation; The results will be shared with the Alabama State Department of Education, and possibly will be presented at professional conferences or published in professional association journals.

10a. KEY PERSONNEL. Describe responsibilities. Include information on research training or certifications related to this project. CITI is required. Be as specific as possible. (Attach extra page if needed.) All non AU-affiliated key personnel must attach CITI certificates of completion.

Principle Investigator Shawn E. Schofield Title: Researcher E-mail address schofse@auburn.edu  
Dept / Affiliation: EFLT

Roles / Responsibilities:

RESEARCHER, PARTICIPANT RECRUITER, DATA COLLECTOR, RESPONSIBLE FOR CONSENT OF PARTICIPANTS, ANALYZE DATA

Individual: Dr. Cynthia Reed Title: Professor E-mail address reedcyn@auburn.edu  
Dept / Affiliation: EFLT

Roles / Responsibilities:

Advisor and Chair of Dissertation Committee

Individual: Dr. Margaret Ross Title: Professor E-mail address rossma1@auburn.edu  
Dept / Affiliation: EFLT

Roles / Responsibilities:

Data Analysis; Member of Dissertation Committee

Individual: Dr. David DiRamio Title: Assoc. Professor E-mail address diramdc@auburn.edu  
Dept / Affiliation: EFLT

Roles / Responsibilities:

Member of Dissertation Committee

Individual: \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_  
Dept / Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Roles / Responsibilities:

Individual: \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_  
Dept / Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Roles / Responsibilities:

11. LOCATION OF RESEARCH. List all locations where data collection will take place. (School systems, organizations, businesses, buildings and room numbers, servers for web surveys, etc.) Be as specific as possible. Attach permission letters in Appendix E.

[See sample letters at <http://www.auburn.edu/research/priorities/sample.html>]

\*All data collection will be conducted at the home office of the researcher at 2200 Rocky Brook Road Opelika, Alabama.

\*All data will be collected electronically using the Auburn University Server.

12. PARTICIPANTS.

a. Describe the participant population you have chosen for this project.

Check here if there is existing data; describe the population from whom data was collected & include the # of data files.

\*The population consists of current Alabama High School Principals. These participants will be invited to submit one set of data files, in response to the research survey instrument.

b. Describe why this participant population is appropriate for inclusion in this research project. (Include criteria for selection.)

\*All Alabama High School principals will be invited to participate. High School principals were selected because most K-12 distance education offerings are available at these grade levels (grades 9-12).

c. Describe, step-by-step, all procedures you will use to recruit participants. Include in Appendix B a copy of all e-mails, flyers, advertisements, recruiting scripts, invitations, etc., that will be used to invite people to participate.

(See sample documents at <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ghs/sample.htm>.)

\*The researcher went to the the Alabama State Department of Education website, [www.alsde.edu](http://www.alsde.edu). Next, the researcher clicked on the tab labeled "Reports". Afterwards, the researcher clicked on the hyperlink labeled: "Schools Listing- (Including Principals) - Excel Format. URL: <http://www.alsde.edu/EdDirToList/Default.aspx?listtype=principal&dataformat=excel> Then, the researcher downloaded the excel file and saved a copy to his computer in a folder called "Dissertation Files". Next, the researcher identified all High School principals and their contact information for this study. Then, the researcher re-saved said file. The researcher then entered all high school principals' e-mail addresses into his Auburn University e-mail account into a group e-mail contact tab. Upon IRB approval, the researcher will send the recruitment e-mail to all of the identified High School Principals in Alabama. Then, an information letter e-mail will be disbursed to all participants. This e-mail will contain a hyperlink that will connect the participants to the survey instrument electronically. The Informational Letter specifies that clicking on this hyperlink implies their consent, while ensuring their anonymity for the research. The recruitment e-mail (see Appendix B), states that all survey responses will be completely anonymous and be kept confidential. Additionally, this document also states that all participants nor their respective school district will be identified in connection with any results or reporting.

What is the minimum number of participants you need to validate the study? 50

Is there a limit on the number of participants you will recruit?  No  Yes - the number is 506

Is there a limit on the number of participants you will include in the study?  No  Yes - the number is 506

d. Describe the type, amount and method of compensation and/or incentives for participants.

(If no compensation will be given, check here .)

Select the type of compensation:  Monetary  Incentives  
 Raffle or Drawing incentive (include the chances of winning.)  
 Extra Credit (State the value)  
 Other

Description:

13. PROJECT DESIGN & METHODS.

a. Describe, step-by-step, all procedures and methods that will be used to consent participants.

(  Check here if this is "not applicable"; you are using existing data.)

\*The recruitment e-mail will be sent to all identified participants.

\*The recruitment e-mail contains an anonymous hyperlink that connects participants directly to the survey instrument, hosted by Qualtrics.com, the web-based survey software endorsed by Auburn University.

\*Participants read the recruitment letter that informs participants about the study.

\*Participants are notified in the e-mail of the December 30, 2012 deadline.

\*The information letter e-mail specifies that by clicking on the anonymous hyperlink and by returning the completed survey, informed consent is implied.

\* Participants who have questions can phone the researcher at the phone number listed in the recruitment e-mail, or via the researcher's e-mail address identified in the recruitment e-mail.

b. Describe the procedures you will use in order to address your purpose. Provide a step-by-step description of how you will carry out this research project. Include specific information about the participants' time and effort commitment. (NOTE: Use language that would be understandable to someone who is not familiar with your area of study. Without a complete description of all procedures, the Auburn University IRB will not be able to review this protocol. If additional space is needed for this section, save the information as a .PDF file and insert after page 6 of this form.)

\*The researcher will e-mail a recruitment letter that informs participants about the study.

\*An information letter will be sent out via e-mail. It contains a hyperlink that links the participant to the survey instrument.

\*The participants take the survey, and then click to submit their responses to the researcher via Qualtrics, a web-based survey software company used and endorsed by Auburn University.

\*Neither the participant nor their school district will be identified in connection with any results or reporting. All information received will be anonymous and treated with the utmost professional discretion.

\*Participants must complete the survey by December 30, 2012. The questions on the survey will ask participants to state their personal beliefs and answer a few demographic questions.

\*It will take approximately 10-15 minutes of their time to complete the survey.

\*Data from Questions 1-8 will be tabulated and entered into SPSS v. 21 for analytical statistics purposes.

\*Data from Questions 9-15 will be tabulated and entered into SPSS v. 21 for descriptive statistics purposes.



13c. List all data collection instruments used in this project, in the order they appear in Appendix C.

(e.g., surveys and questionnaires in the format that will be presented to participants, educational tests, data collection sheets, interview questions, audio/video taping methods etc.)

\*Survey instrument

d. Data analysis: Explain how the data will be analyzed.

\*Participants' responses for survey items 1-8 will be analyzed via the 1-way ANOVA test using SPSS software.

\*Participants' responses for survey items 9-15 are demographic questions and will be reported as descriptive statistics.

14. RISKS & DISCOMFORTS: List and describe all of the risks that participants might encounter in this research. *If you are using deception in this study, please justify the use of deception and be sure to attach a copy of the debriefing form you plan to use in Appendix D.* (Examples of possible risks are in section #6D on page 1.)

\*The risks associated with participating in this study are risks of Breach of Confidentiality due to Electronic or Physical Security Breach of electronic survey responses.

15. **PRECAUTIONS.** Identify and describe all precautions you have taken to eliminate or reduce risks as listed in #14. If the participants can be classified as a "vulnerable" population, please describe additional safeguards that you will use to assure the ethical treatment of these individuals. Provide a copy of any emergency plans/procedures and medical referral lists in Appendix D.
- \*To minimize these risks, we will be using Qualtrics, a web-based survey software provider, endorsed by Auburn University.
  - \*Researcher has no survey questions that identify participants by name, location, or educative agency.
  - \*Any loss or unauthorized access of data will always be categorized as a Level 4 or HC incident depending on scope and severity, per Qualtrics Security White paper, page 34. Researcher will be notified within 24 hours if Qualtrics discovers such a breach.
  - \*In the event of data loss or unauthorized access, researcher will be assigned a case manager who will work with the researcher in conducting a formal investigation and deliver an official written report within two weeks of the incident, per Qualtrics Security.

**If using the Internet to collect data, what confidentiality or security precautions are in place to protect (or not collect) identifiable data? Include protections used during both the collection and transfer of data.**

*(These are likely listed on the server's website.)*

- \*Qualtrics offers Transport Layer Security (TLS) Encryption (HTTPS) and survey security options like password protection and HTTP referrer checking.
- \*Qualtrics data is hosted by third party data centers that are audited and SAS 70 certified.
- \*Qualtrics implements Secure Socket Layers (SSL).
- \*Qualtrics meets rigorous privacy standards imposed on health care records by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).
- \*All Qualtrics accounts are hidden behind passwords and all data is protected with real-time data replication.
- \*Qualtrics makes full daily backups of all data, which are stored on hard drives in the locked server room at Qualtrics Headquarters. The backup file is a compressed database that stores complete survey responses compressed into individual cells, which means that researcher data is digitally obfuscated by two levels of compression then stored in the same physically secure facility that houses Qualtrics source code.

16. **BENEFITS.**

- a. **List all realistic direct benefits participants can expect by participating in this specific study.**  
*(Do not include "compensation" listed in #12d.)* Check here if there are no direct benefits to participants. ✓

- b. **List all realistic benefits for the general population that may be generated from this study.**

- \*The general population will learn about High School Principals' perceptions about the quality of teaching and learning that distance education facilitators are providing.
- \*The general population will learn to what extent that High School Principals believe that distance learning is preparing students for post-secondary education, meeting expected learning outcomes, and preparing students for college entrance exams.
- \*The general population will learn to what extent that High School Principals are aware of the delivery methods used, the type of technology used, the primary reason why distance learning is chosen, and what criteria is used to help decide which courses are selected for their students.

17. PROTECTION OF DATA.

- a. Will data be collected as anonymous?  Yes  No *If "YES", skip to part "g".*  
(*"Anonymous" means that you will not collect any identifiable data.*)
- b. Will data be collected as confidential?  Yes  No  
(*"Confidential" means that you will collect and protect identifiable data.*)
- c. If data are collected as confidential, will the participants' data be coded or linked to identifying information?  
 Yes *(If so, describe how linked.)*  No

d. Justify your need to code participants' data or link the data with identifying information.

e. Where will code lists be stored? (Building, room number?)

f. Will data collected as "confidential" be recorded and analyzed as "anonymous"?  Yes  No  
(If you will maintain identifiable data, protections should have been described in #15.)

g. Describe how and where the data will be stored (e.g., hard copy, audio cassette, electronic data, etc.), and how the location where data is stored will be secured in your absence. For electronic data, describe security. If applicable, state specifically where any IRB-approved and participant-signed consent documents will be kept on campus for 3 years after the study ends.

\*Survey responses will be stored electronically on Qualtrics web servers See #17E for physical address to Qualtrics.

\*Investigator will possess hardcopies of data at his office at 2200 Rocky Brook Road Opelika, AL.

\*Access to the survey is password protected by the researcher. Qualtrics has access also.

\*Survey responses entered into SPSS for statistical calculations will be stored via the researcher's external hard drive, which is password protected and has 256-bit hardware encryption.

\*Qualtrics makes full daily backups of all data, which are stored on hard drives in the locked server room at Qualtrics Headquarters. The backup file is a compressed database that stores complete survey responses compressed into individual cells, which means that researcher data is digitally obfuscated by two levels of compression then stored in the same physically secure facility that houses Qualtrics source code.

h. Who will have access to participants' data?

(The faculty advisor should have full access and be able to produce the data in the case of a federal or institutional audit.)

Investigator & Faculty Advisors (Dr. Cindy Reed & Dr. Margaret Ross) will have full access to the data.

i. When is the latest date that confidential data will be retained? (Check here if only anonymous data will be retained. ✓)

j. How will the confidential data be destroyed? (NOTE: Data recorded and analyzed as "anonymous" may be retained indefinitely.)

Sample of online  
information letter can  
be found at

Dear Educator:

[auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/  
Sample Documents](http://auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/Sample Documents)

As a fellow Alabama educator, I am requesting a few minutes of your time to participate in a research study entitled, *Alabama High School Principals' Perceptions of the Quality of Distance Education Courses*. This research is being conducted as part of the doctoral dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to determine the perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the quality of instruction in distance learning courses.

There is a continuing need to study the K-12 distance learner in light of the growth of K-12 distance education. Furthermore it is critical to understand how educational leaders view distance education. High school students are the biggest consumers of K-12 distance education courses. The high school principal is the pivotal educational leader in the arena of K-12 distance education. This investigation will determine perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the quality of instruction in distance learning courses.

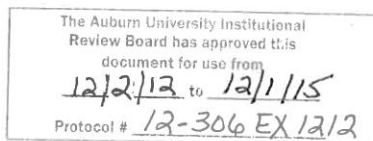
Your survey has been coded for the sole purpose of sending follow up e-mails to non-respondents and all submitted surveys will be destroyed after tabulation. The code number will be destroyed upon submission of the completed survey. The information you provide will be anonymous. become part of the data reported by group. Neither you nor your school district will be identified in connection with any results or reporting. All information received will be held confidential and treated with the utmost professional discretion.

To participate in the study, please select the following URL:  
[https://auburn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_9B3pUX2X8JQYUZv](https://auburn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_9B3pUX2X8JQYUZv) and complete the survey by December 30, 2012. The questions on the survey will ask you to state your personal beliefs and answer a few demographic questions. It will take approximately 10 minutes of your time to complete the survey. Your participation in this project is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any penalty. There are no direct benefits to you in participating in the study. However your participation will enhance the knowledge base related to distance education in Alabama. Returning the completed survey implies your informed consent.

If you have any questions, now or later, you may contact me by phone at 334-498-1023 or via email at [schofse@auburn.edu](mailto:schofse@auburn.edu). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a human subject, Please contact the Research Compliance Office at 334-844-5966.

Thank you very much for your time and assistance. Your participation and prompt response is sincerely appreciated.

Sincerely,



Add this info in sentence  
format.

Shawn E. Schofield  
Doctoral Student

Dr. Cynthia Reed, Gerald and Emily Leischuck  
Professor of Educational Leadership  
Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership  
& Technology

108 Ramsay Hall  
Auburn, AL 36849  
Phone: (334) 844-4488  
Fax: (334) 844-0558

The Auburn University Institutional  
Review Board has approved this  
document for use from  
12/2/12 to 12/1/15  
Protocol # 12-306 EX 1212

E-mail can be  
shortened +  
information letter  
attached.

Dear Educator,

I am a graduate student in the Department of Education, Foundations, Leadership and Technology at Auburn University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to study perceptions of High School Principals. You may participate if you are High School Principal that uses distance learning at your campus. You *may not participate* if you are a High School Principal that does not use distance learning at your campus.

Participants will be asked to respond to a short survey that will last approximately 10 minutes.

There is a continuing need to study the K-12 distance learner in light of the growth of K-12 distance education. Furthermore it is critical to understand how educational leaders view distance education. High school students are the biggest consumers of K-12 distance education courses. The high school principal is the pivotal educational leader in the arena of K-12 distance education. This investigation will determine perceptions of Alabama high school principals regarding the quality of instruction in distance learning courses.

As with any research, there are risks to breach of confidentiality. I have taken measures to ensure that no security breach will occur. The online survey is hosted by Qualtrics, a web-based survey software company that is endorsed and used by Auburn University, and many high-profile businesses worldwide. The survey will be accessible through a secure HTTPS connection and firewalls are in place to ensure the highest levels of security. Neither you nor your school district will be identified in connection with any results or reporting. All information received will be held confidential and treated with the utmost professional discretion.

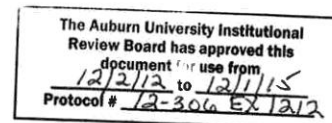
Your participation in this project is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without any penalty. There are no direct benefits to you in participating in the study. However, your participation will enhance the knowledge base related to distance education in Alabama. Returning the completed survey implies your informed consent.

There is no cost to you the participant. Additionally, information garnered from this study can be used by educational leaders in determining what steps can be taken to improve distance learning locally and statewide.

If you would like to know more information about this study, an information letter can be obtained by sending me an email to [schofse@auburn.edu](mailto:schofse@auburn.edu). If you decide to participate after reading the letter, you can access the survey from a link in the letter.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (334) 498-1023 or my advisor, Dr. Cindy Reed, at (334) 844-4488

Thank you for your consideration,



Sincerely,

Shawn E. Schofield  
Doctoral Student

Dr. Cynthia Reed, Gerald and Emily Leischuck  
Professor of Educational Leadership  
Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership  
& Technology

108 Ramsay Hall  
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